

**Sunday Morning, 5:45 AM. I wake up in a crap hotel room on the outskirts of Marquette, Michigan. My head is throbbing, the taste of cheese and Italian sausage are in my mouth. Hunks of dust ooze from the corners of my eyes, there's a lump on my forehead, and I have a Bon Jovi song stuck in my head. The bed next to me contains a buxom redhead and a midget. What . . . ? Why . . . ? How . . . ?**

I fall back to sleep.

An hour later I wake to the sound of the TV blaring *Phineas & Ferb*. It all starts to come back to me.

It's the day after the 2011 Ore to Shore.

The dirt filled eye boogers are no doubt from racing 48 miles with 670 other folks in dry, dusty conditions, and the throbbing head and Bon Jovi song are surely the evil work of the Bell's Brewing after-race party; a party that I went to way too early and stayed at way too late with my friend Ben. Not super late, but late enough that singing along to a bad cover version of *Living on a Prayer* seemed like a perfectly acceptable thing for a 40-year-old man to do. The cheese and sausage taste in my mouth is easily explained by the empty pizza box beside me. Thankfully (I guess?), the buxom redhead is my wife (complete with ugly pajamas), and the "midget" is actually my seven-year-old son; current owner of the TV's remote control.

My wife rolls over and asks, "How's your head?"

Assuming that she thinks I had way too much to drink (I did), stayed out way too late (correct), and that I am suffering the ill effects of having done so (right again), I act like nothing's wrong.

"Oh fine, yeah, I'm good, real good. Thanks."

"Really? 'Cause, dude, you ran into the bathroom door really hard last night, I thought you hit your face on it or something."

Shit, that fucking door! That's right! THAT explains the lump on my forehead.

"Oh, yeah . . . right, the door. Yeah, it was dark, I ran right into it. Stupid door! I'm good. Thanks."

I need some coffee, some Advil, a shower, and for *Phineas & Ferb* to STOP yelling so loudly!! Yes, yes, I KNOW WHAT YOU'RE GONNA DO TODAY! As soon as we check out of this dumpy hotel, we have a bit more driving to do as we extend our adventure in Michigan's Upper Peninsula from Marquette to Copper Harbor in the Keweenaw Peninsula. Damn this room stinks.

Soon I'm packed, showered, void of the throbbing headache and we're on our way. I forgot to eat. Damn, I'm starving; I need an Egg McMuffin badly.

We make a quick pit stop in Ishpeming. Shit, we missed breakfast by like 20 seconds! Now "breakfast" for me is two McChicken sandwiches, some stolen Happy Meal fries and an entertaining conversation among some elderly U.P. residents that contained many an "eh" and references to eating pickled fish for breakfast (not on a dare). OK, now we're on our way.

With one eye on the road, and one on the lookout for rabid moose, I drive down two lane roads lined with thick forest, lake views and signs for "The Best Pasties in the U.P." I take the time to replay yesterday's race in my mind.

The Ore to Shore was one of those races I'd always wanted to do, even back when I lived in Western Pennsylvania; but driving 750 miles to race a 48-mile point-to-point race was not something I

really wanted to do. This year was different -- I live less than half that distance from Marquette, and we were heading to the U.P. anyway. I might as well race one of the biggest mountain bike races in the Midwest, if not the country, while I'm there.

Some riders I've talked to in the past seemed less than impressed with the Ore to Shore's course: "there's not too much singletrack," and "it's a lot of cross-country ski trails and logging roads" seemed to be the complaints. I do not share those points of view. The course has more climbing than I'm used to down in the Lower Peninsula, and as far as the track: ski trail, dirt roads, ATV trails, singletrack, who cares? It's bike racing in the dirt, for 48 miles, sounds great to me! Plus 2,000 Ore to Shore Hard Rock, Soft Rock and Shore Rock racers can't be wrong.

"I'm heading to the start line!" I yell to my wife, who is hanging out with my son in a Negaunee playground a block away from the staging area.

"Where's that?" She asks.

"Right around the corner, turn left by the bombed out looking building, you can't miss it."

So here I am, a good 30 rows back, and still sort of in the front part of a huge pack. I try not to get nervous, and watch racers sprint into the laundromat to use the can. I should pee. Nahh, I'm good. In between J. Geils Band and AC/DC songs, a race official gives shout-outs to sponsors and last minute race information on the loudspeaker: don't cheat, follow the arrows, don't litter, don't do anything stupid, etc., etc.

Just a minute or so to go, all the super fit fast guys like Brian Matter, Mike Simonson, and Tristan Schouten are on the front row and ready to pounce. I nervously adjust my helmet strap, gloves, take a swig of water and silently plan to not get mixed up in some sort of crash at mile 0.1.

The next thing I know, 670 racers and 1340 knobby tires are whirling through downtown Negaunee. A turn here and a turn there, and soon we are on some rolling double track. The scene is sort of amazing from my mid-pack view. Hundreds of racers snaking in front of me, kicking up a thick cloud of dust -- it is impossible not to think of famous images from races like Paris-Roubaix.

I have to pee. Shit. No way! I'm not stopping, not in this pack. It'll keep. Only 45+ miles to go.

"Dad I gotta pee." Damn, back to reality.

"Can you hold it?"

"No, I gotta go bad."

With over 100 miles to go, it's probably a good idea. We stop at a small town gas station, scurry in and look for the restroom. Nothing in sight, I'm forced to ask the clerk.

"The key's by the door, the bathroom is around the side, eh." He says.

Out we go with our key attached to a big plank of wood that says "MEN'S ROOM" on it. Once we return the key and its plank, I buy a soda to feel less guilty about using their bathroom and once again we are on our way and I return to my thoughts.

Being at the front of this huge pack would surely have been better, but I know my place in the race world. Mid-pack is where I roam, and I am comfortable with that. I still want to compete, though, so I move up through the pack when I can, and then the pack moves up through me. Pretty standard stuff for me. The most opportune place for someone like me to make up ground is to power on the flats and on anything technical. I'm not exactly Hans Rey in the technical stuff, but I can hold my own well enough.

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Photo by JoErin O’Leary

I find myself feeling surprisingly good during the race; I am climbing well, and able to make some passes where other riders dismount. I successfully negotiate one longer rocky climb.

“Was THAT this ‘Misery Hill’ that I keep hearing about?”

Um, no, the giant undulating rocky climb that is now laid out before me with rider upon rider hike-a-biking up is Misery Hill. Oh yeah, there’s a sign that says, “Misery Hill” too, that helped.

We hit a flat section of road; I take a swig from one of my two bottles. I’m doing pretty well with hydration, feel good, no cramps, and I still have a full bottle left with an Aid Station or two in front of me. The carb drink I’m using is taking care of the hunger, but I should still probably stuff something in my mouth. Approaching the Aid Station, a man with a bugle blows *Charge*. A volunteer holds out a hunk of banana, and I grab it and shove it in my mouth. God I hate bananas.

“The map says if we make the next right we can take a more scenic drive into Copper Harbor.” My wife says, snapping me back to the reality of our trip.

“What? Oh yeah, sure, OK. . .”

We turn right and weave through some small mining towns that have seen better days. Some remind me of the small defunct mill towns of Western Pennsylvania. I am underwhelmed and then miss the turn that leads us to the supposedly more scenic and historic route. We end up right back on the road we were on.

“Sorry, my bad.”

I wash the vile banana down my throat with another swig from my bottle and another gulp of Michigan dust. I’m still feeling good as the race hits some pavement. Time to make up some time, I lock

out my fork, shift down and get ready to feel myself take off. I don’t. The whirl of my 29” knobby tires reminds me that I’m on a mountain bike. Some stiff climbs approach, I get out of the saddle for the first few, then just settle in and spin up, and get ready for a pretty fast decent back to dirt.

Now we’re on some Nordic ski trails, I see signs along the trail and everything’s in metric. What the hell, am I in Canada now? A race sign jokingly welcomes us to Canada. Smart asses.

I leap frog with a few guys and do my best to open it up whenever the race signs warn “STEEP DOWNHILL AHEAD.” I’m really having a blast on this course. Those riders I talked to were right, there isn’t all that much singletrack, but I am loving it and they’re missing out in my opinion. The variety of terrain, the views, the woods, it’s all perfect. I soon realize how hard I’m pushing and I try to push more.

After a few sandy downhills, one of the last climbs approaches. It’s not all that long but pretty steep, and lined with women sporting pink hula skirts of some sort. I shift and am spinning up with no problem.

“I’m gonna clear this thing!” I mutter to myself.

The best line is right, deep loose sand is to the left. The rider in front of me bails.

“NO! Gosh-darn-son-of-a-buck!!”

I head left, sink, unclip and run the last few feet to the top.

A hula girl yells, “You almost had it, nice job!”

A few sections of singletrack trail and some pavement lay ahead. I pass a singlespeed racer who I think I have leap frogged with since

mile one, and get to the pavement. Damn, this went fast!

I once again lock out the fork, shift to the big ring, and hammer. I am almost giddy with the finish line in sight. Head down, I just keep pushing. I lick my lips; I can taste the dirt on my face. It tastes good, I am happy.

I cross the line and hear a voice on the PA system say, "Jason Mahawk-ey of Mount Pleasant, Michigan crosses the line. Nice job, Jason."

I laugh to myself at the mispronunciation of my name, and find that even after 10 months, I am still slightly weirded out at hearing it associated with my new town in Michigan.

I look around and see bright white eyes and teeth popping out from dark layers of dust, sweat and mud coating the faces of hundreds of racers. A few limp, a few grimace, but mostly there are smiles, and the sound of laughter mixed with tales of the day's effort.

I finished in 3:16:49, about 50 minutes off the time of overall winner Brian Matter – who had sprinted and just nipped Cole House at the line by three hundredths of a second. I am always shocked at the speeds at which Pro/Elite racers go, but I am more shocked at how hard I can push myself to come in 292nd place – a placing that I would be inconsolably depressed over if it weren't for the fact that 263 guys finished behind me.

Soon my wife and son meet me at the finish and we head back to the hotel. On the way to the car I run into my friend Ben. I say the words that 24 hours later I would half heartedly regret.

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Photo by Joh Yanover / MQTphoto.com

"Meet up at the Bell's party later?"

"Sounds good, I'll give you a call, see you then."

I continue driving. To the left, blue waters of Lake Superior crash against rock and white sand beaches; to my right, dense green forest. In front of me, the steep hills and trails of the Keweenaw Peninsula await.

"This is amazing," my wife says.

"It sure is, look at that water! Look at those hills! They have hills here! This is going to rock."

I'm tired, I'm still humming *Living On A Prayer*, and I can't wait to race the Ore To Shore again in 2012. First, a week of riding in the U.P. awaits.

"Dad?"

"Yeah buddy, what's up?"

"I gotta pee."

I'm so tired.

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*Jason Mahokey is the publisher of XXC Magazine and mid-pack at best mountain bike racer who, as of publication, is still trying to get "Living On A Prayer" out of his head. Stay tuned to XXC Magazine #14 for the skinny on the amazing riding to be found in the U.P.'s Keweenaw Peninsula.*

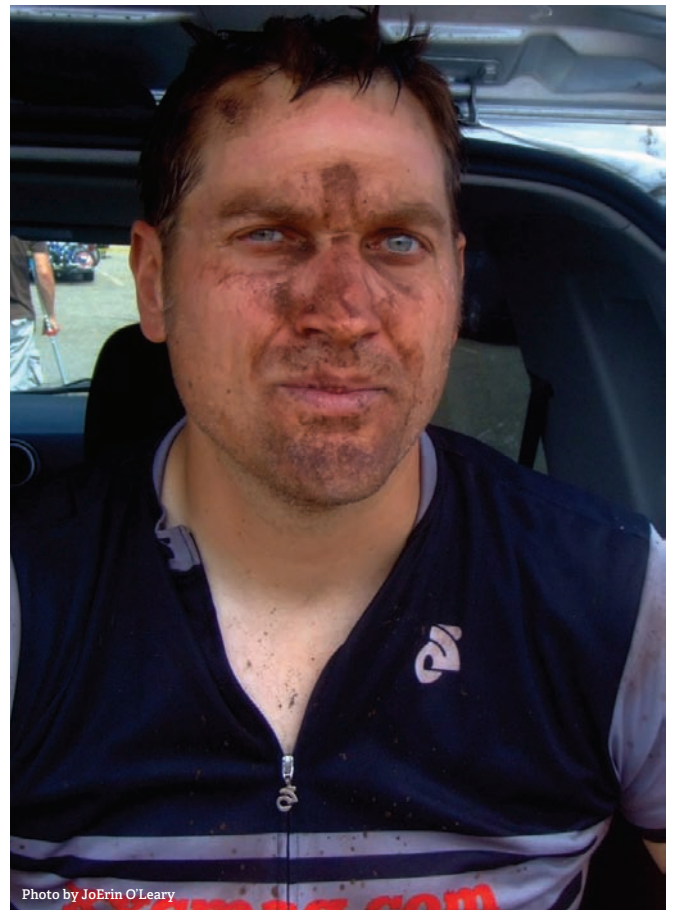


Photo by JoErin O'Leary