



Fall under the spell of the Deerfield Dirt Road Randonnée.

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**THE MOST**

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# G MOMENT

**AT THE D2R2, YOU START WHENEVER YOU WANT AND NAVIGATE YOUR OWN ROUTE, YOU WON'T GET A PRIZE FOR FINISHING FIRST OR GRIEF FOR FINISHING LAST—AND, BY THE WAY, YOU WILL FALL UNDER THE SPELL OF THE MOST BEAUTIFUL HARD ROADS YOU'VE EVER RIDDEN.**

**BY MIKE MAGNUSON | PHOTOGRAPHY BY HEATHER MCGRATH**





## ONE SUNNY AUGUST FRIDAY AFTERNOON

in Massachusetts, the day before I rode the Deerfield Dirt Road Randonnée, I wandered into Valley Bike and Ski Werks in Hadley to pick up a fancy bicycle, and I encountered a magician. He was a small, elfish-looking man with white hair and a white T-shirt and a tan outdoorsman's vest and tan cargo shorts, and next to him stood a smiling, brown-haired girl who was probably 8 years old and who I assumed—because she had an elfish look to her, too—was the magician's granddaughter. On the magician's vest was a large rectangular pin that read Magician At Work! Without this button, I would have assumed he was any other citizen of the empire who had, like me, wandered into a bike shop in search of two wheels to point in the direction of eternal happiness.

The magician held court near the front counter with Dave, one of the shop's owners, who was checking the computer to see if a bike the magician wanted to special-order was available at a regional supplier. It was. But the magician hesitated to order this bike and instead produced from one of his pockets an old, raggedy travel magazine and handed it to Dave and said, "Pick a word out of this magazine, any word you want."

Dave was a fit guy with a smile on his face and

who looked clean-cut and scruffy at the same time—a likeable fellow, for sure. He exchanged a glance with the magician then said, "What am I supposed to do with this word?"

"Memorize it!" The magician threw up his hands in a combination of despair and joy. "And make it a good one!"

Then the magician turned his back to Dave and winked at me, and Dave flipped through the magazine and made some serious faces that weren't too serious.

The magician said, "You have that word yet?"

Dave said he was still hunting for one, and the magician gave me a stern glance and said, "So you're riding the D2R2 tomorrow?"

"Yep," I said. "I'm really excited about it!"

"Don't hurt yourself out there," the magician said. "Those are some incredibly difficult dirt roads."

They are, indeed: a total of 100 kilometers, with more feet of climbing than my mind could wrap itself around, and most of this on dirt roads that were constructed back in the days when Ethan Allen and his Green Mountain Boys roamed the Massachusetts/Vermont border country dreaming of carbon-fiber cyclocross bikes with revolutionary, state-of-the-art disc brakes.

I said, "I'm just going to take it easy tomorrow and enjoy the scenery."

The magician's granddaughter gave me a long, disappointed stare and shook her head in disgust. Behind her, the dozens of bikes in the shop seemed to form a collective frown at me.

Just then, Dave said, "Okay, I've got a word!"

The magician took a little notepad from his pocket and wrote down a couple of letters with a pencil. "Does it start with a P?"

Dave shook his head and chuckled.

The magician pondered Dave's expression for a moment, as if he were searching through Dave's mind. "Is there an H?"

Dave's left eyebrow lowered just slightly.

The magician said, "There is!" Then he scribbled a few more letters on his notepad and dropped the notepad to his side and gave Dave the same disappointed look the magician's granddaughter had given me moments before.

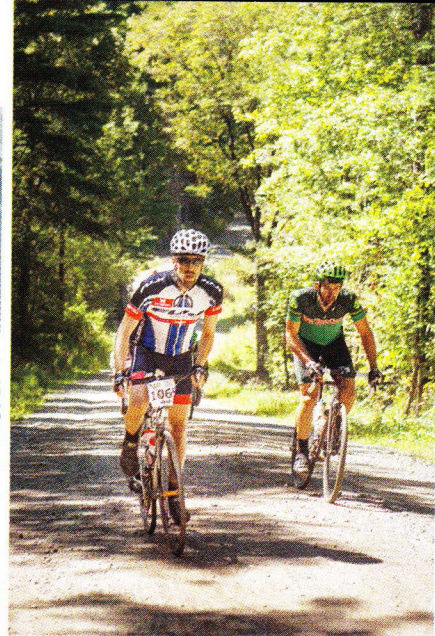
"I told you to pick a good word," the magician said. "Breathhtakingly is a bad word."

"That's amazing," Dave said, but he didn't look too amazed. "The word was breathtakingly all right."

The magician said, "Who the heck would use a word like breathtakingly?"



**OPPOSITE** The D2R2 route description promises “the narrowest, oldest, twistiest, quietest, and most scenic roads available.” **THIS PAGE** Courses from 40 to 112 miles draw all sorts of riders—and ambitions.

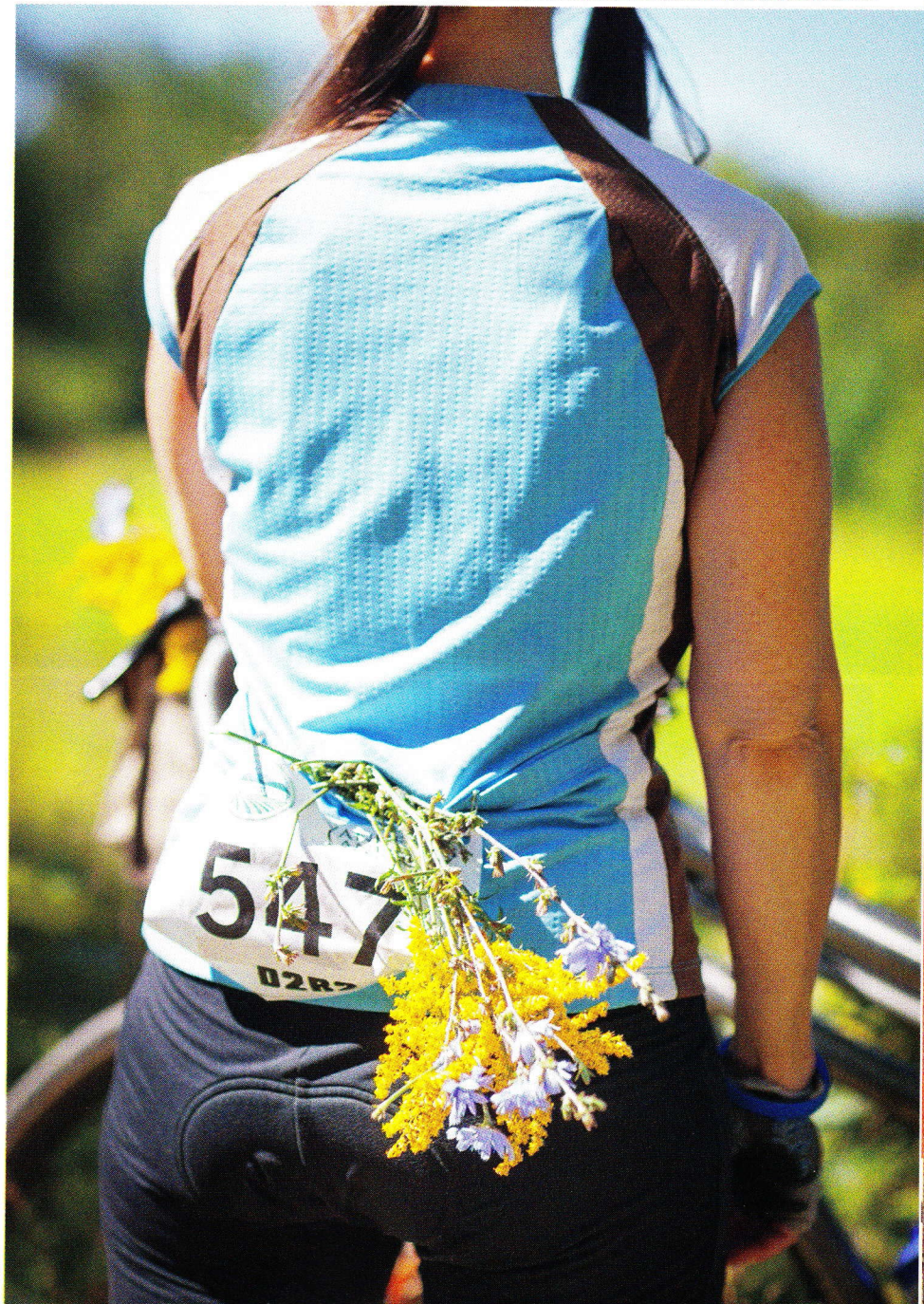


And Dave and the magician and the magician’s granddaughter looked at me and did not avert their eyes for a long, very uncomfortable while. “Well, then,” I said. “I’m here to pick up my bike!”

**THE NEXT MORNING**, near the town of Deerfield, in a valley bordered by treelined ridges and forests full of ghosts, I hopped onto that bike, a Specialized Crux with disc brakes, a space-age bike from our future designed for the dirt roads from our past, and I followed a small group of cyclists down a narrow road that headed south, away from a circus tent in the hayfield where we had all gathered to pick up our bib numbers and cue sheets and other stuff for the D2R2. The sky was the kind of blue that made me thirsty before I had rolled 500 feet, and alas, I was already lost. I had my cue sheet. I had studied in advance the route I had chosen, the 100k. I knew the ride would be hard, but it could have been harder. I could have picked the 115 or the 150 or 180. I had scanned the horizon, too, ever since I arrived here this morning, and all I could see was hill, hill, hill. So I guess I didn’t want to bother myself with little details like where to go, because I knew it would be up, and I knew there would be dirt underneath me.

The D2R2, which has been held every August since 2005, is a randonnee, not a race, which means the course isn’t marked and riders must navigate their own way through it. Nobody gets anything for finishing first and nobody gets grief for finishing last. Riders can start whenever they want, and the idea is for cyclists to take on the route as a personal, self-reliant journey, one that is difficult but also fun and one that, to complete successfully, requires some respect for the roads and for the other riders on them. I guess you could say that the Deerfield Dirt Road Randonnée is a cycling form of the American freedoms Ethan Allen and the Green Mountain Boys fought for so long, long ago.

At least 1,000 cyclists were out here on this day, maybe more, and some of them probably had satellite guidance systems, so I could have been resourceful and devised a way to check the map every mile, but I figured I’d just follow people till I got dropped, then I’d take it mellow till another group of riders came up behind, then I’d follow them.





**THIS PAGE** Even though the remote roads get a little woolly, there is still plenty of beauty and bucolic thrills such as covered-bridge crossings and impromptu apple feasts. **OPPOSITE** Or a cooling dip in the Green River.



My method here was neither mad nor singular. Lots of other riders were doing the same thing, watching who was riding ahead, keeping an eye on where distant groups turned. We were lost or not lost. We followed or were followed. We rode neither with each other or against each other, together and alone, occasionally all at the same time. If our lives on this day happened to intersect into a conversation, well, that was fine but it didn't matter either way. Me, I kept to myself from the start and didn't speak to anyone and pedaled in the sunshine along 4 miles of rolling farmland asphalt roads on the way to Old Albany Road, a narrow paved lane that meanders about half a mile until it enters the forest and turns to dirt and rises about a thousand feet in the next mile or so.

The dirt path was about 10 feet wide and loose in spots, but not rutted. It wound steadily upward through the kind of woods Robert Frost had once written about: lovely, dark, and deep, with dense vegetation and old rock fences and nary a twinkle of sunlight making its way through the tree leaves to the ground. This climb was hard, sure enough, but it did not separate the great riders from the lesser and did not cause me to think about epic suffering or triumph over insurmountable odds or whatever else cyclists are supposed to contemplate on a long, steep dirt climb. I was breathing hard, of course, and sweating in the piglike manner that has traditionally discouraged fellow riders from dawdling in my draft, but I was thinking about who made this road in the forest 200 years ago. Or 300? How did they know to pick this route up the hill? Because this had been indeed the correct way; if it weren't, the road would not still be here after all this time.

A mist formed on my riding glasses, and my mind began to unravel with each hard pedal stroke. Up ahead, I could see people walking on the dirt, a man in breeches and knee socks, a woman and little girl wearing dresses and bonnets, then I could see what might have been a horse laboring to pull a cart loaded with full burlap sacks, then, when I drew closer, I could see that it was a man in a blue jersey on a mountain bike, spinning what must have been the easiest gear any human being has ever turned on a bicycle. He was putting in a huge effort but was hardly moving. When I passed him, I said, "This is the most amazing road I've ever ridden."







## **The only way to summarize riding a bicycle in an environment like this: breathtakingly beautiful.**

He said something softly to me, and for a second, I thought it was, “He who liveth on God’s earth must climb,” but that could not be—could it?—and soon his heavy breathing and the crunch of his tires faded behind me, and I was alone on the dirt again, caught between wherever my wheels were leading me and whoever had trodden this countryside since humans had arrived hereabouts.

I had not gone crazy, thinking of the ride in such a way. The D2R2, despite its unofficial billing as the toughest dirt-road ride in America, is an event as much about preserving this historic area and its dirt roads and farms as it is about providing people in spandex an opportunity to get their jollies for a day on what might indeed be the toughest and most awesome dirt roads anywhere. The D2R2 is a fundraiser for the Franklin Land Trust, a

nonprofit organization that for 25 years has promoted its mission of working “with landowners and communities to protect their farms, forests, and other resources significant to the environmental quality, economy, and rural character” of the region, and through this mission, they preserve the land and fight against development. Development, in case this has not occurred to you, involves widening and paving old dirt roads.

Somewhere in there, the road flattened, and I scanned across a vast valley interspersed with woods and farms and hayfields and orchards, all of this under an azure sky, and in the far distance, along a wooded ridgeline, I could see a long line of cyclists making their way to the top. From my viewpoint, they looked like British cavalry on a long, expeditionary trek in search of Ethan Allen, or like a band of

Pocumtuck fleeing to high ground to escape a Mohawk invasion from the west. Lining the road and separating the fields were rock fences, the kind that Mr. Frost said made good neighbors, the kind that people have to repair after every long winter, year after year. Laundry fluttered on clotheslines outside the old farmhouses as if it were waving hello to the world. Dogs lounged on the porches and paid no attention to the lines of cyclists rolling by. Cows meandered in the alfalfa. Ripe apples and peaches hung suspended over the orchard grass like magnificent jewels on a necklace. Rows of sunflowers opened to the sky, and high above all this, hawks soared on thermals and surveyed this stretch of earth that for hundreds of years, on this very day of the year, has looked exactly like this. The only way to summarize such a sight, and the experience of riding a bicycle in an environment like this, is to say that it is breathtakingly beautiful.

### ***A COUPLE OF HOURS LATER,***

I leaned my bike against a tree in Guilford, Vermont, and took a half-hour break to eat lunch beside the Green River Covered Bridge, which was built in 1870 by an industrious fellow named Marcus Worden. He did a | **CONTINUED ON P. 96**



## The Most Magic Moment

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good job, too; 143 years later, the bridge looked as good as new. Eighty years before the bridge was here, in 1790, at the time of the first United States Census, Guilford was Vermont's largest town, and on this August day in 2013, more cyclists surrounded this covered bridge along the banks of the lazy Green River than had ever surrounded any other covered bridge in the world. All the routes of the D2R2 converged here for lunch, so several hundred of us in various shapes and sizes—from lean, top-notch racers doing the 180-kilometer route to chubby fellows struggling their way through the 100-kilometer route—rested in the shady hillside next to the river. Some sat in the grass and ate sandwiches and chips and slurped Cokes. Some stretched. Some slept. Some lined up to make use of the portable chemical poopers, while some, like me, snuck off into the woods instead. Some shuffled through the crowd trying to shake the cobwebs of a hard morning's ride out of the brain. Some stood alone, with sagging shoulders, and looked disconsolately at their feet. One bearded rider rolled up his shorts as high as he could and waded into the river, which was about thigh deep, and he stood

“ *The D2R2 was one of those something-for-everyone moments. Everything was good. Nobody was more special than anybody else.* ”

there in a shaft of sunlight with a sandwich in one hand and a Coke in the other and periodically stretched out his arms in a posture that suggested religious ecstasy. Another guy wore a pink tutu, which he'd probably thought would merit the appreciation of the throng, but nobody cared; nobody said anything to him. The D2R2 was not a cyclocross race on Halloween weekend. The D2R2 was one of those something-for-everyone moments. Everything was good. Nobody was more special than anybody else.

As I sat on a rock by the Green River Covered Bridge and surveyed this scene, not one of the cyclists looked like the other, and every available tree had a bike leaning against it. I could see that, at best, we were a ragamuffin band of souls with probably not much in common other than that we took joy in a

hard day of pedaling a bicycle. When Marcus Worden built this bridge in 1870, the Safety Bicycle, the forerunner of the modern bicycle, hadn't yet been invented and wouldn't be for almost 15 more years. And before this bridge was here, who could guess the souls who waded into the river's middle on a late-summer day to feel joy and relief and happiness? Yet here we were, united in a purpose, all of us eating the same lunch in our own individual ways and accepting each other for who we are. We could forge world peace on this principle.

**AFTER LUNCH**, life did not go downhill, but it was flat and dirty and out of the sun for a good long while. I rode alone next to the Green River, traveling the same direction as its current,



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## The Most Magic Moment

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on an ancient dirt road called, naturally enough, Green River Road. The river was clear and shallow and dancing with diamond glints of afternoon sun, and the road hung next to a steep, tree-covered rise, over which the sun had passed for the day. I couldn't see any riders in front of me or any behind me, but I knew I would be on this road for the next 10 miles. Somebody would come along. Somebody always did.

A few miles into this, I saw a man sitting on a lawn chair in the river, in the sun, wearing a floppy hat and aviator sunglasses and drinking a beer. He looked free and so content with life. I could tell immediately I liked him, so I hopped off my bike and stood on the river bank and called out to him.

"Hey, man," I said. "What's happening?"

He lifted his beer to me, and his body convulsed in a little chuckle. "Nice day to ride a bike," he said.

"Nice day to drink a beer," I said.

We nodded to each other and resumed what we had been doing.

What a happy guy he was! As I rode on, I wondered now and then if I might have hallucinated that encounter—if, somehow, on that shady

dirt road, I had encountered my inner, totally relaxed self and tried to make friends with it.

In any case, not long after that, I did see another rider up ahead, taking a sharp turn onto a steep road that lifted away from the river and rose something like 1,800 feet over the next 4 miles.

I should report that I suffered and dug deep into the epic reserves of my limitless fortitude and pounded through near death throes to make it to the summit of this climb in triumph, but that would be a lie. Cyclists materialized on this climb, some of them up the road, some coming from behind, so suddenly I was in a group of easily 50 other riders. The route up the hill was dirt in some stretches and asphalt in others. We slogged upward through one ageless, panoramic view after another, until eventually we took a left onto an asphalt road lined with open fields, and this road climbed to the top. We could see it. The whole way was lined with riders slowly straining upward. Maybe 100 riders were strung across this next mile, maybe 200, with not a cloud in the sky and not a puff of wind to push us back and nothing but green fields stretching in all directions. In all

the years I had been riding bicycles, I had never seen such a sight as breathtakingly beautiful.

I had always believed a truly perfect moment on a bike would never come to pass, but this was perfect. This was magical.

**THE NEXT DAY**, I went back to that bike shop in Hadley because I knew Dave, the owner, would be working, and I wanted to tell him, in person, that I knew the truth: Dave and the magician had colluded to pull off that mind-reading trick the other day. There was no damned way that trick would have worked unless Dave had been in on it.

I was not moving too quickly when I walked into the store. My body had that ridden-hard-and-put-away-wet feeling that usually comes with the day after a big event. I felt good, though. I felt cocky. And Dave was outside, showing a young couple some cruiser bikes that he said would be a lot of fun.

Dave waved at me and said, "Dude, how was the D2R2?"

I wanted to get right into it, to start up with the trick and how he must have agreed on the word breathtakingly with the magician in advance. But I couldn't do it. I said, "That was the best day I've ever had on a bike."

"Awesome," Dave said and returned his attention to the people who wanted some new bicycles.

A while later, I was standing in the parking lot shooting the breeze with an old friend of mine who lives in the area, and I felt a tap on my shoulder.

There stood the magician, wearing the exact same thing he had worn the other day: the tan vest, the tan shorts, the button with Magician At Work on it.

He said, "I see you made it through the D2R2 in one piece."

I reached for his hand and shook it. I said, "Well, a few pieces of me are probably still out there on those old roads."

"I know," he said.

I didn't ask him how he knew. Sometimes, the best way to live is to just go ahead no matter what and believe in magic. **E**

**DREAM BIG**

"I never knew what was going to come out of Phil's mouth, but I always knew he would race himself into the ground to try and win."

— FRANKIE ANDREU, TEAM DIRECTOR AND 2-TIME OLYMPIC CYCLIST

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