

Mountain Gazette

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Off Belay

Stories from the vertical perspective

John Nichols

Dick Dorworth

Mary Sojourner

Royal Robbins

Jeremy Bernstein

Cameron Burns

Lito Tejada-Flores

When in doubt, go higher

section of whitewater (the river is running low), another 12-mile hike, a grueling mountain bike ride and a final 25-mile hike across steep scree fields intersected by a 400-foot rappel.

What used to be focused, individual pursuits — running, cycling, climbing, and kayaking — are becoming theme-park-style team sports exploited for the human drama of a virtual TV adventure. Shows like *Survivor* come to mind. Multi-event expedition adventure races like the Subaru Primal Quest compare their athletes' endeavors with explorers like Lewis and Clark and Magellan and Cook, but we're kidding ourselves if full-sized RVs every 30 or 40 miles, a plate of hot food, a down jacket and a well-marked map constitute pushing any type of new frontier. The question in the public mind in Telluride is: Is it appropriate for public lands to be used as a vehicle for profit and commercial endeavors? In this scenario, California Sports Marketing comes in, puts on a 10-day race, allows their sponsor to strategically place 100 Primal Quest logo-sporting Subarus throughout the region, heavily impacts fragile high-alpine areas and uses backcountry trails where people flee for quiet spiritual moments — all to make TV drama and leave a few hundred thousand dollars richer.

Another disappointing factor in the descent of this race on the San Juans is the deep-pocket, corporate sponsorship of Subaru. Subaru promotes itself as eco-friendly. But if you click on Subaru's "Commitment to the Environment" link on the Eco Primal Quest website, you pull up a spiel about how Subaru can get you off the beaten path. That's not exactly preservation of ecosystems, wildlife corridors and untrampled land. "When you see a Subaru driving down the road or on the trail," reads the site (a trail!?), "chances are it

will be loaded with a kayak, canoe, mountain bike, skis or snowboard."

We already live on a violated planet and the very people who love the outdoors are killing it. Subaru should know better than that. But they don't, and that's what stinks. On top of that, the Primal Quest website says that corporate sponsors are "increasingly interested in the sport, as it communicates marketing-friendly attributes such as teamwork, perseverance, and communication."

So, there we go: It's a self-pronounced marketing gimmick. Human drama sells cars? How stupid are we? The locals around here laughed all week at the Subaru parked at the entrance to the Mountain Village. It was so close to the decorative flowerpots it looked like the car was driving over the wildflowers. Corporate commitment to environmentalism is a scam. As the adventure racers burst out of the starting gate, after being serenaded by a solo performance of the national anthem, at least four teams tramped right through wetlands cordoned off with white tape.

Public lands are fragile and valuable not for their monetary value, but for their wildness and the animals that live there and the ecosystems that struggle to survive. In a pre-race meeting in a nearby town where citizens opposed to the race questioned impacts on land, animals, and an already toasted High Country, Barger, the president of California Sports Marketing, assured us that all potential impacts were being mitigated.

Back on Teakettle, teams are stacked up on the other side of the archway waiting to get down the ropes. I figure I'm either going to be up here all day or I'm going to have to make a break for it. Team Ice Breaker, a really nice group of Kiwis, takes a smart approach and waits for all to get across the zip line so they'll

descend the gully together, mitigating rockfall intensity. While they're waiting, I hug the sidewall and make my way down, ducking around a corner just as rocks come crashing toward me. I notice on the way down that there's a freshly trampled path through the meadow that leads down to the road. Only 12 teams have come through here so far.

Corinne Platt lives in Ophir, Colorado.

An Urban Eco-Challenge

By Allison Johnson

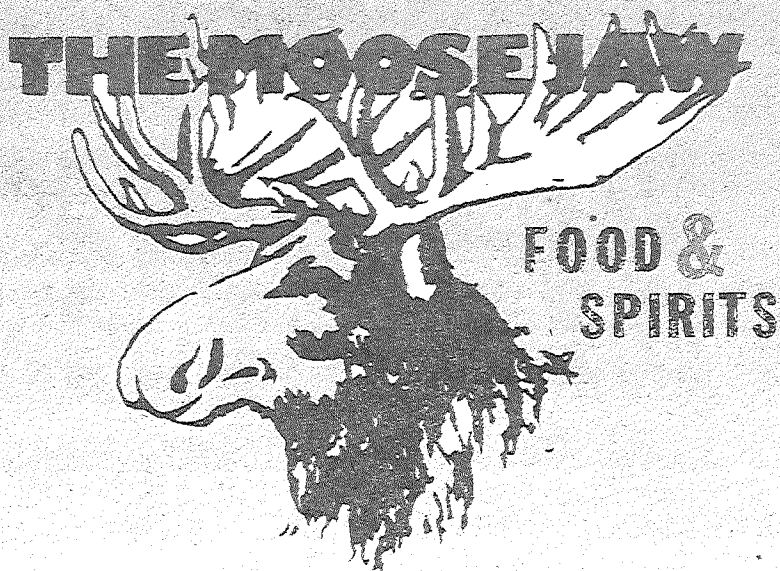
When I hear the words "eco-challenge," I imagine glaciers in Patagonia, frigid rivers in Alaska and bush that needs serious whacking in the Australian outback. A location I never envisioned in one of these demanding wilderness races was my own residential neighborhood located just three miles from the start of the 2002 Subaru Primal Quest adventure race in Telluride, Colorado.

As the international competition for \$250,000 began and the 62 teams of four contestants each headed out into the San Juan Mountains for a week of hiking, biking,

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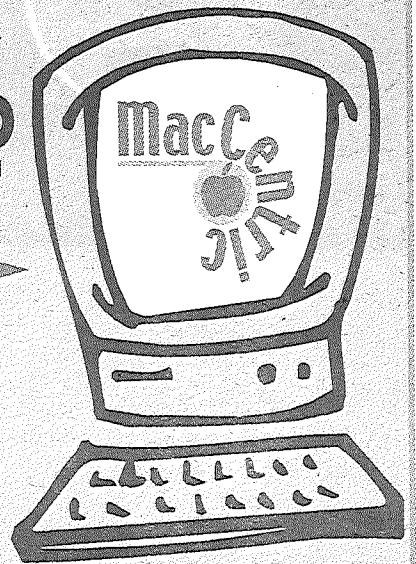
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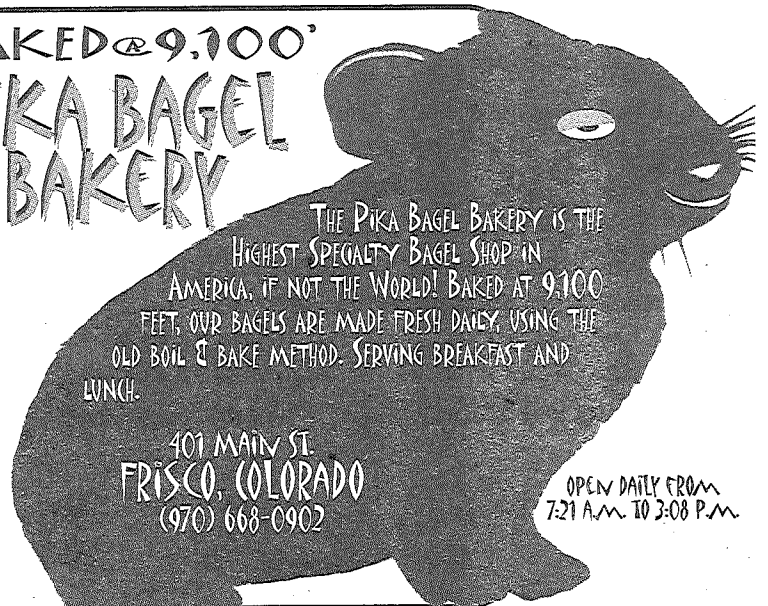


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rock climbing and kayaking, I was a little miffed to learn that these hardy souls planned, in the first leg of the race, to cover backcountry that had taken me the better part of five years to explore. Since the race course had been kept top secret, I could only envision with a sort of sadistic delight the extreme wilderness route these racers would follow. Imagine my surprise, then, when the course turned out to include a late-night jaunt right past my house.

At around one in the morning on the first night of the race, a commotion outside my bedroom window — squeaking brakes, a muffled curse, headlights flashing like strobe lights — caused my husband to peak through the blinds and groan, "Hey, that was a team from the race! Did you hear that?"

I didn't have to listen very hard. A few moments later, a new quartet skidded to a halt. The single-track path the racers had chosen eventually connects below my house to an old railroad corridor from the region's mining heyday. Due to a confusing intersection, the racers had become disoriented barely ten feet from my bedroom window. My husband and I lay in bed and eavesdropped on the conversations of these supposedly experienced orienteers.

"Is the trail down that way?"

"Nope. This is a dead end. How about over there?"

"Not here either. Where the hell is it?"

"Well, we're supposed to find an old railroad track."

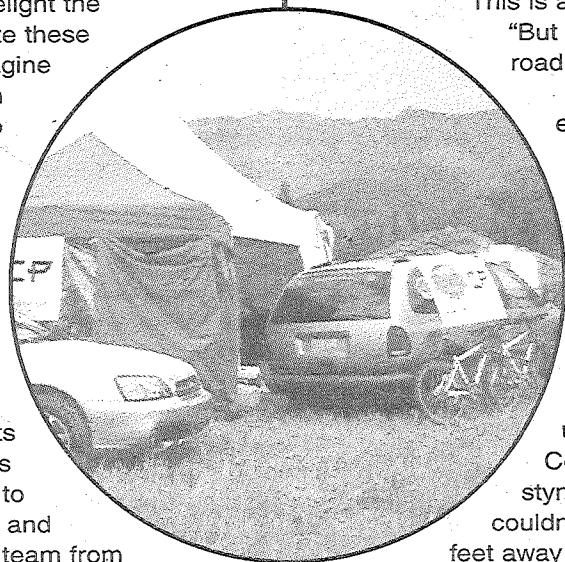
"So that's got to be wider than a single-track, right?"

"Well, it's not a path."

"But is it a road?"

"This is a road."

"But there are houses on this road."



The competitors sounded more than a little disconcerted to find themselves lost in a housing development rather than a high-alpine basin. My husband marveled that the racers had managed to wind their way through 24 miles of uninhabited High

Country, only to be so stymied by asphalt that they couldn't find a trail just five

feet away from where they stood. I wondered why they couldn't tell from their topographical maps that the trail they hoped to connect to actually was several hundred feet below their current location. I had delusional moments of grandeur, thinking, "Heck, if these people can't find a railroad track, then maybe I should take up adventure racing!"

The mothering side of me then remembered that these folks had been up all night. I considered whispering to them through the blinds like the disembodied voice in the movie *Field of Dreams*: "If you head down to the river, you will find the trail." My husband pointed out that such advice ultimately would prove futile to restoring our sleep since another way-

ward team was bound to show up a few minutes later.

Hour after hour we listened to each new team repeat the confusion of its predecessors. Once I peaked outside to see probably a dozen bikers lined up in a row with one or two reporting back every few minutes from reconnaissance missions. My husband groggily suggested I go outside in my nightshirt to see who would offer me five bucks, or at least a Primal Quest T-shirt, in exchange for directions. I contemplated preempting their discussions by writing directions in the dirt on the side of my unofficial Subaru or camping out on the front porch with a lawn chair, a cup of hot chocolate and two flashlights that I could wave like an airline attendant in the direction of the trail.

In the end, though, I did nothing. With stops, starts and noisy discussion, the teams eventually found their way and headed back out into the wilderness. When my husband and I dragged ourselves out of bed in the morning, the loitering competitors had disappeared into the dawn like mischievous apparitions. We downed several cups of coffee and decided over breakfast that, for those brief moments in the darkness, the 2002 Subaru Primal Quest had been more of an urban-challenge than an eco-challenge. It reminded me of a UPS driver who, after receiving directions to my home in a development called Lawson Hill, actually thought I'd told him I was "lost in hell." Expecting more challenging mountain terrain than my banal little neighborhood, the eco-challenge competitors probably thought of it exactly the same way.

Allison Johnson writes columns for *The Telluride Watch* and *Telluride Magazine*.






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