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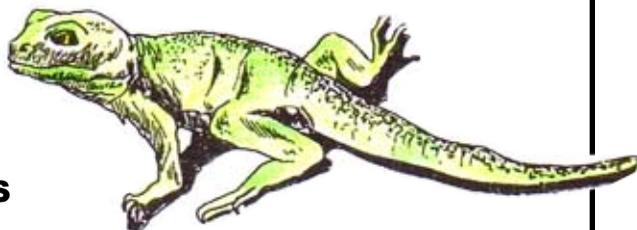
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# POINTBLANK THE GAUNTLET...RUNNING (FROM) '24 HOURS OF MOAB'

BY ALLAN GREENWOOD

The last time I was out on this mesa visiting a relatively unknown and, by the standards of others, insignificant arch, I was alone having seen no one on the 4WD trail that reaches Behind the Rocks or on the rambling route of my hike. On a well-run 4WD road one should expect an off-roader or two and maybe even a hearty mountain biker. However, when I came across over a thousand bikers and their entourage of hangers-on I was dumbfounded. It was startling, frightening and disappointing, leaving me confused and unable to make the rational decision to turn around and leave. In a state of numbness and disbelief at the surrealism I had chanced upon, I continued on through the masses hoping I would soon bypass the throng.

Unbeknownst to me, I had chosen the day before a huge race to "escape" into this area. The sign with a big "24" on it at the highway turnoff should have tipped me off, but I had grown complacent over the years and overconfident in my ability to avoid others and find solitude reasonably close to Moab. Ninety percent of the time I had gone out and seen footprints, at most, spending the day unencroached upon by another human being. Granted, I was particular as to the locations I chose and the time of year I went to my selected destination, however, this time I had obviously chosen poorly. Not being interested in festivities that draw crowds of people, I was negligent in becoming aware of the location and magnitude of the following day's bike race.



As I got deeper into the area I saw more and more vehicles, which included an amazing number towing various campers, struggling along, barely able to navigate the rough road. Right where the road reached a point where it would be extremely difficult to go any further without a higher-clearance vehicle was the race headquarters, and a virtual refugee camp. A circus of tents and campers were everywhere, packed in like carnival sideshows. People were digging along the side of the road and by their campsites, for what I have no idea. They were tearing up brush and fires were burning despite the heat of the day. Although it was mainly Russian thistle that was being uprooted, I was not relieved. Noxious plants tend to keep obnoxious people at bay, but on that particular day that maxim was not holding true.

Sales representatives from various biking related companies had display tents to exhibit and hawk their wares. To them this was not a bike racing event, but an opportunity to generate profit. I am not a religious person nor do I believe in the literal interpretations of a book I consider mythology, but now I understand the part in the Bible where Christ was so upset at the moneychangers and sellers on the temple steps that he went ballistic. The peace and solitude of the desert was being desecrated, this sanctuary that I can almost feel religious about was being shown the ultimate in disrespect. The mesa was being turned into a strip mall to generate sales for corporations by salesmen who showed no interest in maintaining what little was left of the integrity of this place in nature. To the buyers and onlookers it was a chance to dig up the earth, make fires and consume alcohol. For them this was not the quiet desert, magnificent in its beauty and solitude, but a place to party.

I noticed that no one seemed to understand that it was a road that was going through his or her newly erected refugee camp. Dazed onlookers wandered along paying more attention to the beer in front of them than the vehicles behind them. Lawn chairs were set up in the roadway and in one spot they were even small children's chairs. Whatever happened to teach your children to "look both ways before you cross?" I guess the logic here was that they were not crossing, but instead, just stopping in the middle of the road, so there was no need to look. The bikers I saw did not look like the racing type, but exhibited more of the hangers-on wannabe persona, hence the aimless and ambling nature of their peddling. They did not seem to grasp the concept that motorized vehicles usually win in a head-to-head competition. One could argue that in this highly unusual situation they believed that they had the right-of-way, but Darwinian self-preservation still tells me that flirting with self-destruction is not the best method to prove that point. Just when I thought I had seen enough, I was treated

to a rider of less-than-ideal biking physique with a round, yellow smiley face tattooed above the crack of his ass. This appalled me but did not surprise me, for the smile and its location summed up the situation I had ventured upon. At this point, in a state of shocked disbelief, I was too far into the Twilight Zone to turn around and leave, so I continued through the gauntlet of surrealism hoping this carnival would soon end.

It did not entirely go away, but it did improve. As I left the "festivities," I rumbled along seeing only real bikers who were here to participate in the race. I must admit that I was impressed with their legs. Calves were not a single bulge that tightened with each pump of the pedal, but well-defined double-bellied gastrocnemii muscles. Above these ideal calves were slim, well-proportioned thighs, which were an anatomy lesson in quadriceps and hamstring muscles. Their trim, sinewy legs looked like those from a statue of an ancient Greek hero.

They were lean and darkened from days and weeks and months of training on the trail for the following day's main event. However, their mythological effect was destroyed by Lycra and an underlying arrogance that exuded as they pedaled along, as if the desert was there only to conquer. They were not gods, but pretend gods. However, that can be easily forgiven for they were well-trained athletes.

I am sure more than one sneered at my vehicle and me as they passed me on a downhill run or I passed them on an especially sandy stretch, thinking that I, the guy in the obnoxious SUV, should try exerting himself like them and leave his motorized vehicle behind. When I waved at a few, only one waved back, but he

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was having an especially hard time of it, having apparently reached his physical limit, which made him feel less the conqueror and more the comrade. I took a liking to him; he was more like me in loose-fitting shorts and a t-shirt. I envisioned him out there pushing himself just to have a good time working out in the desert, regardless of the upcoming race and its outcome.

What those who did not acknowledge my wave failed to recognize is the amount of time I have spent in the desert, not just traveling through it on some sort of challenge, but appreciating it as something better than me. I have hiked in the blazing midday sun of summer and faced freezing winds when the place is deserted in the middle of winter. Sweating at times and shivering at other times, I have even biked... just like them.

The difference is that I go into the desert, greet it with offerings of respect and join it becoming one of its many inhabitants. I harbor no delusions of grandeur for I am just another creature that nature and the passage of time can, and will, crush as I travel through life and the desert. Therefore, I offer no challenges directed at a place immensely more powerful than me. Although, like the bikers I, too, challenge myself. However, my goal is not to overcome the desert, but to become the desert.

When I finally reached my destination, I left my vehicle behind and struck out perpendicular to the road. Within minutes I was totally alone and had calmed down, having discovered the peace and solitude I was starting to fear I would not find that day. I descended into washes and climbed places I knew bikers could not reach. I had won the battle, overcome the enemy, but it was not the desert I defeated, only a bad experience getting there.

I wandered high and low going further and further away from the challengers of the desert, their hangers-on and the moneychangers. When I reached a height in the distance where it was not possible to overlook the road, I gave thanks to the spirit of the desert. Despite being an agnostic/atheist, alone on a sandstone cliff, resting in the shade of a giant juniper or wandering through scented sage, I feel a part of the desert. It is something special only the perfectly quiet and still of mind can experience.

It amazed and saddened me that out of so many, so close, no one wanted to simply walk away from the road and the chaos to enjoy the desert. As much as I take great pleasure in being alone in the desert, I would have welcomed another searcher of peace and solitude, a fellow human who only wished to overcome himself. However, deep inside, I knew that I would remain alone in my desert sanctuary until I chose to run the gauntlet and race back to a more "civilized" place. The moneychangers were too busy reaping profits, the hangers-on too intent on having a party and the racers had too rest up to challenge the desert the following day.

*NOTE: For another perspective on 24, go to this link and scroll down to: '24 Comes to Moab Again.'*

<http://www.canyoncountryzephyr.com/oldzephyr/oct-nov2006/takeleave.html>