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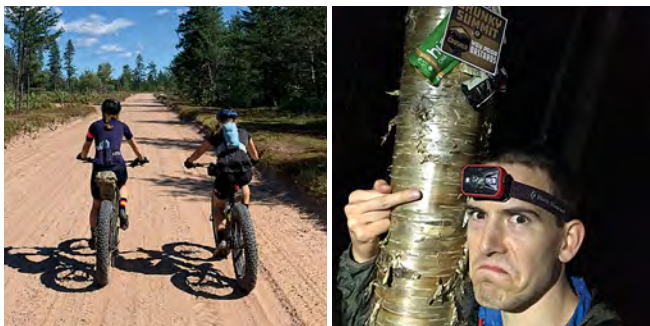
THE PLAN TO CREATE VERMONT'S LONGEST TRAIL

A GREENER FUTURE

CAN THE BIKE INDUSTRY BECOME SUSTAINABLE?

On Michigan's Upper Peninsula, enhanced gravel racing demands teamwork, a self-supported spirit and a whole lot of determination

by Tess Weaver



It's an unsettling feeling, backtracking on an unfamiliar route as dusk fades to darkness. Nightfall seems more ominous in the Michigan woods than it does back home in high-country Colorado. We're surrounded by dense northern hardwoods, white pine and hemlock, without vistas or clearings to extend twilight. The forest symphony of tree frogs, owls and who-knows-what sounds foreign and alarming. And we're pedaling away from the finish line.



- [Top Left] Jessie Young and Caroline Tory push along flat, sandy logging roads during their self-supported Crusher. **Tess Weaver**
- [Top Right] A rider shares how he's really feeling in a checkpoint selfie. **Courtesy Todd Poquette**
- [Above] Teamwork makes the tandem work. **Ryan Stephens**



• [Left] Race promoter Todd Poquette says he designed the 2020 Crusher to be as difficult as the year in which it happened. **Courtesy Todd Poquette**

• [Below] The author and crew capture their Checkpoint #2 selfie after twice passing the roadside spring. **Tess Weaver**

• [Facing Page] The Crusher crosses the mouth of the Huron River where it meets Lake Superior, and the crossing depth is ever changing—from knee high to deeper, depending on the weather. **Courtesy Todd Poquette**

Jessie, Caroline and I missed our final checkpoint,

the last of five predetermined locations that require taking a selfie to continue this “race.” Is the top of this climb the notorious Chunky Summit? One light short and unsure of how many more hours we’ll be riding in the dark, we delay switching on our headlamps and bike lights and squint as we scan the trees—not just for the marker, but for a testy moose who is rumored to roam this area. Other racers have reported seeing bear, bobcat, coyote, and badger.

Finally, we notice a small brown sign on a brown tree trunk bearing the race’s logo. Jessie, an accomplished endurance athlete and multitime U.S. Ski Mountaineering Champion, is bonking and pours a packet of energy drink mix directly into her dry mouth. Once the taurine and caffeine hit her bloodstream, her eyes widen and glow in the dark. We snap the last mandatory selfie, muster some laughter at Jessie’s manic look and head in the direction we hope is the finish line.



I’m in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula with three girlfriends—Jessie Young, Caroline Tory and Tara Abbaticchio—all of us seeking to satisfy a restlessness for a socially-distanced adventure. We’ve found it in a place where none of us has been before, and where only three percent of Michigan’s population enjoys close to 30 percent of the state’s land mass. Long

a summer playground for Midwesterners, the U.P. is a wild place of thick forests, thundering waterfalls and trout-filled streams. It’s bordered by three Great Lakes, including Superior, the largest body of fresh water in the world, and is chock full of enough logging roads, jeep trails and singletrack to satiate the most adventurous mountain bikers and gravel riders.

You can trace the rise of off-road cycling in the U.P. to one person: Todd Poquette. He noticed the area’s cycling community was aging and saw a need to cultivate youth cycling, to get kids off devices, boost their self-esteem and show them

the joy of an active lifestyle. So Poquette started a NICA high school race team and, in 2014, founded the 906 Adventure Team, a nonprofit focused on getting young people and newbies into mountain biking and motivating people of all ages to challenge themselves. Hundreds of riders sign up for his self-supported character-building events such as the Polar Roll winter fat bike race and the Marji Gesick, a challenging 100-mile bike race that includes 12,000 feet of climbing and plenty of “Blame Todd” signs along the way. These are events where just finishing equals victory.

The Crusher, the event we’re in the midst of, is known for crushing participants, yet it’s also regarded as Poquette’s most “approachable” creation. He helped evolve the grassroots Huron Mountain Crusher, established in 2014 by Matt Beardsley, into an organized “enhanced gravel” race. Profits from the race go to 906, which has raised more than \$140,000 for trailbuilding in the area since 2015 and funded a new learning management system that’s trained

more than 150 volunteers.

In May 2020, Poquette announced that the sixth-annual, pandemic-year Crusher would be held that summer utilizing a self-supported format and boasting a route that would be harder than ever. Competitors could race anytime throughout the summer using the route file and tracking progress by taking checkpoint selfies along the way. Skeptics told Poquette no one would enter. One thousand people signed up, including us.

A couple weeks before our departure we dug into the details. “Have you looked at the times?” Jessie asked over a group text. “It’s taking a lot of people 15-18 hours.” Shocked responses followed. How could it take more than 12 hours to ride 100 miles of gravel roads? Heck, Caroline ran 40 miles and climbed 7,000 feet across Colorado’s Elk Mountains quicker than that.

We arrived in Marquette the day before our chosen race day and went straight to Poquette’s home in a modest, wooded neighborhood. The race organizer is a salt-of-the-earth type with the kind of strong charisma it takes to convince people to test their limits. He also leads by example.

In October 2020, Poquette and friend Marc Salm circumnavigated the U.P. by bike, covering 1,033 miles in 10 days on a rugged new route. When I follow up in June 2021, he’d just finished a 1,600-mile ride.

Poquette, a husband, father and business owner, is an incredibly busy guy. Yet prior to our arrival he rounded up two Salsa Timberjacks and two Cannondale Fat CAADs for us (our cross-country mountain bikes weren’t suited for this course), driving six hours roundtrip to get two of them in Green Bay, Wisconsin. In his driveway, he helped us fit our bikes and outfit them with perfectly sized bikepacking bags. He’d already gone above and beyond when he saw our rental minivan and offered to drive our bikes to the race start early the next morning.

It’s 4:40 a.m., and we’re sitting in the dark at the Forestville Trailhead, 15 minutes from town. Poquette promised he’d be here at 4:30 a.m., but we’re starting to wonder. At 4:45, we call. Straight to voicemail. You can’t be bummed at someone for being late when they’ve sourced your bikes, then tuned, stored

and transported them for you. But we’re headed into what could be a very long day. The last thing we need is a late start.

Fifteen minutes later, Poquette calls. He forgot to set an alarm but is now on his way. Soon, he’s snapping a group photo in the dark and wishing us luck. The start is a far cry from the festival-like atmosphere that typically sends off the few hundred Crusher participants. Poquette knew riders would miss the camaraderie, but he also knew people needed an outlet.



Endurance events like the Crusher, which are socially distanced by nature, were better equipped to carry on through the pandemic. Cycling’s audax/randonneuring model has been using checkpoints (or a stamped brevet card) since the late 19th century. Audax rides aren’t ridden to race but to discover new landscapes and explore personal limits. And the proliferation of gravel events—specifically the ultra-hard variety—shows that these events are less about competing against others and more about pushing personal limits.

“More events aimed at helping people test themselves is a good thing if it’s truly being done for the right reasons,” Poquette said. “Our obsession with how fast we go detracts from what is truly important—did you finish what you set out to do? Did you get a green dot or a red dot? And if it’s a red dot, what are you going to do differently next time to finish? Here’s how I look at the parallels between life and events: *Life isn’t fair, the world isn’t safe, there is no finish line.*”

In 30 minutes, we’ve covered just two miles. And we’re off our bikes—not just walking them but hoisting them ledge to ledge up a sheer rock face. I’m familiar with hike-a-biking back home, but lifting this 40-pound rig is another story. It’s a full-

We laugh at the ridiculousness of the terrain, but our smiles remain intact. I'm actually shocked by how good a time I'm having.

body workout gaining the crest of Hogback, but once there we witness a barren rock summit with nothing but verdant forests extending to endless blue. Caroline grew up on Lake Ontario, yet even she is in awe of the vastness of Lake Superior. Our timing makes the view feel like the luckiest gift. The sunrise over the lake reaches maximum orange-to-neon-pink transformation upon our arrival.

Rocky, rooted singletrack extends from the descent of Hogback to the next summit, called Top of the World. Our bikes handle the terrain, but there's plenty of walking, too. Finally, we reach a cruisy gravel road with only a few puddles. We're almost 30 miles and six hours in and are looking for a roadside natural spring, the second mandatory checkpoint. We miss it and must backtrack, something we learn to take in stride throughout the day.

When we intersect a paved road, Tara tells us she's taking it back to town. She's felt off since the start and knows she can't do another 75 miles in her current condition. We're nervous for her to take off down a random highway without cell service, but as our race inches on, we'll know she made the right call.

Within the hour, Jessie and Caroline are settling a navigational dilemma: continue on pavement or take an overgrown dirt road. Jessie has the route preprogrammed into her bike computer. The mapping app on Caroline's phone isn't working. My intuition says nothing, and I'm preserving mental strength for the hours to come. We decide on the road less traveled.

"It's shockingly empty out here and really easy to get lost," Caroline muses. "No signs, no stores ... this is wild and remote." Indeed, the Crusher uniquely captures the remote and wild spirit of gravel riding, where the landscape is a blank canvas and opportunities to explore independence and teamwork abound.

"We need more self-reliance in the world and less finger pointing," Poquette told me. "Everyone wants to tell others how to think and talk, but they never look at the person in the mirror. Events like the Crusher force you to be self-reliant and overcome adversity. Hell, our 40-mile race is actually 54 miles. People just know this is the way it's going to be here. Things aren't what they seem to be because that's life. I hope we start to see more promoters focus less on dollar bills and more on life lessons."



• [Facing Page, Above] A rider crushes a slick, boulder-filled river crossing. **Ryan Stephens**

• [Facing Page, Below] The long, steady walk to the technical summit known as Top of the World. **Ryan Stephens**

• [This Page, Left] Jake Gervais and Sarah Heikkila Mills enter Mosquito Gulch. **Luke Erickson**

• [This Page, Right] As the miles stack up, the riders' expressions grow more goofy. **Ryan Stephens**

By midday, we're enjoying smooth miles as we cruise to our third checkpoint at an abandoned snowplow. Our spirits are pretty high—even if this old piece of machinery is cause for a pointless out-and-back.

There's nothing like a river crossing to break up the monotony of pedaling, and when we reach the Yellow Dog River, which runs wild through Marquette County with many small waterfalls and rapids, I enjoy wading through our first of two scheduled crossings.

This one is more like a giant puddle. I focus on a stand of orange- and red-leafed trees rushing toward autumn. It's the first sign of the fast-approaching change of seasons. But for now the sun is shining for the hottest stretch of the ride, where flat, sandy roads weave through logged forests. The surroundings feel coastal, even though the last view we had of Superior was at Mile 2. Sadly, we won't see it again.

A few hours later during our second crossing, the Yellow Dog proves itself to be a real river. Luckily the water level is only knee-deep, but once across we're forced to bushwhack for 10 minutes to find the route again. These navigational challenges are a mental game. Think positive and imagine stumbling on the route and you're golden. Dwell on the wasted time and worry you've lost the track and things get dark quickly.

I've heard a lot about the infamous Mosquito Gulch and immediately realize when we've arrived there. It's a swampy, rutted valley within a valley. We push our bikes through mud. Our feet get soaked. Had there actually been mosquitos, it would've been my Seventh Circle of Hell. We laugh at the ridiculousness of the terrain, but our smiles remain intact. I'm actually shocked by how good a time I'm having. It might have something to do with the multiple Cokes I guzzled, gifts from a stranger running an aid station for his wife. But I also truly feel myself setting well into this plodding all-day pace. Besides, how often do we get to spend all day riding with friends—and get to know a place we might never see again? I'm flooded with appreciation for what bikes can offer.



At 6:30 p.m., after 13 hours of riding, we break into open terrain and coast down a smooth, powerline road, passing the 90-mile mark. I start to feel like things are going too well. Turns out they are. We missed a turn and have to back-track. Uphill. As it's getting dark. When we pass 100 miles, we cheer, but the Chunky Summit and seven more miles still loom ahead.

We collect our final selfie before darkness, then cross Bismark Creek as nightfall approaches. While our default feeling is urgency, I try to remember that there's really no rush. We have two lights between the three of us. The sky is clear, and we're satiated and hydrated. And, surprisingly, no hot spots have revealed themselves anywhere on my body. As I speed down the overgrown singletrack, my light illuminates the tall grass on the sides of the trail and it all starts to feel like a game.

Finally, after 15 hours in the saddle—and sometimes out—we approach a campground with crackling fires that represent our return to civilization. I exhale with deep relief. I'm proud of our fitness, our group dynamics and our navigation skills. It's time to go check on Tara back at the hotel and then get some sleep. It's not until then that I realize my body is truly crushed, but it's a welcome sensation that I need a couple times a year. This time, it sits alongside an overwhelming satisfaction and sense of camaraderie. True adventures are getting harder and harder to come by. I'm grateful we found one.

