

chasing- ing the alley- cat

by Johnathon Allen





It wasn't until I found myself running through a stranger's backyard in northeast Portland throwing my bike over an 8-foot cyclone fence in a torrential downpour that I bothered asking the question, "What the hell am I doing?"

There is, of course, a logical chain of events involved that makes a twisted sort of sense. It started when I entered a local bike-messenger alleycat race called Too Much Scotty. Apparently, there is more than one messenger named Scotty in the city and it's important that we all learn to be more Scotty-like in order to absorb the universal wonk. Scheduled as a daylight event without bar-stops, it also seemed perfect for photo opps, actual competition and hopefully my overall survival.

The operation proved to be considerably more challenging than predicted. For one, the city's biggest annual messenger competition—the West Side Invite—was canceled this year because every self-respecting courier on the West Coast will be in San Francisco at the North American Cycle Courier Championships on Memorial Day weekend, the traditional date of the West Side. This means that the majority of the couriers who bothered to show up in Scotty's front yard on a rainy Saturday afternoon (some traveling from as far

away as Seattle and S.F.) to do what they do every other day of the week actually *care* who the fastest messenger in the city is. Given the weather and time of year, they certainly didn't come for a scenic tour.

While sitting on Scotty's living room couch watching the parade of tattooed, hung-over racers drag ass in the door, I heard someone ask: "So, what do you need to win?"

Scotty smiled and said, "Stamina."

Translation: This is going to be a long, fast race with a bunch of obscure stops only the locals know.

Then there's the split-mind problem. Part rider, part journalist, I constantly struggle with balancing the roles of participant and observer. I started out with a decent-enough race strategy: I would establish the obvious leaders via pre-race observation, pick someone more geographically savvy than I and do my best to hang onto their wheel. This approach allowed me to shoot photographs while everyone else paced back and forth studying the



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stops on the race manifest. Riders looked over maps of the city and discussed the potentially fastest routes while I walked around taking lifestyle pics and rolling video (surreptitiously recording the intended strategies of the faster riders). I had considered the manifest for all of about 20 seconds. Out of the seven stops, I could place maybe five in my head. The race went all over Portland—deep north end, southeast industrial, northeast, central downtown and way the hell out to the top of a ridge called Rocky Butte. I'd never even heard of it, let alone gone there in my usual migratory routes around the city. While recording video, I overheard a messenger chick in a red hoody say: "Hey, I live at the base of Rocky Butte, and I know exactly how to get there from the Halsey overpass."

Target acquired.

She looked up at my camera. "And don't even think about following me."

"As if I could keep up," I quipped, aware of a strong hint of truth in both statements.

Though they are technically underground events advertised only by word of mouth, not everyone who shows up at an alleycat is a bike courier (there are a few thousand riders in Portland but fewer than 50 paying messenger positions). Some, like me, are ex-messengers who've gone on to work in less lethal professions; others are "fakengers"—cycling hipsters with pimped-out custom bikes and matching shoulder bags who want to see how well they measure up. All of the above were in attendance to see if they have what it takes to be Scotty.

Rain fell with a God-like vengeance. There was a profusion of drinking, smoking, map pondering and typical bitching about the weather while the checkpoint volunteers got into position. Alleycats aren't exactly run with Olympic precision. Events like this happen on "messenger time," which means everything starts at least an hour after it's scheduled. Experienced messengers know this and, of course, add another hour on top of it. Despite the scheduled start time of 1 p.m. and a staggering number of beer, cigarette and donut runs to secure sufficient race supplies, we were still standing around at 3:30 contemplating the waterfalls tumbling from the gutter-clogged eaves of Scotty's roof.

I thought things might just devolve into a beer-swilling porch party when the last checkpoint called in ready. Bikes were locked to

Bike messengers, ex-messengers and fakengers. All were in attendance to see if they have what it takes to be Scotty.



themselves on one side of the street while the mob of fidgeting riders stood on the other.

Before the start, Scotty stuffed a deflated beach ball in the spokes of each bike.

“That piece of paper we gave you is just a guide. This is your *actual* manifest!” he yelled with a sadistic Scotty smirk. “It must be inflated at each checkpoint to be signed.”

As soon as he yelled “GO!,” adrenaline systems and drivetrains snapped into overdrive, and the entire crowd charged into traffic in a pedal-stomping, wheel-humming blur.

Don't let the cigarette-smoking, booze-drinking tattooed-stoner look fool you. Bike messengers spend innumerable hours in the saddle doing sprint intervals all day in weather you wouldn't walk a dog in. They are some of the fastest bike riders you've seen anywhere. Say to one of them, “Go there, get this,” and a

deep-seated Pavlovian response kicks in that makes them nearly impossible for the average human to keep up with in open traffic. Dodging side-view mirrors and suddenly opening car doors while chasing Red Hoody Girl as she bobs and weaves between SUVs and Outbacks like a bullfighter on speed is no small trick. She puts a couple of blocks between us almost instantly. In order to keep up, I resort

to skitching (holding onto moving cars), trimming parking lots and shortcutting through random yards. I close the gap by a block and take a gamble that the backyard at the end of the street and the adjacent park are *not* separated by a tall rusty cyclone fence. Next thing I know, I'm tossing my bike over and scrambling after it, trying not to cut myself as Red Hoody Girl pulls a hard left and disappears on the next street. DAMN! I land in ankle-deep mud, feel my socks fill with goo, grab the bike and charge after her down a parallel street. She still doesn't know I'm tailing her.

This is where you came in: right about the time I was wondering what the hell we're doing. I mean, these cats are riding at breakneck speeds all over the city in a torrential downpour on their day *off* for little more than beer money and a pair of oversized bowling shoes. It's not like anyone of this ilk will ever land a lucrative advertising deal with Nike.

Red Hoody Girl sums it up when I finally reel her in on a long open straightaway



and yell over the din of rain and passing cars: “So ... why are we doing this, again?”

“Because it's FUN!” she yells back, pulling another hard left across three lanes and vanishing momentarily in the giant puddle wake of a passing bus.

The thing is, bike messengers aren't like regular people. They live on the front lines of a cultural war zone where the simple act of making a living involves a constant struggle for survival. The lifestyle also requires the ability to sustain high levels of physical output on a refined diet of donuts, nicotine and cheap pilsner. It's a demanding set of skills that few people possess. Then there's the astronomical rate of attrition. Most bike messengers are under 25, and two years on the streets is considered a lifetime. Collisions, accidents and life-or-death chase scenes occur on a weekly if not daily basis.

Jamming through the brake-light mash-

up of rush-hour traffic with minuscule, femur-shattering margins of error can make anyone feel like the fastest thing in the jungle. Alleycats are a way of determining the difference between true masters of the craft and those who merely look good in a pair of cutoffs and high-tops. The entire existence revolves around racing things—cars, clocks, lights, cops. As long as there have been couriers, they have been racing each other to see who the fastest really is. The term alleycat was originally used in the late '80s to describe a traffic courier race held every Halloween in Toronto (called the “Alleycat Scramble”). When a group of Toronto messengers brought videos of the races to Berlin for the first-ever Cycle Messenger World Championships, the alleycat phenomena spread around the world like herpes through a frat house.

Since its 1993 Berlin inception, the Cycle Messenger World Championships (CMWC) have annually drawn professional couriers



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together from across the globe to celebrate the concrete underbelly of cycling subculture and compete for bragging rights as “world’s best” in an array of distinctively urban disciplines, including alleycat racing, no-handed track stands, skids, bunny hops, cargo hauling and all-night pub crawls. The gathering, along with two similar continent-wide events—the North American Cycle Courier Championships (NACCC) and the European Cycle Messenger Championships (ECMC)—have become the culture’s most notable centers of gravity.

While the question of whether or not you can hold a definitive championship in what is essentially an entire lifestyle is the subject of endless intoxicated debate, it’s an indisputable fact that messengers throw the best damn party on two wheels. One part legitimate race, one part indie worker convention and one part nonstop party, the world championships are as much a family gathering as an international competition.

While the Internet has made true working-class messengers ever more obsolete, it has

also connected the community in unprecedented ways. Blogs and Web forums raise the value of street cred to global proportions. When the 14th annual CMWC convened in Sydney, Australia, last year, few people were surprised to see Washington, D.C.’s fixed-gear master, Andy Zalan, dominate the track-stand and backward-circle competitions; it was also common knowledge that San Fran’s legendary Super Mike was not to be challenged to a bike duel under any circumstances (unless you’re Swiss and/or severely inebriated). These guys will never have the name recognition or bank accounts of, say Lance Armstrong, but their talents are every bit as impressive and larger than life on the courier underground. One of the first things I noticed attending my first CMWC was how many people already knew each other by their online handles even though they’d never officially met.

The Seattle event kicked off with 600-plus riders arriving from more than 40 cities, including London, Tokyo, Sydney, Prague,

Copenhagen, Calgary, New York, Chicago, Houston, Denver, L.A., Portland and San Francisco, to take over the streets of downtown in a cosmopolitan critical mass (with friendly police escort, no less)—all of it organized online by messengers, for messengers.

The culture also seems to attract a disproportionate number of rock musicians, abstract painters, screen printers, sculptors, photographers and performance artists. As a result, these gatherings also double as cycling art expos. Ground zero for Seattle’s CMWC was a sprawling theater/gallery complex called Consolidated Works carved out of a block-long warehouse in the Lake Union district. In addition to being the start/finish, the venue hosted two stages of rotating music acts, a theater screening underground messenger flicks, and a half dozen art galleries brimming with paintings, graphic novels, kinetic sculptures and photographs reflecting the messenger life. There was also a body

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Super Mike was not to be challenged to a bike duel under any circumstances (unless you’re Swiss and/or severely inebriated)

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mod booth offering tattoos and piercings for those feeling insufficiently adorned. A punk band rocked the main stage while drunken spectators tossed mad belly flops across the dance floor on a giant beer-soaked Slip 'n Slide. Friendly biker girls walked through the crowd handing out PBRs for a buck while hundreds of onlookers screamed at participants in a tag-team wrestling match being thrown down in a Jell-O-filled kiddie pool.

Living and working in a state of constant self-propelled street combat gives bike messengers a profound sense of battle-hardened kinship that the average cubicle clone will never know. Whether they ride the streets of Boston, Budapest or Barcelona, messengers everywhere confront many of the same challenges. The CMWC and NACCC events also serve as an industry forum for couriers to organize a collective approach to labor rights, wage standards, health insurance and negative media stereotypes.

For the main world championship race, riders are given a series of manifests with pickups and drops spread out over a large urban course and four hours to complete their assigned runs. In contrast to traditional alleycats, CMWC courses are closed to traffic in order to minimize hometown advantage. Other than a lack of moving cars and a few strategically placed hay bales, the Seattle race course was a 100 percent ungroomed concrete jungle laced with sketchy cobblestone streets and a maze of narrow littered alleys. A combination of quick strategic thinking and strong legs were mission critical to taking home the crown.

Messenger rigs come in all types—mountain bikes with slicks, city-fied road bikes, souped-up cruisers, European cargo rigs—but if you want real street cred, you have to thread the gauntlet on a fixed-gear track bike. Originally designed to be ridden at high speeds in large groups on indoor tracks (hence the lack of brakes), the fixie is the two-wheeled weapon of the urban purist. No handbrakes, no shifters, no gears, no coasting; just the sheer force of your own two legs plugged directly into gyroscopic gravity. Riding a fixie through traffic requires Zen-like anticipation, timing and control.

Shooting film at the CMWC halfway down a steep hill with a 90-degree T intersection at the bottom, I was awestruck as dozens of riders careened past simultaneously on different lines without colliding. It was like watching a flock of birds engaged in a high-



speed dog fight: fixies ripping down the middle of the street, mountain bikers cutting the inside sidewalk lines, roadies shooting outside at mach-10, all going in opposite directions at the same time. It was four hours of nonstop close calls and near misses. The only accident I saw was when one of the fixies broke his chain at the apex of the bottom turn. He hit a curb at almost 30 mph and broke his collarbone, but it wasn't a mistake; he was just pushing the envelope.

The only ones who really care about winning the main race are the Swiss and a few riders from alphabetically named cities like N.Y.C., D.C. and S.F. with something to prove. When it comes to celebrating a lifestyle, messengers place the emphasis on *style*. Events like the wheelie competition, downhill night slalom, track-stand skids, gold sprints

and random feats of naked bravery are the moments legends are made of.

The demented sense of humor carries over to alleycat racing, which generally consists of themed delivery checkpoints that riders must execute by whatever route they deem fastest. Checkpoints are frequently enhanced with reality-based twists to make things more challenging. Operatives will steal your bike and hide it or make you deflate your tire just to re-inflate it. Mock security guards, desk clerks and cops—the natural enemies of the bike courier—will hassle competitors mercilessly: demanding to see ID in order for them to proceed; heckling them for bringing the wrong package and forcing them to exchange it for an even more awkward one; or changing the program midrace by assigning them a surprise drop on the other side of town. When Red



Hoody Girl and I arrive at the Halsey overpass checkpoint—where racers must learn to play the games of the Scotties—we are ordered to remove our front wheels and use them for a game of PBR can bowling.

“I can't sign your beach ball until you score!” says the stop director, who is doing his best to keep the empty beer cans flowing.

At other stops, riders are zip-tied down and forced to break free; required to scream their love of Scotty from the mountaintops; and must scramble over broken glass, rain-slicked stairs and treacherous train yards to get to the next checkpoint. It's not easy being Scotty.

In fact, I got completely turned around while descending Rocky Butte because I failed to stick to my strategy and let Red Hoody Girl get away while pursuing a photo op.

I reached down to grab my camera with one hand, tapped the rain-slicked curb with my front tire and went down in an amateurish tumble. After pulling my act together, I dropped the wrong way off the summit and suddenly found myself alone in the middle of bum-fuck-nowhere northeast Portland with absolutely no idea where I was or which way I should be going. A wave of depression washed over me as I realized that I didn't, in fact, have what it takes to be a Scotty. Luckily, I'm never too proud to call for backup.

I snapped my cell phone open and punched A.B. (he is both conveniently located at the top of my contact list and almost always sitting in front of a networked computer). In less than 60 seconds, he has determined my precise location and given me new directions. I'm more than a hundred blocks from downtown, but, miraculously, the sun emerges from behind the clouds and warms the valley with an ephemeral light. Then, as if on some cosmic cue, I spot a rider sprinting cross-street six blocks ahead with a brightly colored beach ball bulging from his pack. In a heartbeat, everything has changed. The sun is out, the chase is back on, there's a fresh dose of adrenaline shooting through my veins and I'm thinking, *Hey, maybe there's a little Scotty in me after all.* ☺

