



**I**t was a tranquil Colorado summer day in June and it was poised and ready for a group of mountain bikers set to hit the beckoning trails. Awaiting their journey were the winding, rigorous paths called *Greenland Trail Loop* which summoned them like a medieval king gathering his armies for battle. And this path would prove to be as challenging a foe as conquering such enemy kingdoms. The day began with scattered thunderstorms—mixed with marble-size hail and heavy rain—which threatened the team’s ride. Lightning strikes cracked the sky’s backdrop like twisted, white neon lights. By the afternoon the clouds had proved their capabilities and then gracefully bowed away with the promise to return another day; to unleash their hammering downpours. All that remained was the salty smell of wet field grass and the soft, padded earth from the rainfall.

Six enthusiastic trail riders made up our team of trekkers ranging from the educated and experienced all the way down to me; the naïve rookie. After parking our trucks and SUV’s on a sandy parking lot near the trailhead we unloaded our bikes and geared up for the ride. As we buckled up our helmets and slipped on our gloves, we exchanged greetings and carried out some casual conversations. But we weren’t the only ones talking. A pack of wild coyotes, hidden

somewhere in the distant evergreens of the surrounding foothills, howled and wailed as if dancing to a *Brian Setzer Orchestra* song.

I was anxious and excited about trying out my brand new mountain bike. Beyond knowing that I had bought an excellent bike for trail riding in my *TREK 6 Series*, I had a lot to learn about using it. I tried hard to act like I knew what I was doing. I nodded as the other riders checked out my new wheels and mumbled bicycle jargon about the *Shimano M475* disc hubs, *Bontrager Ranger* rims, and the *RockShox Dart 3* with preload, lockout front suspension. But there is more to a good bike than the cool satin black finish, and I chuckle now in retrospect in realizing just how important it is to familiarize yourself with your riding equipment; especially when there's no dust or scrapes on it yet.

It was time to ride.

One-by-one we saddled up and began pedaling down the trail – you could hear the grinding of our chains against the cassettes as we adjusted to the right gears sets. I was having trouble finding mine. The first leg of the course was a slow rising path that meandered through the rolling plains. A cool breeze blew gently over us and rustled the tall, thin bladed grass covering the fields. We picked up speed across the more leveled ground and then reached a portion that began a steady climb up the hillside. It didn't take long for me to get winded and my lungs to pump faster as they struggled to find breath in the thin mountain air. Slowly the group began to pull away—leaving me in their dust—while my thighs began to burn and my calves ached. It's never fun being the one left behind in the back. The only time this is acceptable in a guy's life is when he's standing in the long line, waiting to turn his head and cough, for the school physical at gym class. I never minded being the last-in-line for that humiliating experience.

I picture the Apostle Paul of the New Testament as the sportsman type; although I'm not sure if he had a mountain bike or not. Maybe a mountain chariot; do you think they had those? He definitely had to enjoy spending some time in the outdoors soaking up the Corinth sun everyday. The Bible says he was a tentmaker and besides a good camping trip on the occasional missionary journey we can assume he was a sports fanatic. Paul made several references—in his teaching—to boxing, running races, and fishing. Maybe that's why I can accept his firm, yet affectionate, instructions on the importance of a disciplined life, because with each painful down stroke of my feet against the pedals I realized just how unprepared I was for that trail ride. It's his precise and unwavering words that effectively illustrate the spiritual race we compete in everyday. He said things like: "...*Everyone*

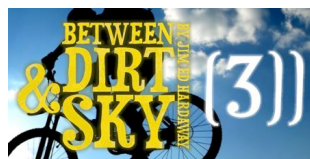


*who competes in the games goes into strict training,” and “...do not run like a man running aimlessly.”*<sup>1</sup>

God was teaching me something that day. As the dust I was breathing in—kicked up in the air by the rider in front of me—was scratching on the back of my throat, Paul’s words were churning in my thoughts. The incline was too much for me and finally I had to bail. With each embarrassing step I walked beside my bike and pushed it up the hill. I was still breathing hard and fast. My teammates had either left me as dinner for the red-tailed hawk circling in the air above me, or they were patiently waiting at the top of the hill. Fortunately, the latter was true. I tried desperately to regain control of my breathing so they wouldn’t hear the heavy panting and wheezing of this out-of-shape cycling wanna-be. Turns out they were very forgiving, much like God when we fall behind in our spiritual journey. I came around the last corner of the winding path just in time to see one of the other riders slowly picking himself up off of the dirt, from being thrown from his bike. It was encouraging to me, to his demise, to see that the trail was no respecter of persons and could have its way with anyone; at any time.

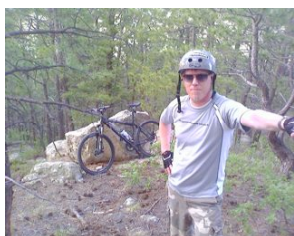
After every steep climb comes the rewarding downward ride that becomes the thrilling pinnacle of every mountain biking adventure. Holding my hand above my eyes like a saluting soldier, I was able to block out the sunlight and look out over the valley from the top of the peak we were sitting on. And there it was again, Paul’s voice echoing through my head, *“I’m not saying that I have this all together, that I have it made. But I am well on my way, reaching out for Christ, who has so wondrously reached out for me. Friends, don’t get me wrong: By no means do I count myself an expert in all of this, but I’ve got my eye on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward—to Jesus. I’m off and running, and I’m not turning back.”*<sup>2</sup> About the time I reached the words “off and running” we dropped in on the descending path and took off down the side of hill.

My tires buzzed through the sand kicking up a fishtail of my *own* dust. I lifted myself off of the seat and stood up on my pedals so my knees could act as shock absorbers against the bumps and the hard, compacted dirt forming moguls down the trail. Maybe it was the wind against my face that lifted a smile in the corner of my mouth, or maybe it was the adrenaline racing through my veins from the tremendous speed we gained coming down the foothill. Whatever it was caused me to forget about my aching muscles and hold on to the grips of my handlebars for dear life. One, two, three jumps and I was airborne; landing in just enough time to squeeze my brakes before rolling into the berm on the sharp curve ahead. Twist and turns, repeated jumps, and fast straight-aways



led us quickly to a bumpy section where we had to pedal hard to rise to the next running decent. It caught me off guard and I shifted gears prematurely; throwing my chain off the cassette. I would learn from the veteran riders of the group that losing your chain was a common occurrence in mountain biking.

After another exciting run down the trail we all stopped and gathered at the bottom to talk about our next route. Behind us was my first taste of trail riding and I could only assume that what lay ahead was more of the same – a mixture of technical climbs and satisfying descents. *"I'm not saying that I have this all together, that I have it made. But I am well on my way..."* My journey, though entwined with risks and challenges, is becoming more and more rewarding.



Across the expanse—towards the west—was a ridge that caught our eye, and it rose up out of the valley like a towering fortress at the base of the mountain range. It would be the ultimate enemy we were fighting against and it challenged us to prove ourselves as the warriors we wanted to be. As appealing as the venture seemed; getting to it was another story. It would require a closer look. Pedaling further down the trail we gained a better view of what it would take to reach the ridge, and enjoy its scenic views. Between us and the ridge was not one barbed wire fence, but four; along with two railroad tracks and a small stream. The challenge and endurance required would only make our story greater, so we decided to go for it.

As a team we lifted each other's bikes over the fences and walked them through the soggy marsh and over the railroad tracks. The half-a-mile distance standing between us and the mountain required us to forge through thick underbrush and several dry crevices to get to the other side. When it was level enough for us to ride our bikes we had to forge through dry groves of cattails, and their crisp brown stalks bent and cracked underneath our tires. Finally, we made it to a short concrete tunnel leading under the road and to the base of the ridge.

We began our next ascent in the series of climbs we would take that evening as the sun slowly



began to set behind the mountains. Dark and sinister shadows from the tall pine trees began to stretch out across the land fighting hard to impair our vision, but the cloudless sky allowed just the right amount of sunlight to remain. My muscles began to burn again, and my shoulders developed a dull pain, as I peddled feverishly up the narrow slope behind the other riders. This climb became increasingly more technical weaving us through mounds of jagged rocks and dangerous drop-offs over the shoulder of the trail. Despite my commendable tenacity I was forced to dismount my bike regularly and walk it up the mountain. *"...but I've got my eye on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward...and I'm not turning back."* I was more determined than ever to accomplish the goal and condition myself for the future.

We entered a section of switchback that would take us on a quick climb up to the top; a zigzagging part of the trail that allowed me to ride on some of the level earth. But these portions were few and far between and I had to work hard to manage the sharp turns. Occasionally one foot would slip off of the pedal sending it spinning back around and slamming into the front of my shin, but the pain was minimal compared to the fire purging through my leg muscles. They began to take their toll, even overpowering my will, and I fell further behind from the group. You know your heart is racing when you feel your pulse throbbing in your earlobes.

All around me the spring weather had provided lavish, green brush and flourishing pine trees. The wind blew a little stronger now and rushed through their needles creating a faint, bristling sound; nature's percussion. The dancing of pine needles brought a relaxing serenity and allowed me to escape momentarily from my exhaustion. It was beautiful. Sometimes there is deception in beauty and its appeal hides a dangerous aggressor. It's a funny thing—in almost haunting irony—how our minds began to conjure up fears. As I work my way up the winding path towards the top of the ridge I image the eyes of some stalking predator, a mountain lion or a hungry bear, watching me from behind those same trees. Small fears invaded my imagination, renewing my energy, and pushing me faster up the mountain.

At last it came. No longer were tree limbs and boulders shrouding overhead, but I lifted above them to see a brilliant bluish-purple sky all around me. I rejoined the team and together we stood on the ledge and enjoyed an amazing, Rocky Mountain scenic view. The valley below faded off into the distance, stretching itself over rolling hills blanketed with assorted shades of greens and browns. The same fields we trekked through – crossing fences, railroad tracks, and streams. It was too great of an opportunity to pass up on taking a few snapshots to commemorate our trip. Like kids we posed





next to our bikes trying to adorn faces of intense, conquering mountaineers.

*"This is the only race worth running. I've run hard right to the finish, believed all the way. All that's left now is the shouting—God's applause! Depend on it, he's an honest judge. He'll do right not only by me, but by everyone eager for his coming."*<sup>3</sup> These were Paul's encouraging words to young Timothy, his protégé. Somewhere in his words he remembered all the hard challenges, the falling behind, the falling off and getting back up, the burning muscles, and the fears that surrounded him. But bigger than these was his desire to finish the course; to honor God; and to learn the valuable lessons necessary in becoming more than a conqueror.

I am learning day-by-day that God wants us to grow through every situation we encounter in life; to become stronger in wisdom and knowledge and understanding. We must also realize that before the "sky's the limit" and endless possibilities is the raw grind of becoming disciplined. That's the life we must live, between dirt and sky, so that we can become the person God is calling us to be. This rawness will push us to our limits and war against our desire to press on, but it is necessary and we must fight against our own self-interest to overcome. It was Thomas Merton who said, "Save me from my own, private, poisonous urge to change everything, to act without reason, to move for movement's sake, to unsettle everything that You have ordained."

Before leaving our sanctuary we discovered that our teammate, Dale, had damaged the bolt for his derailleur hanger; which holds all the rear mechanisms onto the frame of his bike. At first it looked like it would be a long walk back, but the others managed to help him piece it together long enough to ride back down the peak. Our mountain bike journey down *Greenland Trail Loop* totaled almost 11 miles. It was a first for me, but only the beginning of a summer full of trail blazing adventures and more demanding paths through the surreal Rocky Mountains of Colorful Colorado.

**For more adventure reading we recommend "Kayaks" by Jim Ed Hardaway. You can read it and other inspiring articles at [www.epictrek.com/articles.htm](http://www.epictrek.com/articles.htm)**

<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, NIV

<sup>2</sup> Philippians 3:12-14, The Message

<sup>3</sup> 2 Timothy 4:7-8, The Message



Written by Jim Ed Hardaway June 2008

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