

Wherein the Dirt
Donks tempt fate
and abuse good sense
by riding in Oregon's
outdoor amphitheater.
You've heard of
Rope-A-Dope
in center ring?
Would you believe
Zonk-A-Donk?

Northwest Passage

By Phil Schilling

● WHAT'S SO GREAT ABOUT THE GREAT OUTDOORS, ANYWAY? It was a comforting question, considered from the safety of my wheelchair, as the first Great Dirt Donk Expedition set out from Westlake Village to cast itself across the California desert to Randsburg. A road accident had temporarily parked me in a wheelchair; that was the bad news. The good news flowed from the bad. My infirmities

would deprive the desert of yet another victim. Donk Neilson had regretted that I'd miss the circus, but Donk Jennings allowed I shouldn't fret: this would be no Ringling Brothers road show, he darkly surmised, but a right proper gladiator's circus. To me, Jennings sounded like a prophet.

Besides, following lizard tracks across the desert lacked appeal to someone who spent his boyhood cowtrailing. Not cowtrailing, I hasten to add, in the effete manner as done by motorcycling dilettantes, but *real* cowtrailing as practiced by small people with short legs, pursuing huge, lumbering cows. For the benefit of you suburbanites who are only acquainted with cattle through dairy cases and meat counters, a word of explanation is in order. Cattle are creatures with four legs, wide noses and dreamy eyes, but their most salient characteristic is incalculable stupidity. Even the *summa cum laude* among cattle find it difficult to stay on trails of their making. Not that they ever noticed, but their pathways take the most circuitous routes imaginable, so that the shortest distance between any two points becomes a swaggering arc that invariably runs over the roughest, nastiest and most treacherous terrain in the county.

Cows—which I once knew on a first-name swearword basis—could be driven into our woods lying between the back eighty and front forty, whereupon the dummies would scatter, diving off the trail, to be swallowed from sight by the dense underbrush. These mindless detours had to be cut short, and small farmboys—animals that are smarter than horses and bigger than dogs—made suitable chasers.

So between the age of nine and twelve, I got enough off-roading to last a lifetime: running in agitated frustration,

stumbling over fallen branches and hidden tree roots, plowing face-first into prickly bushes and intricate spider webs, tumbling down forgotten embankments, slogging through muddy creek beds and slipping on wet rocks. And always there was the rustle of some half-concealed four-footed beef-barge ahead, two legs and 20 feet up on me. Cowtailing, cowtrailing, off-road sport—for years it's been all the same to me.

Sometime after its appointed hour, the first Dirt Donk Expedition reported back to *Cycle's* Westlake office, rubbing

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PHIL SCHILLING



shins and picking scabs. Much to my amazement, none required a stretcher, splint or wheelchair. In fact the Donks could still stand, walk and take nourishment. "It was fun," they brightly reported in unison, though I wasn't sure I understood that cryptic conclusion: did they mean the ride was fun to do, or fun to have done, or mere fun in the retelling? For me, Oregon held the answer.

Pabatco is the short name for a small importer nestled in Oregon's big sky country. By any other label, Pabatco is the Pacific Basin Trading Company, which operates from beautiful downtown Athena, Oregon. Actually Pabatco lies on the outskirts of Athena, but downtown and suburban Athena lock tightly together, inasmuch as the place only harbors 800-





PHOTO BY LUCY KIRBY

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While Pabatco dealt with such logistical problems, the Dirt Donks Three—Neilson, Jennings and myself—settled into a Boeing 727. Understand that the Donks never throw themselves on the hospitality and mercy of any host without due precaution. *Cycle's* ace in the dirt, Managing Editor Dale P. Boller, came along as photographer, coordinator and rescue unit. Dale can cross rough terrain at a demon's pace, exactly the kind of topography which would have any Donk waiting for the next helicopter. At six-two and 200 pounds, DPB is as strong as a diesel Caterpillar but agile as a Honda Civic; that's an excellent combination for someone who might have to haul a Donk or two out of a rocky crevasse. Donks, as DPB realized from his last outing with novices, float over rocks like falling anvils.

At the Pendleton airport, the jet smacked down with a resounding jolt/hop/bounce which trailed off into a series of intermittent bumps. Good grief, I wondered, if this is the Northwest's idea of a smooth landing strip, what do you suppose the trail-riding areas are like? Marvin Foster and Delegation met our evening flight, conducted the entourage through Pendleton, past the "Let-Er Buck" Motel (which provided Neilson and Jennings with hours of quippery), and guided us to our motor lodges.

The following morning washed-in clear and bright; not a particle of smog smudged the atmosphere, and shadows fell to the ground with hard, crisp edges. Our speeding Hertz-o-Racer, pointed toward Athena, seemed out of scale and crawling, struggling at a hundred to cross an immense valley carpeted in wheat, bordered with mountains and arched by an eight-o'clock sky that vaulted into infinity.

At last our rent-a-racer pulled up in Athena, and Jennings and I wriggled out of what Chrysler is pleased to call the rear seat of the Cordoba, wondering whether or not at the end of (Continued on page 115)

odd souls. Chief among those odd souls is intrepid Marvin Foster, PeeCo's national and international sales manager. Now Foster qualifies as a Brave Man: he rang up *Cycle's* Dirt Donks and invited them to Oregon for a trail ride. Foster even had the audacity to play fast and loose with the United States Government and the Bureau of Land Management. Although he knew the trails the Donks would be riding, Foster did not file an environmental impact statement. Incredible.

Trailside in Oregon, Foster would have Hodakas in three denominations: 100, 125 and 250cc bikes. Terrific, I thought, there will be some options open: we could start off at 100cc and crash our way up to 250cc, or begin at the top and crash back down to 100cc. Either way, the key word seemed to be *crash*, but that was appropriate for a Dirt Donk Expedition. Marvin, as it turned out, was sensitive to donkly needs in other ways. He organized a riding party—Ed Chestnut, Jim Gentry and Scott Hudson—which would split in two: a scout spearheading for the Donks, and a scoop-up, clean-up, prop-up detail behind.

the day, we would be able to ease ourselves back in, or have ourselves eased in. "I know what kind of man I am, and what my needs are," I muttered to Jennings in a rude mimic of Ricardo Montalban's television commercial, "and I theenk thees evening I'll need a beeg amboolance."

Experienced riders can suit up for trail riding in a flash, but Donks proceed at a slow pace. Part of this may be attributed to mortal trepidation concerning the coming attractions, but most delays involve basic clumsiness. No one should consider an off-road ride without using genuine boots designed for the purpose. Most enduro boots are drawn tight on the sides by belts-and-buckles, and one must maneuver around so that he can cinch the clodhoppers on tightly. No problem, thank you, assuming your back, knees and ankles all still move as God intended. By our own fault and foolishness, Neilson, Jennings and I have made permanent modifications to our skeletal structures. We no longer bend in precisely the right spots. I thought Jennings had brought along his hightop lace-up-the-front army boots just because they happened to fit. Wrong. While Jennings snappily laced up his boots, I fumbled to get my enduro units clamped on, at last resorting to a pair of pliers to complete the job. Standing up, I put my Gold Belt on to support what might eventually remain of my back, and shuffled off in the direction of the bikes.

Boller and the Hodaka riding crew had long since geared up. Conspicuous by his absence in battle-dress was Marvin Foster, who, after inviting the Donks and assuring us of a splendid (read easy) ride, excused himself. He had to chase after provisions for the mid-morning and noon-time stops. Such a sly presentation and artful dodge would have done justice to Henry Kissinger. The Donks suspected a fly, but it was too late. The ride was on.

Mercifully the first 35 miles passed uneventfully, as alternating sections of dirt road, smooth trails and macadam pavement rolled beneath the Hodakas. Jennings opted for a 100cc Road Toad while Neilson and I tried 125cc Wombats. DPB, laden with cameras, tools and other equipment (which I hoped included a long chain and hoist) took a 250. Scott was similarly mounted; Ed and Jim had a Wombat and a Yamaha 125 Enduro between them.

Although a GL-1000 might have hung up on its undercarriage at a couple of points along the early-morning section, there were no obstacles which would have irrevocably trapped a big road-burner. We Donks knew, however, our easy miles were numbered: not only was Marvin missing, but every turn of the road brought the mountains closer. Gradually foothills began to crowd out the big sky to our left and right, and dead ahead loomed

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