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balancing act

THE MASTER OF MULTI-TASKING

NOTHING REVEALS A MAN'S CHARACTER LIKE A BROKEN printer. Mike McCormack stands above his unit with a look of disbelief. It is the final Friday of September 2015, and the first day of the inaugural Outlier Offroad Festival in Vail, Colorado. McCormack conceived the event and it's one he thinks could look like the long-running Sea Otter Classic in just three years.

Already nothing has gone right. The lanyards got shipped to the wrong place; the online comp code for shop techs failed, which means they are all on their way to register for today's 2016 bike demo in person; a rack went missing from the photo shoot; and he just realized there's soap in his water bottle.

McCormack's phone rings. He answers: "Can I call you back in 10 minutes? Or actually, can you call *me* back in 10 minutes?"

Six people are standing in line to talk to him, each seemingly

with his or her own logistical emergency. A pile of zip ties, a cup of coffee and an untouched foil-wrapped bagel sit on the table next to his laptop. He looks at the printer, which is refusing to print double-sided waivers. He Googles the problem and grins while the page loads. "If all else fails, pick it up, drop it, pick it up again," he says. Then he turns back to the printer. "All right, sweetheart, you and I both know you have paper."

Finally he finds it: one sheet of white poking its head where it shouldn't be, "disrupting the sensor," he says. The printer resumes its job, and McCormack begins the line-whittling process in front of him.

It was a coup for McCormack to launch the Outlier. He spent three years planning it before the town of Vail gave him \$25,000 and the resort let him stage it at Gondola One in the main village

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and gave him manpower, everyone sharing high hopes for the future. McCormack sees a no-brainer: Vail, “one of the blue-chip brands in the world,” is looking for a signature mountain bike event. Why not get next year’s bikes the week after the Interbike tradeshow, where the general public can’t demo them, and let consumers take test lap after test lap down shimmering aspen-lined singletrack? Then pony up for enduro and XC races to bring in some pros?

“The goal,” McCormack says, “is to grow the purse to make it the single-richest weekend event in the United States; to increase the demo; book a lot of room nights; and make it the signature season-ending event for the industry.”

It is a long way from McCormack’s start in cycling. He grew up as a shop rat in Madison, Wisconsin, where “the trails were not so great. Riding was more of an affectation than anything in the late ’80s and early ’90s.” He adds: “I couldn’t tell you what they’re like now. I pay for my mom to come visit me; I don’t want to go back to Wisconsin.”

McCormack worked in sales for Trek, then in marketing for Bontrager and Klein. When Trek bought the latter two brands, McCormack struggled to conform. “I was way too much on the punk-rock, outlier side,” he says. “And at 25, you just think you’re right! Man, I don’t know much at 45. I can’t believe how *infuckingsufferable* I must’ve been then.”

He got fired, and for once he couldn’t argue with his bosses’ decision. “I was like, I do suck,” he says. “It was one of the most pivotal experiences of my life. It made me realize that being so cocksure wasn’t necessarily a great character trait. And that maybe thoughtfulness was a better way to live, and to question my own opinions first before anyone else’s. You know, you grow

up, these things happen.”

McCormack moved to Breckenridge, Colorado, in 1999. He and another local, Jeff Westcott, founded the Firecracker 50 Independence Day race in 2001, and he started the Breck Epic stage race—a 200-mile, high-alpine odyssey that draws entrants from around the world—eight years later. He also runs the Eagle Outside Festival and Firebird XC race in his adopted hometown of Eagle, Colorado, where he moved in 2012.

Eagle also serves as home base for McCormack’s PR agency, Uncommon Communications. Throw in a dose of advocacy—he was a key voice for maintaining mountain bike access within the Hidden Gems Wilderness proposal in Colorado in 2010—and a hobby of getting kids on bikes wherever he lives, and you can see why his longtime director of operations, Matt Sutton, calls him “the most dynamic guy in this business.”

All of which would make for a nice political résumé, but McCormack never takes himself too seriously, either. He cracks wise on the microphone in a weathered cowboy hat (“I got cheap Irish skin,” he says of the hat), combines the cool of a ’70s surfer with the articulation of a CEO, and works to maintain a very particular feel at his races. The No. 1 rule at the Breck Epic is “Don’t be a dick.”

“We’re really upfront with saying there are behavioral expectations when you do one of our events,” McCormack says. “We’re all on bikes. The price of your integrity should not be 4 seconds gained on a racecourse. Think about how imbalanced that is. This is supposed to be a meeting of friends and fellow travelers. If you can’t buy into that, there’s always triathlon.” The PR guy in him catches himself. He laughs: “Tri’s not like that always. I need to be careful about bashing other things. But tri’s very data driven.”





McCormack's overlapping roles can create conflict when his event sponsors compete with his PR clients, which include BH Bikes, Wigwam, Ergon, Ortlieb, Alchemy and Praxis. His PR business, after all, is what pays his bills.

"We're sensitive to it," he says. "When we bring on a brand as a sponsor or as a client, my first call is to the people who might have an issue with that. The events are the give-back piece, but we need them to run in the black; we're not here to donate, and I don't think anyone should apologize for trying not to live in the red. But mainly we just ask that everyone in the room be an adult."

This past June, there was confusion with the times in a state championship women's Super D race at the Eagle Outside Festival. The second-place finisher, Caitlyn Vestal, might have actually won, and it still wasn't clear by the time she had to drive home. McCormack handed

Vestal a blank check and told her he would email her the amount to fill in later. "Who does that?" says Vestal's husband, Zack, the bike marketing manager for Scott Sports USA.

McCormack says he expects this year's Outlier Offroad, set for September 9-11, to feature twice as many demos as last year. More big-name brands jumped on board as sponsors. The racing purse is up to \$25,000. His vision is playing out as planned.

Something else has changed since last year. At the inaugural Outlier, McCormack said he hadn't ridden his bike in four months. Part of that was due to his penchant for watching his sons, ages 7 and 9—and nicknamed 'Mini Mac' and 'Breck Epic Jr.'—play sports. But the bulk of the reason fell to how much he took on *in* cycling.

This year, he says, "I'm trying to simplify and ride my bike more." ▢