

SPOKE

The mountain bikers you



VOYAGERS

TREKKING

BUT NOT AS WE KNOW IT

PASSING

AND BREAKING IN KOMBIS

NOT SEEING

BELIEVING

FLIPS AND WHIPS

FOR SILVER CHIPS

SUBSCRIBE AND WIN **WTB** TYRES

A **FIRSTFLOOR**

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Blind Ambition

What
can **stop**
Bobby
McMullen?

WORDS YURI HAUSWALD

PHOTOS STEFAN HAWORTH

no EXCUSES

He has plenty of them. Excuses, that is. He's survived diabetes, kidney failure, years of dialysis, two kidney/pancreas transplants, multiple tibia and fibula fractures, open heart surgery, and an aggressive form of cancer. Oh yeah, and he also went blind when he was 29. But Bobby McMullen, the man I'm heading to Queenstown with to compete in a 6 Hour Super D, doesn't make excuses.

We're on our way to the airport, Bobby's Ford F-150 van stuffed with bikes and gear, his wife Heidi driving, when the gravity of what I'm doing really hits me. I'm heading to another hemisphere, with a blind man who basically has to carry around a small pharmacy of pills to help keep all his organs working, to guide him down a dangerous track of berms, bumps and banks that most sighted people wouldn't even consider riding. I'm going partway around the world to ride with a man whose wellbeing, every time we swing a leg over our bikes, is in my hands and my hands alone. I'm embarking on a journey of a lifetime with a man I barely know, to spend two weeks competing, riding and travelling around the South Island of New Zealand, and all I have to do is make sure he has fun and, most importantly, makes it home in one piece.



Bobby and Mark Dickson
Rude Rock, Queenstown

your dirt in Teeth

Bobby and Yuri Hauswald
Rude Rock, Queenstown



Dirt in our teeth. That's what Bobby likes to say after we've perfectly choreographed riding some sweet singletrack; when we have grins on our faces that have collected more dirt than the grill of a car collects bugs. Yesterday, after a long day's worth of travel, we rode just such a trail. Rude Rock, a 3.5km, purpose-built, rollercoaster ribbon of dirt which falls off the slopes of Coronet Peak, is one of the best trails I've had the pleasure to ride.

But I didn't start the ride with a smile.

I hadn't guided Bobby in two years, the last time being the Sea Otter XC course, and to be totally honest, I was extremely nervous about riding a completely unknown trail in the waning light of the day. It also didn't help that when Bobby asked our host—Mark Dickson of KRD Distributors—what the trail was like, he replied, "I have no idea, I've never ridden it."

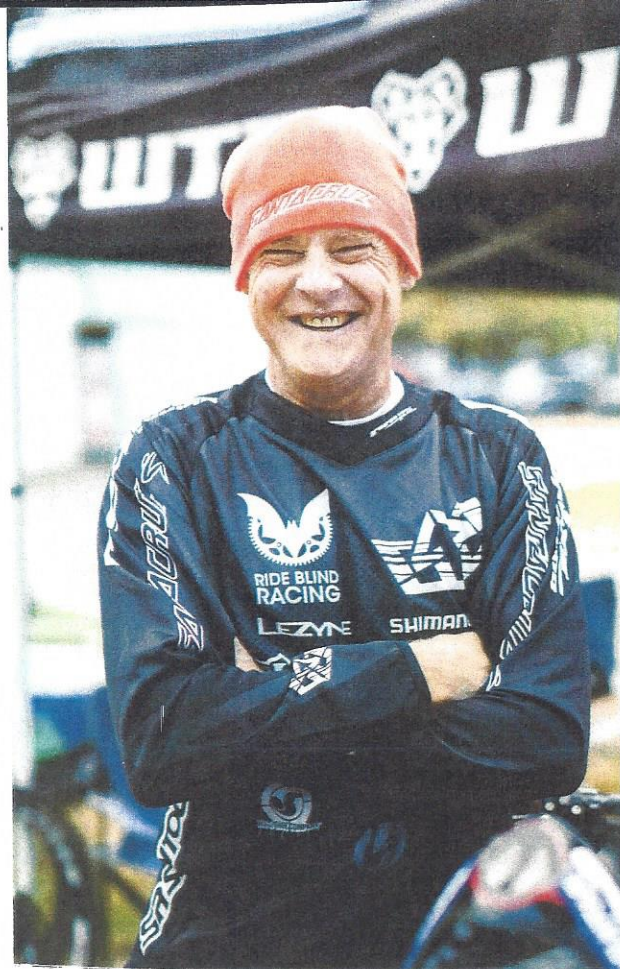
After a serious grunt up a gravel service road, one that forced us to walk sections, we reached a massive Otago schist headstone trail sign where I had my first of many Hobbit moments. The view to the valley floor below was breathtaking, and it wouldn't have surprised me if Gandalf had stepped out of the tussock. With the light fading and temperature dropping, Bobby and I quickly reviewed our ride commands, took deep breaths and timidly pushed off into the unknown.

After a few stall outs, "oh shit" moments and some miscues on my part, Bobby and I got our riding flow on. The staccato stream of commands never stopped flowing from my mouth as we rode the flowy trail. My voice was the beacon he followed and my commands laid down a 'track' that he read instinctually. By the time we reached the bottom of Rude Rock, we had our biking choreography back, and with that came ear to ear grins. When we were spat out where Mark was waiting with the truck, Bobby and I had dirt in our teeth and the confidence that we could ride the Super D course at the Queenstown Mountain Bike Festival.

Riding the Dragon

It was on our pre-ride of the Super D course that Mark and I decided the technical, rooty upper sections pushed us out of our comfort zones as far as guiding went. That's not to say that Bobby wouldn't want to give it a go—he'll be the first to let you know that he wants to be the one defining what his riding limits are—it's just that neither Mark nor I wanted the responsibility of taking him down terrain that made us fearful for his safety. Neither one of us wanted to be the one to call Heidi to tell her Bobby had crashed and hurt himself, again. So, much to Bobby's chagrin, we were granted permission from the race promoter to alter the course to bypass the upper section, allowing us to ride about sixty percent of the actual race course.

It was on Bobby's third lap that he 'rode the dragon'. I was chasing him and Mark with a GoPro as they bobbed and weaved their way through the undulating, wooded tract, when we came upon one of the more banked switchback turns. By this time Bobby had the course basically memorised, which meant he was feeling more comfortable with his riding limits. Being who Bobby is, he was taking more risks by riding the berms higher, so he could carry more speed out of them. As we entered the second berm of the set, I could see Bobby was taking this one too high up the bank. His exit trajectory was taking him straight towards the edge of the berm, and to the edge of the trail which dropped off quite dramatically into the woods. I remember shouting a few hard rights in a panicked tone as Bobby's front tyre skittered along the outer edge of the berm, rolling precariously close to the edge but somehow not going over. It was that moment in time—that moment of delicate, perfect balance—where it became clear to me that every time Bobby throws his leg over the top tube, he risks everything for the thing he loves doing most: riding his bike.



Bobby during the
6 Hour Super D



Bobby and Yuri Hauswald
Rude Rock, Queenstown

Jet Boat Choreography

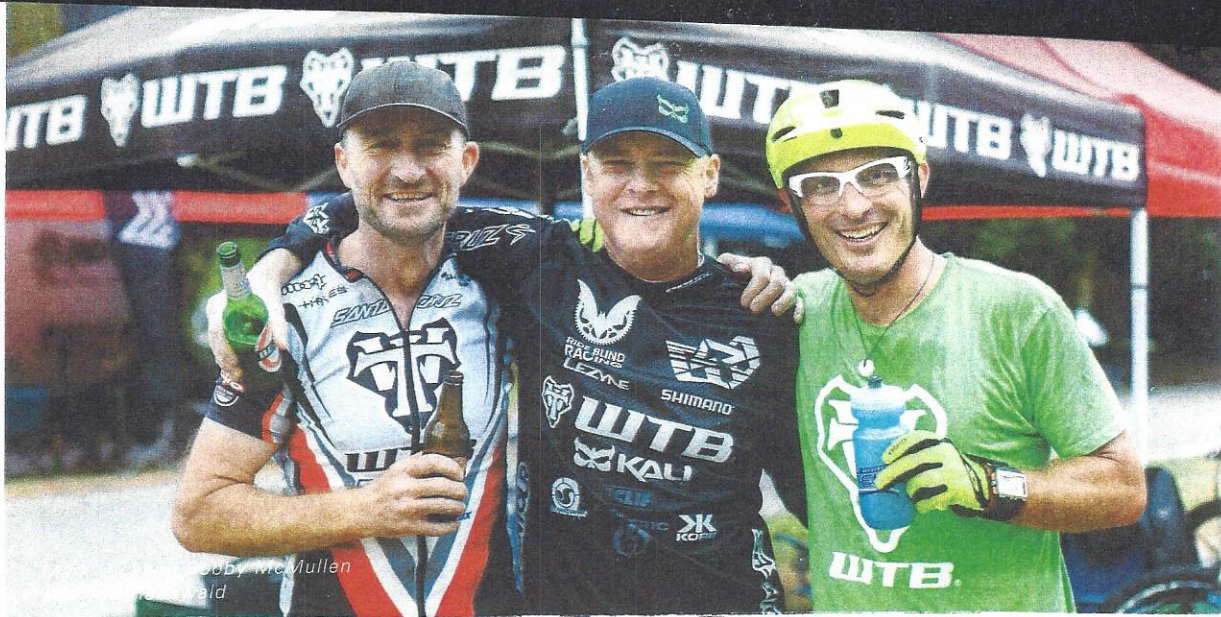
Yuri Hauswald and Bobby
Rude Rock, Queenstown



Bobby never ceases to amaze me. I mean, I already know the guy tears it up on a bike, so I guess it shouldn't be too much of a surprise that his great bike handling skills transfer to jet boating, right? Yesterday I found out first hand that Bobby, after a bit of coaching, can also rip up the river behind the wheel of a jet boat.

Mark had been telling us all week about taking us up Canterbury's Waimakariri River in his jet boat. Now, to be totally honest and at the expense of sounding like a snob, I had visions of some shiny, cigarette-shaped speedster, so I was a bit surprised when Mark unveiled his pride and joy and it looked more like your standard 13 foot fishing boat with a rather large engine in the rear. As it turns out, that rather large engine housed 250 hp; this 'standard' looking fishing boat pinned it on the water.

After a few instructions on the handling qualities of the boat, the workings of the jet propulsion system, some stall outs and some mis-turns, Bobby and Mark got their jet boating choreography right, and Bobby was able to drive the boat on instructions very similar to the ones we use on the bike.



Brake Burner Time Travel

Today we sampled some soil that is part of New Zealand's mountain bike history, a track woven into the fabric of Queenstown's local racing lore: the Brake Burner. This snaking rollercoaster of dirt fun plunges off the top of Coronet Peak Ski Area, and was host to New Zealand's first lift accessed Super D race in 2007. Bobby, Mark and I were to be riding it with Mark Angus—owner/founder of The Bike Fix, Queenstown's locals' shop for twenty years—who competed in the first running of the race.

Since Mark Dickson had also ridden Brake Burner before (he raced it with Mark Weir in 2008), I didn't argue when he volunteered to guide Bobby down the precipitous track. And boy was I glad. Standing at the top, I puckered at what I saw. Within feet of the start was a rock drop, some tight switchbacks that funneled through a jagged, boulder-strewn rock garden, some more drop-offs and a transition into some big, rolling gap-type jumps that all had bailouts. Speaking of bailing out, we opted to skip this section, much to Bobby's disappointment, and rode down the access road to a safer entrance.

After watching Mark and Bobby safely navigate the highly technical Brake Burner tract, I came to the realisation that too often we look at life's obstacles, setbacks, injuries, arguments etc as limiters or barriers that quite literally bring our forward progress to a standstill. Watching Bobby blast his bike over stutter bumps, rail through berms and perfectly banked turns, and rolling over contours made me think; we need to constantly reassess what's possible in life, even when faced with some sort of impediment, or 'handicap'. Standing before me, at the base of one of the most fabled tracks in the South Island, was a truly inspirational man, a man who wasn't going to let a little thing like blindness stop him from doing what he loves most: riding his bike and living what is possible.

No matter how beautiful and fun it's been exploring Queenstown, after two weeks of being on the road, living out of suitcases and bike boxes, both Bobby and I are ready to get back to our wives and our regular lives.

Travelling with Bobby, navigating the hustle and bustle of airports, is much like guiding him down a technical bit of singletrack. There are the multiple FOLLOW MEs, STRAIGHT AHEADs and STAY TIGHT RIGHTs, as well as the 'get him through safely' nerves, as we bob and weave our way through crowded pedestrian crossings, ticket counters and terminals. Because he's so fiercely independent and rarely uses it, he's going to hate me for saying this, but nothing parts the seas, affording us space when there is none, like Bobby's 'handicap' cane. He never uses it in his regular life because he doesn't have to; he has adapted his movements such that he can navigate his way through high-traffic areas by following shadows, sensing the flow of people around him, or actually memorising the layout of a room. He never uses it because he's too proud, too stubborn (in a good way) and he doesn't want people to know he's 'disabled' because, when he can, he wants to be able to live his life as independently as possible.

Sitting in the Auckland terminal trying to pass a four hour layover, Bobby and I reflect on just how damn lucky we are to have done what we did. When it comes to accomplishing things people think are impossible, it's great to show that passion, determination, focus, skill, and a bit of stubbornness can make almost anything possible. Once we cram onto the plane, our eminent launch back in time just moments away, I ask Bobby why, at age 50, he continues doing what he does, why he continues to compound his medical risks by taking physical risks. Bobby turns to me and, with that squinty smile of his, says "Every day I get up, I'm thankful for the life I have. Every day gives me the opportunity to push limits beyond limits, and show what we're capable of." **S**

