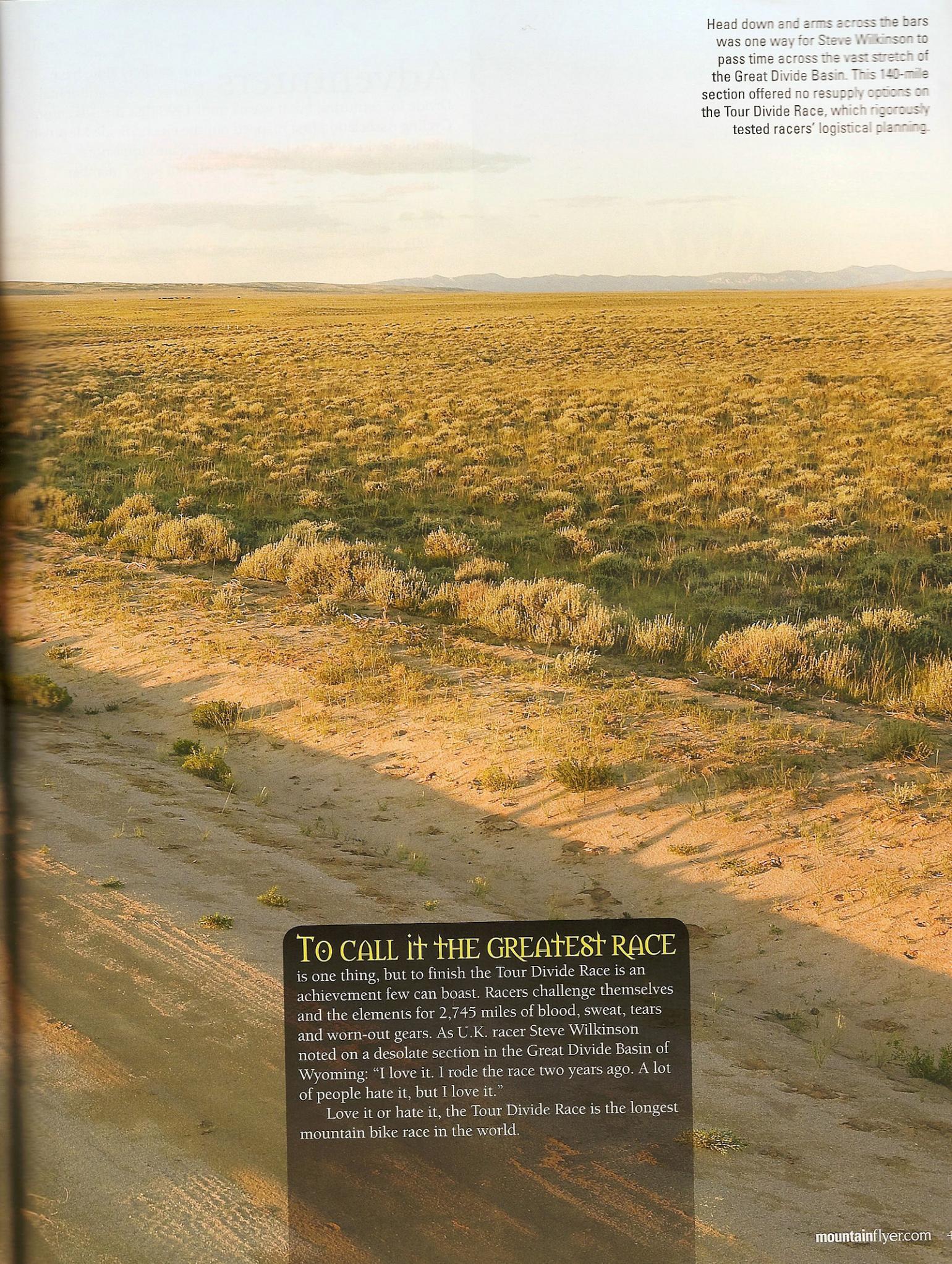


TOUR DIVIDE:

THE GREATEST, LONGEST & LONELIEST RACE

WORDS AND IMAGES BY EDDIE CLARK





Head down and arms across the bars was one way for Steve Wilkinson to pass time across the vast stretch of the Great Divide Basin. This 140-mile section offered no resupply options on the Tour Divide Race, which rigorously tested racers' logistical planning.

TO CALL IT THE GREATEST RACE

is one thing, but to finish the Tour Divide Race is an achievement few can boast. Racers challenge themselves and the elements for 2,745 miles of blood, sweat, tears and worn-out gears. As U.K. racer Steve Wilkinson noted on a desolate section in the Great Divide Basin of Wyoming: "I love it. I rode the race two years ago. A lot of people hate it, but I love it."

Love it or hate it, the Tour Divide Race is the longest mountain bike race in the world.

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Kurt Refsnider pushes on through buckets of rain and hail on the ascent up Cochetopa Pass. The lightning was so bad it forced the photographer to hide in his truck, but Kurt rode on.



Adventurers and trekkers alike have followed the Continental Divide for centuries, but it wasn't until 1998 that the Adventure Cycling Association first mapped out the Great Divide Mountain Bike Route. In 1999, multi-time Iditabike and Iditasport Extreme winner and Mountain Bike Hall of Fame member John Stamstad rode the first individual time trial along the Continental Divide from Mexico to Canada in 18 days, 5 hours. This accomplishment lit the imagination of many a racer, and in 2004 the first mass start of the Great Divide Bike Race from Canada to Mexico was held.

By adding a newly mapped section of 252 miles from Banff, Canada, to the U.S. border, the newly dubbed Tour Divide Race was first held in 2008 and is the new benchmark for long-distance mountain bike racing.

Unlike most races that have exorbitant entry fees, the Tour Divide Race is free. There is no prize money either, only the glory and satisfaction of knowing you've accomplished something truly great. There's also no sag wagon, the route is lonesome, and on-route support is prohibited.

Instead, a strong constitution, resourcefulness and a survivor's spirit are key requirements to finish. The Tour Divide treats a weary racer to almost 200,000 feet of climbing from start to finish; that's about seven Mount Everests. Completing the course in its entirety under your own power, resupplying along the way and being self-reliant comprise the code of ethics, which must be followed at the risk of disqualification. For roughly half of this year's 42 racers, this code and the climbing proved to be too much.

At 10 a.m. on June 12, riders blasted off from Banff into the wild and beautiful Canadian Rockies. This year, to follow the racers, all riders started with a Spot GPS tracking device that relayed their current positions and could serve as a rescue beacon should an emergency occur. Racers also called in to the MTBCast hotline to leave voicemail updates, which were then uploaded to the race website (www.tourdivide.org).

With the combination of GPS tracking and voicemail updates, the general public followed the racers' day-to-day tribulations and left supportive comments on the Tour Divide website.

At the end of the first day, eventual race winner Matthew Lee of Chapel Hill, N.C., opted to keep riding into the night and immediately gained a 25-mile advantage over his competitors. All would agree the Canadian stretch had some very difficult climbing through vast wilderness. Canadian racer Blaine Nester estimated they climbed about 20,000 feet in the first two days before crossing the U.S. border.

Once into Montana, the race really started to take shape. Many racers reported incidents with bears and even some whacked-out hippies on the trail. Montana was downright hard on everyone, with chilling, cold nights, pouring rain, pulverizing hail and snow.

Outdoorsmen Cyclery in Butte was a welcome first bike overhaul stop for many racers. While pushing through a mile of snow over Richmond Peak, Eric Lobeck of Steamboat Springs, Colo., strained a calf muscle and showed his grit by pushing on, recovering on the bike.

For some, the weather was worse. After spending a few wet nights freezing in his tent, Jeff Kerby of Belen, N.M., pulled out

Steve Wilkinson makes a brief roadside stop in the Great Divide Basin for a dinner of gas station junk food.



after eight days with pneumonia.

Keeping bike and body going forward and pushing through new aches and pains that accompany riding a bike for 100 to 180 miles a day is a significant part of finishing. Race winner Lee said it best: "There's a point at which the return is just not there, so you stop, rest and ride harder the next day."

Route finding is another key to finishing the race, as well as abiding by the rules. With many racers pedaling onward after sunset, a few wrong turns were made. The 2007 Great Divide Bike Race record holder Jay Petervary and his wife Tracey, a.k.a. T-Race, aboard their Vicious tandem dubbed "The Love Shack," missed a turn onto Whitefish Divide and ended up 30 miles off course. Their only option was to backtrack until they were on course again, adding an extra 60 miles to their race. However, the always-positive couple from Jackson Hole, Wyo., was still stoked about the awesome lake views they had as a result of their wrong turn.

In a more drastic mistake of navigation, rigid fixed-gear racer Deanna Adams and fellow racer Brad Mattingly, both from Arizona, got off course mid-race, but they failed to backtrack their mistake and resume the race.

In Wyoming, Brooks Lake Road was so muddy that racers had to carry their bikes when the wheels jammed up with mud. Second-place finisher Kurt Refsnider of Boulder, Colo., had his lower jockey pulley seize up on the road, leaving him 25 miles away from replacement parts in Pinedale. Refsnider did what he could and turned his bike into a 2-speed to coax it into Pinedale where he was lucky enough to find a replacement jockey pulley.

"I had a couple of quite dreary days in northern Wyoming," said international racer John Fettis of the U.K., echoing the sentiment of many Tour Divide racers. "Conditions were really rough with some really heavy rain and mud."

Wyoming also tormented racers with mutant mosquitoes that attacked by the hordes until Atlantic City. The next leg from Atlantic City to Rawlins crossed the Great Divide Basin and took racers across the longest barren stretch with no resupply options for 140 miles.

Wild sage, yellow flowers, antelope, wild horses and a sky with a million different colors at sunset were the simple rewards for those who maintained their sanity and love of nature in the Great Basin. A strong tailwind helped across this stretch.

Rolling out of Rawlins meant one last push uphill into the Medicine Bow Mountains and then into Colorado along Slate Creek Road. To sweeten it up, racers looked forward to a rest and refuel at Brush Mountain Lodge just outside of Steamboat Springs, Colo. Racers had much praise and thanks for Kirsten and the Brush Mountain Lodge.

"Kirsten really looked after us. There were five of us there, so it was a good night. I had my hot tub and sat in there with Blaine and a beer," said U.K. racer Alan Goldsmith. "Then she got up real early and made us breakfast. Set us off at six." Trail magic doesn't get much better than that.

After the merciless mud of Idaho and northern Wyoming, bikes were in shambles by Steamboat Springs, with nonexistent brake pads, fried headsets, gritty bottom brackets and worn-out drive trains.

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After the day's riding is done, Matthew Lee wastes no time in getting bedded down, having a last snack and sleeping for four to six hours. Lee rose promptly every day at 4:40 a.m., a schedule that helped him win the event.



Luckily, rules allow for racers to mail supply packages ahead to shops and post offices. Orange Peel Bicycle Service in Steamboat became a bike shop oasis with packages of parts waiting for racers. The Petervarys coaxed their Love Shack into the bike shop on a wing and a prayer.

"We just got a full rebuild on The Love Shack...ah, really excited for that. It's running great, new brakes, new drive train, full of grease," said Jay Petervary from the trail. "Brock really took care of us over here."

In a rare flap, race leader Lee beat his mailed care package to Absolute Bikes in Salida, Colo., which meant his pit stop would just be a clean and tune. Later, after running out of chain lube on course, due to what Lee called "weather like none other," he resorted to buying canola oil from restaurants along the way to use as chain lube.

Sleeping, or lack thereof, is another part of life racers must adapt to. Typically, racers ride 12 to 18 hours a day depending on conditions and sleep on the ground with a pad and bivy bag for four to six hours. If the rain or mosquitoes are bad, sleep time is usually cut in half.

The Petervarys preferred sleeping close to 24-hour gas stations since they would have a nearby bathroom, coffee and food to load up on before hitting the road, whereas Lee enjoyed his solitude and dryness under random fir trees right on the side of the course. For his daily schedule, Lee woke to his alarm at 4:40 a.m. and got pedaling by 5 a.m., rain or shine, every day. For coffee, Lee chewed on whole coffee beans, preferably organic Costa Rican, as he rode.

Tour Divide on-route accommodations can also be less

glamorous. Racers this year holed up in places like rooms over noisy bars, over-booked campgrounds, dog-poop-laden hills in Montana, roadside bathroom floors and even under a bridge with a homeless drunk guy.

Everyone has their limits, and many are found in a muddy ditch or deluge of hail straight from hell. This race throws everything at you and then some.

Refsnider was even charged by a riled-up porcupine that came flying out of a bush at him early in the morning in northern New Mexico.

"It was strange. Porcupines are out to get me, I think," he said.

In addition to plentiful wildlife experienced on route, racers also became very familiar with the dirt.

"That dirt just gets in you, it becomes you, and you're eating it all day long," said Eric Bruntjen of Yakima, Wash. "You're just absorbing this amazing geological and sociological feature of our country."

Five racers found their limits this year when they descended Boreas Pass into Como, Colo., about the same time. Severe lightning, a heinous thunderstorm, muddy roads and a wide-open, high mountain prairie welcomed them. At that point Cannon Shockley of Leadville, Colo., Nester, Wilkinson, Lobeck and Goldsmith called a truce in the name of safety and had an early night at the Como Bed and Breakfast.

They, henceforth, dubbed themselves as the peloton and made the best of some spare time in Como cleaning clothes, eating, drinking beer and sleeping. For the duration of the race, this peloton grew in size. Lobeck succumbed to giardia two days before finishing and withdrew from the race.



Tour Divide riders (l-to-r) Cannon Shockley, Blaine Nester and Alan Goldsmith have a pre-ride chat after getting their bikes worked over and their bellies filled at Absolute Bikes and Bongo Billy's in Salida, Colo.

From Salida to the finish in Antelope Wells, N.M., racers had to contend with more high mountain passes, muddy roads, long days with no resupply options, headwinds and general bad weather. Some racers crashed out, got sick or developed race-ending physical ailments along the way. In the Carson National Forest of New Mexico, racers found themselves riding through the middle of the annual Rainbow Family Gathering. Hippies by the thousands were camped along the route.

Lee rode on to win the race in 17 days, 23 hours and 45 minutes, short of the 15:01:26 record set in 2008 by John Nobile of Fairfield, Conn.

But plenty of records were made this year. The Petervarys pedaled their Love Shack to the Antelope Wells border crossing for a first-ever tandem finish in 18 days, 13 hours and 50 minutes for third overall. Chris Plesko of Westminster, Colo., set a Tour Divide singlespeed record riding his fully rigid Vassago 29er (using a 32x17 gear) and finishing in 19 days and 21 minutes. The last record broken was by solo female finisher Jill Homer of Juneau, Alaska, in 24 days, 7 hours and 24 minutes, beating Jenn Hopkins' 2008 record of 28:16:40.

Out of 42 starters, only 16 received an official Tour Divide Race finish time. Five either disqualified themselves or were relegated for course deviations or support, and 21 never made it to Antelope Wells.

The Tour Divide Race treats every racer equally with a severity that pushes riders to their breaking points and beyond. Its reward is the simplicity and focus of in-your-face living along the Continental Divide, and undeniably Mother Nature in her very finest glory. One thing is certain: anyone who attempts the Tour Divide will forever remember it. 🍷

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