

## **Junior and Scar Dog: Two Favorites From a Long, Strange Trip**

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It was a gorgeous September afternoon on Utah's Wasatch Plateau, an uprising of chilled land standing 5,000 feet above the heated deserts. Pedaling along the Skyline Drive, a 300-mile dirt road that traversed the plateau, my mountain bike tires rolled past alpine terrain interspersed with islands of evergreen trees. At 10,000 feet, the plateau had already moved into fall; a nearby stand of aspens displayed florescent yellow foliage. Though the Skyline Drive stretched across the entire core of Utah, it was only a bit part of my journey from Canada-to-Mexico on the aptly-named Western States Mountain Bike Route.

Measuring 2,740 miles in length, the Western States Mountain Bike Route begins on the Alberta-Montana border among grizzly bears and concludes at an abandoned U.S. Customs station on the Sonora-Arizona demarcation. Crossing five states and countless individual trail systems, it's a route that also contains 2,740 miles worth of... dogs.

I spotted, beyond the stand of brilliant aspens on the plateau, a group of six overly-active Border Collies in a small field next to the road. Taking a respite from guiding a group of several hundred sheep clumped beyond them, they chased each other through clouds of dust, yelping and growling. Approaching their field, I applied the brakes, dismounted, and slowly laid my bike on the shoulder to watch them play.

They soon noticed me and sprinted to my location as if they'd been locked in a prison camp for years, void of all affection. They jumped on me, their muddy paws smearing my blue cycling jersey with a combination of sheep dung, dust, and mud. Their scraping nails slipped down my chest, stomach, and thighs to finally gouge my shins. I showed little resistance to their soiled tough love though; I really couldn't have gotten much dirtier. Since my life on the road started a month and a half earlier, I showered approximately once a week.

When this pile of fur and teeth finally stopped assaulting me with licks and hugs they sprinted away as soon as they came. There remained one creature, unseen from the bottom of the pile before, looking up at me: a puppy. Colored in a patchwork of black

and white like his aunts and uncles, he stood only ten inches tall, clearly the youngest of the crew. And though I had no idea what his real name was (I named dogs I met along my trip), "Junior" fit him well.

I was probably the first mountain biker he'd ever seen. He was born maybe a month before we met. I may have also been the first man with a beard he had ever seen, which may explain his quiet curiosity. The men he mostly dealt with were smooth-faced Mexicans and Peruvians; migrant workers that herded sheep on the plateau from May to October. Though Junior wasn't a fully-fledged employee of the herders yet, they would soon call on him to help guide sheep in the direction the men seemed appropriate. For the time being, Junior was an apprentice of sorts. He slowly slumped to lie in the sun at my feet while I scratched his small, warm belly and gave him a few pets. Though I wish I could have stayed longer, I was soon on my way south again, the chilly air encouraging my movement.

Junior was one of two favorite dogs from my trip for one reason: he was cute. For me, a guy who used to jump out of planes at night as a paratrooper and was then living a life on the road, showering once a week, this is a big statement. His looks so suave, I had a photo of him enlarged and framed, which I gave to my girlfriend for Christmas. She loves it. Now when I call her I often ask, "How's Junior, Babe?" She reports in a matter-of-fact tone, "Still cute."

On the Western States Mountain Bike Route, my other favorite doggie was a not-so-cute canine named "Scar Dog." He embodied the complete opposite of Junior as one of the underprivileged mongrel inhabitants of a Navajo reservation I crossed in the top right corner of Arizona. He was a black and brown mutt who possessed battle scars from run-ins with dogs, alley cats, and abusive Indians. On top of his head was his large, trademark scar. "Probably," I like to tell people, "from a broken beer bottle." He was very weary of people to the point of near schizophrenia, most likely from being abused.

Scar Dog traveled alone through the outskirts of civilization, hanging out mostly at the Chevron gas station in Cameron, under the pump island's roof to hide from the midday sun. As I, too, hid from the desert sun under the island's roof one day, I watched him cautiously approach RV'ers and Harley riders gassing up, hoping they would toss him a scrap of their Slim Jims and ice cream sandwiches to help fill the pit in his

stomach. At dusk, when the desert cooled, I pedaled away from the Chevron, watching Scar Dog retreat to the surrounding desert wastelands behind the Chevron. I imagined him alone in the dark desert, listening to coyotes howl, wondering why they were free and well-fed with friends and family. I imagined him putting his head down and sighing, wondering why he was disposed to a life of constant hardship while the coyotes – his relatives – controlled their own destinies.

I preferred Junior and Scar Dog for different reasons. Junior was a dog I could not say "no" to. If he were to tear up my couch while I was at work I'd yell at him a little, but soon enough I'd feel too guilty not to forgive such an adorable soul. Scar Dog, on the other hand, was loved because he was the literal underdog, a position I admire. I felt sorry for Scar Dog, yes, but more so I selflessly rooted for him and identified with him. Today, whenever I remember that somebody kicked my ass or broke my heart, I realize I have days where I, like Scar Dog, ask, "Why is everyone else having so much fun?" With Scar Dog I still feel a bond. Our lives are occasionally similar, though his nearly always harder. To this day, I often worry about Scar Dog and fantasize of returning to Arizona to save him. Most likely he's at the Chevron.

I snapped more than 1,000 photos during my two-month trip but have had only two of them framed. With Junior hanging on the wall of my girlfriend's apartment, I thought it only fitting to have Scar Dog on mine, his toothy gaze reminding me life could be much, much worse. «« E.S. »»