

LIFE ON THE BRINK

ONE MAN'S SOLITARY DEVOTION TO A SINGLE NETWORK,
NESTLED HIGH IN UTAH'S LONELY WASATCH RANGE



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WE WERE MORE THAN 30 MILES INTO OUR RIDE when Peter Donner took out his axe. A downed aspen was blocking the trail. Within seconds, Donner was hacking into the 6-inch-wide trunk, slowly at first, then faster, chips of freshly felled wood whizzing into the bush with each swing of his blade.

He had planned this for weeks. 'Life on the Brink,' this trail's unofficial name, means many things to Donner, who rides it more than anyone in the world. Among these things: If you don't want to stop and lift your bike over a downed tree after 6,000 feet of climbing, you must clear it yourself.

Such ownership is part of riding a trail high above Donner's home in Salt Lake City, Utah, that few know about and fewer still ride. Never mind that the faint singletrack crumbled away just ahead of the downed tree, forcing us to dismount and walk a few brief sections through the dense, prickly forest. I could tell that Donner did not mind carrying the axe in his bag and took pleasure in clearing the trail.

When you ride the same route 60 to 70 times from May to November—virtually every day he gets off from his job as a budget analyst and economist at the Utah State Capitol—the question of whether it is worth humping an extra 5 pounds of tool up so many gut-punching climbs and the 2,000-foot Emigration Canyon Road ascent that connects Donner's house to the start of the singletrack is not really a question at all. It is an invitation for more suffering, which, to Donner, means an invitation for more satisfaction.

Residents along the canyon know Donner as the fixture who rides up their road no-handed two to four days a week, wearing a green roadie cap, wire-rimmed aviator sunglasses, black Lycra shorts and an unbut-



toned blue cotton dress shirt that flaps under a bike messenger-style bag/fanny pack with a single strap arched across his chest and over his shoulder. He has been riding the Brink for 23 years. Save for a few days each season, he rides it alone—six to nine hours spent removed from the valley's triple-digit temperatures and real-world realities. He stops to eat lunch. He sits on rocks in the shade. He naps.

When I ask how often he rides a trail that is not the Brink, he says, "This year it's probably going to be one. It could be two. I'm not going to drive to Park City to go mountain biking. I'm going to ride off my porch."

KING OF HIS CASTLE

I had arrived at Donner's house the previous night to shake his hand and plan our itinerary. He was still in his Lycra shorts from the day's ride, shirtless, his lower legs caked in dirt, clutching a 22-ounce Taj Mahal beer—his usual reward for finishing the Brink.

"How was it today?" I asked.

"Hot," he replied. "I hung out under a tree for a while."

It was mid-August. Valley forecasts called for a high of 98 degrees the next day. Donner explained that he carries 7 pounds of water and 4 pounds of ice while riding in such heat, and he recommended I do the same. "I won't be sharing any of my ice water," he said.

His home, a one-story concrete and brick structure where he lives alone, looked like a college house at the end of senior year. Couch cushions, clothes and shoes were strewn about. Grateful Dead and Beatles CDs sat in a stack above the fireplace. An 8-foot-tall Pancho Villa mural—scavenged from a restaurant that went bankrupt—hung on the most prominent wall. The latest issue of *The Atlantic* waited in the mailbox.

Donner led me down to his basement, a musty dungeon with low

Carrying an axe is a regular feature of Peter Donner's Brink-riding routine, as is his practical kit of Lycra shorts and a dress shirt.



A creature of habit, Donner sticks to a fixed regimen that includes countless hours of riding but also leaves time for “lollygagging.”

ceilings that was filled with old bikes and skis (he skis about 80 days each winter, exclusively in the backcountry, starting from the same trailhead almost every time). I asked about a decrepit green Bianchi Brava leaning against the wall, next to his bike stand. “It got a flat in the second millennium,” he said. “I haven’t fixed it yet.”

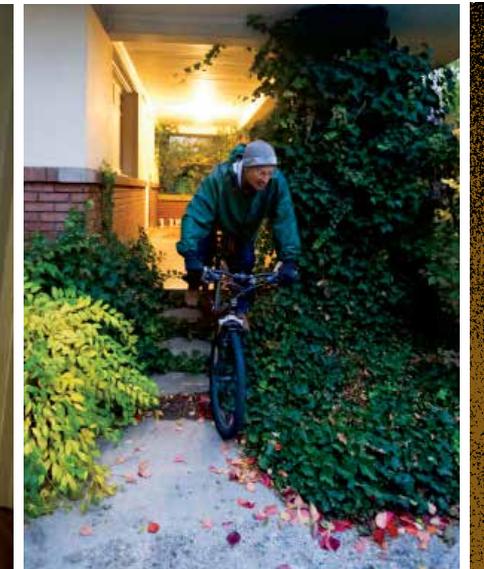
Donner, 52, lives about 3 miles from his childhood home on the east side of the city. His father was a ski bum and English professor at the University of Utah; Donner and his older brother grew up skiing at Alta. The younger Donner was known for schussing down the mountain like a missile, getting massive air and yelling, “Don’t anyone move!” lest they were to get in the way of his landing.

He worked as a ski tech at Snowbird during college at ‘the U,’

then earned a master’s in statistics. He moved to Michigan to pursue a Ph.D in economics, but dropped out after three years. When he moved back to Salt Lake in 1991, he didn’t have room in his truck for his TV, so he threw it away. He never bought another one. “I got a radio and discovered NPR,” he said.

Donner took a job doing state budget work when he returned to Utah and has held it ever since. He produces the economic and revenue forecasts for the governor, follows national and international finance issues like the rest of us follow the weather, and casually breaks down liquidity traps at dinner. Most of his friends believe he could do bigger-picture work in Washington, a notion he doesn’t dispute. But he refuses to leave the Wasatch Mountains.

“You’ll see tomorrow,” he says over a plate of Indian food. “Most people don’t like the Brink. I really like it. I like being on the Brink.”



MOVING THROUGH THE UNIVERSE

I ride into Donner’s driveway at 9 a.m. and walk up the stairs to his porch. He hands me a used, quart-sized yogurt container full of water. “Drink as much of this as you can,” he says. He has already finished eating the same breakfast he eats every day: a two-egg omelet filled with green onions, arugula, red pepper, a clove of garlic, capers, kale, spinach and Swiss cheese, as well as two fried potatoes and two strips of bacon.

Five minutes after my arrival, we ride off his porch, down four steps and begin our “Brink.” It should be noted that Donner uses “Brink” as both a noun and a verb—technically speaking, we are “Brinking” as well as “riding the Brink.” Having consumed nearly a gallon of water since he woke up at 5 a.m., Donner stops to pee after a couple of miles of neighborhood pedaling.

The Emigration Canyon ascent is forgettable, if also a bit entertaining. Roadies in groups of 10 whiz past us, as do dozens of runners and dogs. Donner’s quips help the 12 miles of asphalt pass faster than I expect. At Little Mountain Pass, we turn left onto the Little Mountain Ridge trail, an undulating route that leads into an environment as dry as anything I have ever experienced on a bike.

Donner has adopted dozens of nooks along the trail as his personal waypoints. At the top of one quick burst he points out a small tree that he holds to support himself for a breather. He has grabbed it so many times that the bark is dark and oily where his hand wraps

around it. He is proud of that.

After a half-hour of punchy climbs and short, fast descents, we reach a plateau and Donner pulls off to rest. He hangs his helmet and sunglasses on a pair of familiar branches and plops down on a patch of dried grass. The tundra has been flattened by Donner’s weight so many times before, it looks like a deer’s nest in a wetland. “Human beings are wild animals,” he says matter-of-factly, stretching out in the bush. “We’re basically coyotes, except we have 10 digits and language. Ten digits is what allows us to master the world.”

At the next rest stop, Donner kindly offers the best seat to me and reclines under a rock. “I’m a real shade lizard,” he says. He points at the bushes across a dry creekbed. “The thimbleberries are all gone. I ate the last of them yesterday.”

When asked to describe his riding style, Donner calls himself a “lollygagger.” He has never raced and has no interest in rushing through a ride (he calls one of his few riding partners “Nonstop” because she does not share his proclivity to rest on Brink rides). Some days, when he adds a loop onto the Brink, he will leave his house at 6 a.m. and get home at 9 p.m., having covered 80 miles and 12,000 vertical feet. Yet as his longtime friend and owner of the Wild Rose bike shop, Tim Metos, says, “He’s steady. He’s not going to go flaming fast, but it’s like third gear. The guy rides hour after hour after hour. He’s just out moving through the universe.”

Donner has many trademark riding quirks, but the most star-

ting is his short, high-pitched war cry—“Aaaaaahhhhh!”—that he bellows at the top of each climb. I never mention it during our ride, and he does not deem it worthy of explanation.

The Brink, as Donner refers to the ride in its entirety, is actually a collection of shorter trails that he links together. One such singletrack is the Mormon trail, which tops out at a paved road. There, nearing high noon, we rest again, and Donner takes off his shirt. It feels like the inside of a furnace, even if it is 20 degrees cooler than the hottest days of the summer. He proceeds to ride the rest of the day bare-chested.

Shortly after our break, we attempt a series of switch-backs that Donner cleans only a few times each season (and subsequently records in his Brink spreadsheet each time he does: “Clean Z”). They are mushy and loose today, a result of ongoing trail work and heavier-than-usual traffic. The final stretch is particularly nasty and challenging, thanks to marble-sized rocks. “Nice little shot of morphine right there,” Donner said with a grin when we reached the crest. “We’re really exercising now.”

We pass his nap spot (only room for one) and continue to another of his trusty rest stops for lunch, sprawling under a massive evergreen that he has named “Grand-

When I caught up to Donner, he noticed the red fluid dripping down my leg. “Oh, you’ve got blood! Nice!” he exclaimed. “It’s not a Brink unless you draw blood.”

mother’s Pine.” Donner whips out what he calls “Pete’s Power Cake,” a dense rock of energy whose ingredients include 24 ounces of chocolate chips, four cups of granola, a cube of butter, cinnamon, Cajun spice and bacon. He extends a hunk of cake to me, along with some dried cherries and Turkish apricots. Then he tells me the story of his first Brink.

In 1991, he joined a crew from Wild Rose led by Metos and John Mavor on what was then a foreign concept to him: a long-distance mountain bike ride. After six hours of punishment, he limped into the finish on his borrowed rental bike, 15 minutes behind the rest of the group. He was decimated. “I had no idea that people did stuff

One of the main things Donner loves about the Brink is the constant backdrop of stunning alpine scenery: “I like the views.”

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like that on mountain bikes,” he recalled, quickly adding: “That first Brink was the spring of life for me. Totally eye-opening. I think I’d done the White Rim once at that point—four days for 100 miles.”

By the turn of the century, he was organizing his life around the Brink. The namesake trail draws its title from the old Wasatch Steeplechase running race, which took a few dozen hardy souls through the Wasatch once each year. It turns out that Donner himself was a standout runner in high school and once finished a marathon in 2 hours and 48 minutes, but his first time on the Brink was on a bike.

When the Steeplechase was in its heyday, an old ski-racing chum of Donner’s planted a sign in the earth where the actual Brink began. It read: “Don’t stop. Don’t think. Don’t look now. You’re on the Brink.” That sign has long since been removed, but its message has become entrenched in Donner’s head.

On a clear day, from the height of the loop, at an elevation of 8,600 feet, you can see into Idaho, Wyoming and Nevada. Salt Lake City, nearly a vertical mile below, feels like a world removed. Which may have been the problem when I lost my focus for a moment and hit a sturdy stalk of sagebrush, stopping my front wheel like a tennis ball in tar. I hurtled through the air headfirst and somersaulted onto rocks the size of grapefruits, leaving a nasty little gash in my knee.

A few minutes later, when I caught up to Donner, he noticed the red fluid dripping down my leg. “Oh, you’ve got blood! Nice!” he exclaimed. “It’s not a Brink unless you draw blood.”

THE GROUNDING MECHANISM

Once the downed aspen had been chopped and tossed down the hill, we began the descent back to Emigration Canyon Road. From there, we cruised 12 miles back to Donner’s house, pedaling up the four steps onto his porch to finish.

My arms were raked raw from the thick bush near the end of the ride. My legs felt like they had covered 20 miles more than they had (Donner is not sure how much mileage the loop entails, but he and others estimate it to be between 45 and 50). I was starving. We had talked of eating Mexican food that night, and Donner had a restaurant in mind.

He flicked on the garden hose in his overgrown front yard and doused his head, arms and legs. “I don’t really need to shower,” he said. “This will be good enough for La Fontera.”

Later, at the restaurant, Donner confirmed that he planned to do the same thing all over again the next morning. Given how I felt, this astonished me, even though I knew it was routine for him.

Brinking, he explained, grounds him. He is not interested in marriage or fatherhood, although, as he put it, “I’m glad someone’s into having kids because it keeps the species going.” His work stimulates his mind, but it does not release him like his beloved ride.

“The idea of cleaning my house and tending to my yard when I could be on the Brink, well, it doesn’t happen, because I’m on the Brink,” he said. “I just ride the Brink, and if there are any issues bogging me down, they’re gone when I get back.

“Everything will be okay if I’m on the Brink.” ☐