

TOURDIVIDE2015

# NOT GIVING UP THE GHOST

RACING THE 2015  
TOUR DIVIDE

*xplore*

I could start this story two ways. I could tell you that I came fifth and you will probably think ‘Gee, ok. Fifth. Not bad but no great shakes. What happened?’ or I could start it by saying I beat my previous personal best by almost two days and beat the course record by four hours. Then you would think ‘Wow! Awesome, way to go Alex!’

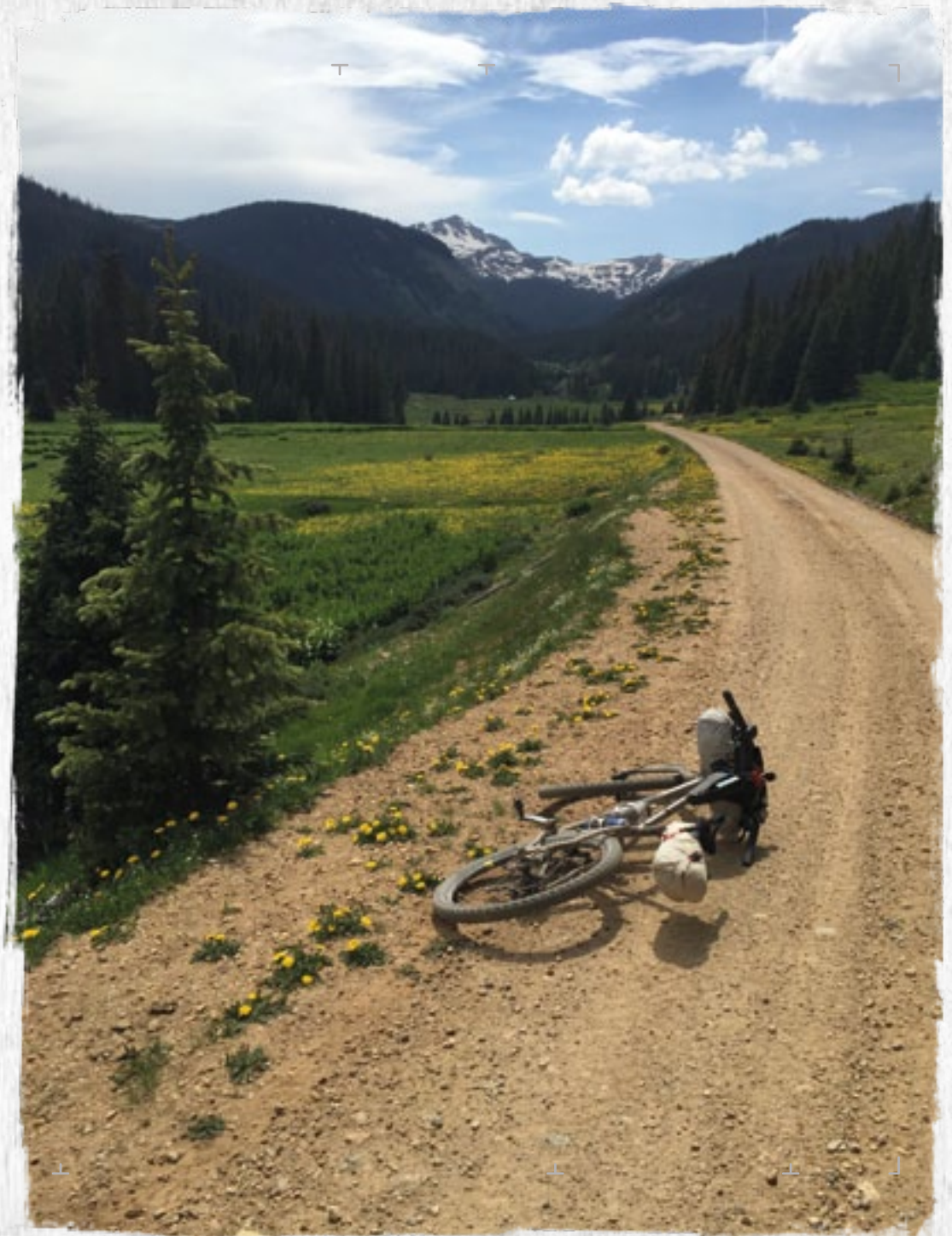
Both sound like two different stories. In fact, they are the same story. Yes I beat the course record by four hours and yes I came fifth. So the obvious question is “How? How did that happen?”



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The plain truth is that I simply wasn't good enough. But there is a less obvious truth that can sometimes be more motivating and more powerful in effecting a result than any physical conditioning can. And by this I mean the thing that compelled me from the beginning.

The why? Simply put; from the start of this journey I was motivated by potential. My potential.



In 2013 I had gone into my first of three Tour Divide races believing that the course record of 15 days and 16 hours was possible. In other words, I thought I might be able to break it. And so I gave myself three years to do this. Year one, 2013, was to 'suss' it out. Go hard but not crazy. I did 17 days and 5 hours and came third. I also felt pretty good. Last year was a bit of a right off. I went hard from the start and led through the first day. Jefe Branham and I pulled away from the field in what was to be a wet and muddy year. I ended up falling into a snow hole and twisting my ankles so badly that I was forced to withdraw after five days. Most of that time we were on or ahead of record pace.

So I figured third time lucky. I know the route. My build up has been great, conditioning on track. Lets give it horns.



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Day 1, the 12th of June and we are out of the parking lot like the clappers. A fierce pace sees 8 of us pull clear. The weather is pretty good with the odd rainstorm, par for this part of the course. After 120km I back off knowing I won't be able to sustain this pace. I had pushed hard and led from the start, hoping to split up the group but that didn't happen. For the next 100 km I let the front guys go as I struggle to shake my legs out and let them recover. Too hard maybe? That evening I'm heading up to Flathead pass and I'm back within an hour of the front guys who include Jay Petervary who holds the record I'm chasing! My intention on Day 1 is to do about 330km. This sounds like a lot but the fact is that the two previous years I have reached Butts Cabin at 315km and was unable to sleep. It's not an unusual phenomenon in these races. Your body might be smashed but your mind is wide-awake. And it will take a couple of days before you get mentally drowsy and can finally sleep. So I figure I will go past, at least to the start of Cabin Pass.

An hour later I get to Cabin pass and I'm still not 'tired'. The problem is, its -2°, and getting colder. Soon its -4° and too cold to sleep with the light gear I have so I realize I have to get up and over the pass. When I finally roll into Wigwam campsite I've been on the go for 20 hours and have covered 358km. But I'm still not tired. My brain is wired, fried really. Filled with a million thoughts and images, noisy, like a freight train. I lie down for two and half hours but it's questionable whether I fall asleep.

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In a brisk morning with a crystal clear sky I set off towards the US border. The race started in Banff, Canada, 200 miles back. But pretty soon I'll cross into Montana and the US then it's 4000km south to the Mexican border. I push hard up towards the Upper Whitefish divide and Red meadow pass. But my legs are toast. I'm beginning to worry that I may have blown it yesterday. When I get a chance to check in on the track leaders website, I see that I'm 3 hours ahead of record pace, just where I need to be. Two other riders are up the trail. Day 2 flies by and in a semi-hallucinogenic state late that night I stop for a powernap. I'm falling asleep and need to rest. My goal of 300km goes out the window as I grind to a halt at the base of a small pass. I manage 287km.

Day 3 and 4 whizz by. It seems the original 8 that broke away are down to 6. Two guys have blown. I pass Seb later that day and I'm still lying third. Dry ground makes Lava mountain a breeze as I head past Basin and onto Butte. Into the night I climb as I drift into zombie land again. I swing under a bridge around 1am and see JayP and Neil bivving on the side. I'm in the lead I think, wow! But I'm useless. I push on for another hour before finally settling in for a short 'night.' Part of me is thrilled as I've passed the point where I bailed last year. And I'm still ahead of JayP's ghost (the term used for the record pace dot on the tracking website)



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Early on Day 5 I climb over Fleecer ridge. I think about last year and remember reading Jefe's blog. As I was climbing over the Butte alternate at midnight and fighting through a sleet storm, Jefe was fighting for his life on Fleecer. The two of us were a full 200 miles clear of the 3rd rider. I was bugged for a long time when I bailed, knowing he would not have me on his tail, chasing him, egging him on for that record. He fell just a few hours short in what was a wet year. Now in the early morning it seemed as though id found a single track out of the back of the garden of Eden. It was majestic in every way, so different to the maelstrom of last year. A mad drop down Fleecer then into Mosquito territory. Later that day I drop down the Wiseriver pass towards Polaris and the temps shoot through the roof. Without warning someone opens a tap deep in my nose. It bleeds in gushes. Hot thin blood and deep red. I have had it before so it's not a surprise. But I'm amazed how much blood I loose that day. I just can't seem to plug it up.

The heat and thunderstorms push and pull me as I make my way over forgotten country towards Lima, arriving ten minutes after the convenience store closes. I push on into the dark. Dilly with tiredness I sway like a broken boat left and right before a cold sleep. All too soon its day 6 and then 7. Red rock pass, Idaho and then Wyoming. The weather is still good, the pace still high. But I'm tiring. I pull into a field for five hours and Josh and Dylan do an all nighter passing me in the dark, as does Seb. Just like that I've gone from 3rd to 6th. Damn. But when I check into track leaders, I'm still four hours ahead of the ghost. I'm surprised, thinking I had lost a bunch of time. At this point I'm only about 50 miles off JayP and Neil who are back in front.



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Day 8 I push hard across the Great Basin with a punishing head wind draining me but still manage a 300km day. I'm sleeping on average 3 hours a night but the sleep is deep. Still, I can't seem to catch anyone. Then Day 9 sees me enter Colorado and big hill country and I manage to claw back Dylan. We ride together for a while chatting about races past, and those still to come. He pushes on as I labour up Lynx pass. In the middle of the night I see him sleeping on the side of the road. Finally I stop. In the morning we bump into each other again. It's a strange rhythm these races tend to have, drifting together and then apart. We ride on into the day and then he is gone. Day 10 turns out to be one of my favourite. In the soft evening sun I power up Boreas pass feeling unstoppable, past Como and into the night. I roll into Hartsel at about 11 knowing I've no chance at finding anything open. But some touring bikers are having a big night out and have kept the bar open. All the barman has are some Jalapeno Cheese poppers and some chili chips. I smash them quickly with a root beer then push on for another hour or two.

Day 11 and 12 become a real battle. Walking to the South Pole and across the Arabian Desert has ground away the natural padding under the balls of my feet. After prolonged days on the bike my feet begin to compensate by developing deep pools of blood and puss, up against the ball. It is excruciating, like walking barefoot through Mordor. The first hour every day is agony until my feet are anesthetized and I can begin to put some power down. Marshall and Indiana, the biggest passes in the race slip by. I realize I have to go now and hard if I'm going to catch anyone. I drop into Platoro in the late afternoon and grab my first and only shower. Late that night in the Brazos I pass a bike that I know must be Dylan or Seb's. Turns out its Seb's. Some time before that he broke his fork and would later the next day walk out to Chama. I'm now lying 5th.



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Day 13 sees me climb into the massive Polvadera. It's an awkward place where the trail seems to climb steeply forever. I'm feeling good and push hard. The steepness doesn't end, and in the dark it always feels steeper. Rain peppers me until I finally crawl under a tree and dive into my tent.

Early on Day 14 i'm sitting in a store in Cuba. Dylan is only 15 miles ahead but the others are closer to 80, and its here that a thought takes shape. It no longer matters whether I can or I cant. What matters is that I don't want to. As I do the sums of how hard I need to ride to catch JayP, Neil and Josh, I realize I don't want to. I'm happy to let them go. You see, I'm still 4 hours ahead of the record pace. Don't get me wrong. A win would be awesome. What bike rider enters a race not dreaming about winning it? A win would be fantastic, the logical conclusion of three hard years of racing. But I never started this journey motivated just by the win. I began motivated by my potential. How fast I could go, for how long and how hard. If that translated to a win, great. The record was the line in the sand. The point to aim for. The measure of potential.

As I sat there drinking a coffee I realized I would not be coming first. Or second or third for that matter, or even fourth! And in a strange way, I was content. But I wasn't about to give up. A lot could happen. And of course Dylan was still just up the road. I pushed hard across the paved flats and into Grants. On through El Mapais and the punishing heat. On into the night and the dark demons.



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Early on Day 15 I roll into Pie Town. It's the second time I've been here in the dark and missed the famous Pie Shop. I fill up with water and head towards the Gilla. Thunderstorms pound me on the way to Beaver Camp, but I'm dry on the inside. I open my mouth trying to catch some rain but it's a waste. In the dying light I'm climbing the monster rollers of the Gilla. A fire truck pulls up and offers me a lift saying a big storm is about to hit. I'm in a race I tell him, but thanks. A few drops at first and then some more. I stop to put on my rain top. Five minutes later the world is a very scary place. I'm high up in the Gilla and the storm cell has dropped around me. Wind blows a fury in every direction. Now and then it's behind and it's pushing me up the pass at 23 kms/hour! But mostly it's random. Hailstones begin to pummel and smash into me, some as big as acorns. I'm screaming out in pain as my back and legs take a beating. Lightning booms and flashes everywhere. I see the flash on the bark of trees. The rain is relentless. I realize there is no safe place. If I roll up in a ball in the road to evade the lighting, I might get run over by a fire truck. In the woods I'm toast. So all I can do is keep riding. I ask the Lord to protect me and I push on into the rage, raging back. And just like that it's gone. Ten, maybe fifteen minutes of a Mordor maelstrom and it's over. I pull off the road to recover marveling that I'm still in one piece.

As night falls I slip into that twilight state of mind. I think I'm out of the Gilla but where's the highway? I can't tell if I'm going up or down. Endless. My mind is numb. At last I'm on tar. I stop for another power nap, my forth for the day. Too inefficient but I no longer care. Finally I'm there. The last crux of this race, the Sapillo CDT, a piece of single track that blasts across rugged country for 12 miles. I put up my tent and get my last 2 hours of sleep. I haven't seen the tracking page in ages and don't know where anyone is but it doesn't matter, as long as I'm ahead of the ghost. Tomorrow it will be over.



T O U R O W I D E 2 0 1 5





I'm in agony as I bump and grind over Sapillo. I'm cursing Matthew Lee for the senselessness of it all. Why not just go around damn it! At first light I roll into Pinos Altos and soon after into Silver City. As I sit in MacDonald's piling down food I take a final look at Trackleaders. Josh came first then JayP. Neil was close behind and Dylan is close to the end. And yes, I'm still five hours ahead of that damn ghost! I rollout of Silver City and onto the final stretch. All I want to do now is get to the end. I lament about not having someone chase me, as it seems the next person is a full 300 miles back! The what if's and what should have beens' play through my mind like a drug. But it's meaningless. I stop at Separ for a coffee then on to Hachita. Still pushing hard. Still racing. Just me and JayP's ghost.

A headwind gives me one last slap as a storm rolls by. A quiet road. No Bison. Robert Newman, a dear friend from El Paso rolls up and gives me a hug. He will pick me up at the border and take me home. He drives on. The sun gets lazy. The miles tick by. And there it is. I remember fondly two years back when Liam and James kicked hard and the three of us sprinted for the line. Now it's just me. The 1 Mile sign board slips by. The road curves and the sun is finally gone. The border is closed. Dead quiet. I roll to a halt and climb off my bike. I prop it against the border sign and push 'stop' on my Garmin one last time. As Robert walks over I give up a tear or two. It's done. Four hours up the road is JayP's ghost. He is still chasing.



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U.S. Customs and  
Border Protection

Antelope Wells Border Station  
Antelope Wells New Mexico





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### STATS:

For those of you that are metric minded.

- **TOTAL TIME:**  
15 DAYS 12 HOURS 9 MIN
- **TOTAL DISTANCE:**  
4339 KM
- **TOTAL ASCENT:**  
50 521M
- **DAILY AVERAGE DISTANCE:**  
280 KM
- **DAILY AVERAGE ASCENT:**  
3259M





No story could ever be complete without thanking the people and organizations that made it possible. Without you, these things remain a dream.

### **ETERNAL PARTNER**

My Lord, savior and King. Jesus. Thank you.

Four, maybe five times I fell asleep on my bike. Each time I woke up still on my bike with you cradling me in your arms. Your love for me is astounding. You began this journey. You will end it.

### **PLATINUM PARTNER**

Barnett Signs

To Barry, Brian, Kelly, Gina and the rest of the Barnett team in Dallas...

thank you for believing in me and being a home away from home. I love your spirit!



### **SILVER PARTNER**

Ermelo MAN

To Lambert and the team in Ermelo...you are faithful! Thank you for the support and belief in what I do.

**MAN kann.**  
**1915 - 2015**



**Ermelo MAN**  
**017 819 2838**



## PRODUCT PARTNERS

### BIG AGNES

Rob and the team from Steamboat springs...your stuff is amazing! Innovative, cutting edge and comfy. I love what you guys do!



The Mother of Comfort!

### OAKLEY

Seth, Cuan, Gwen and the rest of the O team, you guys have believed in me for 17 years! Wow...as always. Simply the best in the game, by a long way.



### VEETIRE

Victor, it was touch and go for a while! Thank you for the energy and willingness at such short notice. The tires were awesome! Not even a sniff...



### LYNSKEY

Don, I know you have moved on, but to you and the rest of the team in Chatanooga...thank you for the support! Anton, I know you are not formally Lynskey but your heart is titanium all the way. Thank you for everything!



### CELLFOOD

To Paul and Fiona. Thank you always for the support. I never leave that small blue bottle behind!







Alex Harris,  
Thank you.