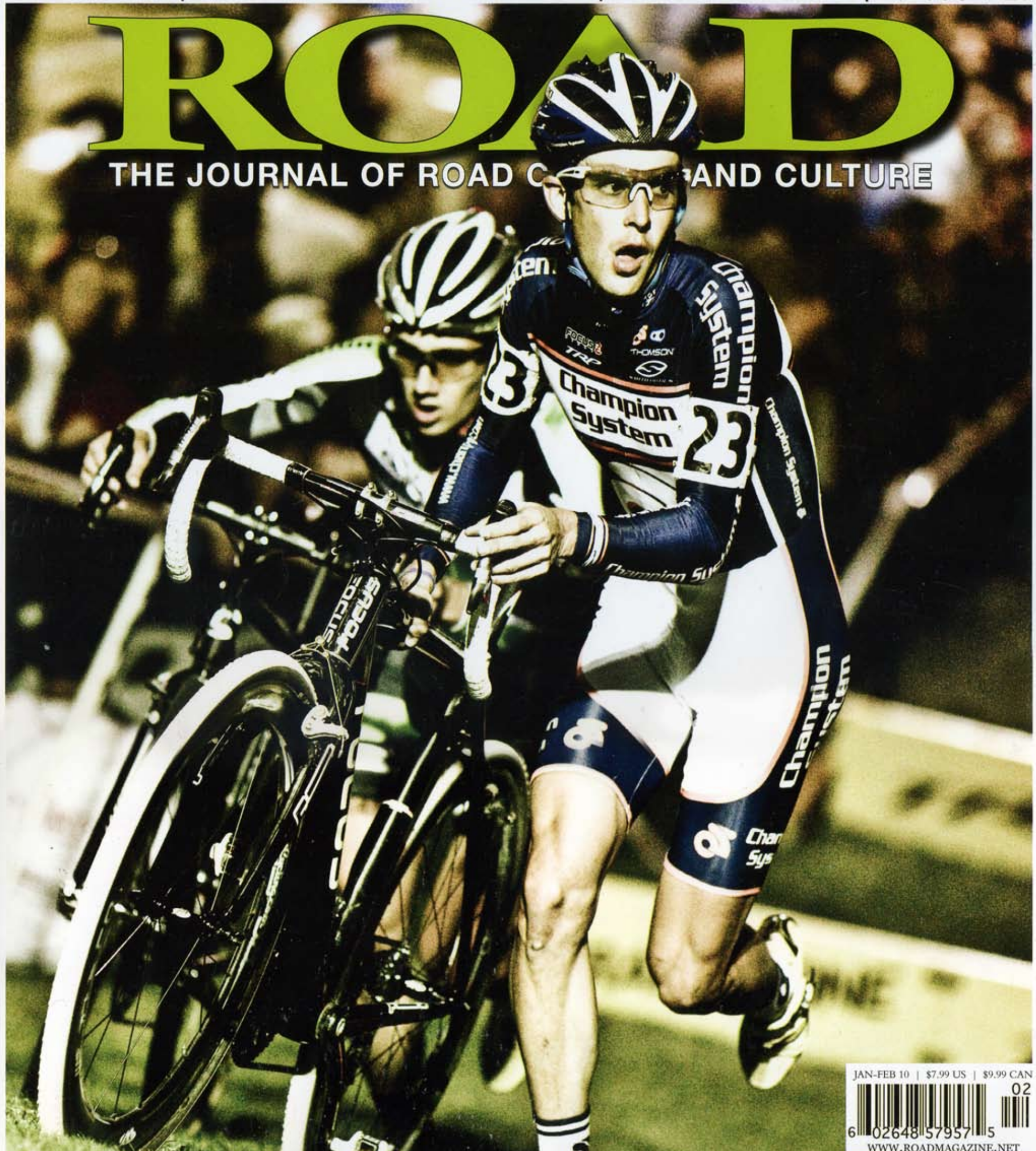


CYCLOCROSS | 26 SWEET RIGS TOM DANIELSON | HIS VUELTA ZAMBIA | THE JOURNEY

ROAD

THE JOURNAL OF ROAD CYCLING AND CULTURE



JAN-FEB 10 | \$7.99 US | \$9.99 CAN



6 02648 57957 5 WWW.ROADMAGAZINE.NET



The Pablove Foundation: A Father, a Son and a bike.

September 17, 2009: It's a hot day in Los Angeles. I drive down Sunset Boulevard looking for an address. Dangerbird Records, an independent music label that handles a number of artists like Silversun Pickups, Eulogies and Sea Wolf, has got to be somewhere in the long line of businesses along the road, but for some reason I am having trouble seeing it. The awnings and storefronts of funky cafes, clothing stores, tattoo parlors, art galleries and furniture stores in this area of Silverlake all seem to blend together into one massively connected chain of commerce, until I turn and notice the distinct color, message and feeling of the building I am looking for. Yes, this is the place, right in front of me.

Words/John Madruca
Images/Pablove

From the outside, Dangerbird looks like something else, and it sort of is. The building is painted a bright, beautiful blue. An image of a large "P-heart" logo is clear to see, as are these words written on the hard stucco exterior: Pablove one another, Pablo Thraillkill Castelaz June 21, 2003 – June 27, 2009 REST IN PEACE. Once inside, I sense the creative energy that drives the business. Its open spaces are filled with light, art hangs everywhere and conceptual work is displayed for everyone to see. The place feels vibrant, welcoming, warm and open.

For Jeff Castalez, who co-founded the record label in 2004 with partner Peter Walker, life has become profoundly shaped by both the creative, communal vibe felt on the inside of Dangerbird, as well as the reality of what the outside of the building embodies. He is himself welcoming, honest and open, with plenty of vision and energy to dive headfirst into any new project he wholeheartedly believes in. In 2004, the record label was, and still is, that defining project for Jeff, however on May 17, 2008, his life took an entirely new and unexpected direction. Jeff describes the day this way:

It was my 36th birthday. I had done an 80-mile ride, the Montrose loop and then broke off by myself into the mountains. I got home and Jo Ann was off with Grady and so it was just Pablo and me at home. We went out to Velo Pasadena to pick up some stuff (he loved going there because he could jump on a little kid bike with training wheels and ride around the store.) When we took our bath a few hours later I discovered this protrusion in his abdomen.

The doctor and hospital visits followed, and as Jeff writes: "Pablo was diagnosed early Sunday morning with Wilms Tumor, a rare form of pediatric cancer that typically appears in children two to five, and sometimes a bit older." On that day, Pablo was just weeks away from his fifth birthday.

Without warning, Jeff, his wife Jo Ann Thraillkill and stepson Grady Gallagher suddenly found themselves at a threshold, standing in a different world. A threshold can be described as an entrance to a new leading pathway, a point where new experience begins or the beginning of a new psychological or physiological state. With the news of Pablo's illness, all of these conditions descended on the family at once, but rather than wait for things to unfold, they decided to cross over and experience what was ahead, with full awareness that to do so would bring a depth of feeling never known before. Irish poet and philosopher John O'Donogue speaks of the idea of threshold in the following way:

Threshold is a place where you move into more critical, challenging and worthy fullness...a line which separates two territories of spirit, and how we cross is the key thing. When we cross a new threshold, if we cross worthily, we heal the patterns of repetition that were in us before, that had us caught somewhere, and in our crossing we cross into new ground where we don't repeat what we've been through in the last place we were.

This was indeed new ground for Jeff, his family and friends. First and foremost on their minds became the health of their boy, and how to navigate the complexities of medical tests, lab

results, doctor visits and medications, in order to do what would be best for Pablo. But there was also in the process, as Jeff describes, the very difficult task of emotionally looking after oneself, of maintaining some semblance of a life, of trying to find a balance between taking care of a child and remembering that each member of the family matters as well:

The first thing that the doctors and nurses and other parents told us is don't buy into this feeling that it's selfish for you to take care yourself. You have to take care of yourself. We're here to take care of your child, but we're not here to take care of you.

You have to do that, whatever your thing is.

Writing the PABLOg! (getwellpablo.blogspot.com) became one of Castelaz's ritual acts, his time to share the news on Pablo and to express the emotional enormity of his experience. Early days of the blog contain factual headings like What does Pablo Have, and What's His Condition? and Update: Tuesday 1 p.m.," the intention being to use the blog as a way to relay information to everyone at once. As Jeff says, "I knew sitting on the phone and emailing back and forth with people one at a time was not going to happen." However, within a short span of time, the blog shifted from being a "central communication tool" into "so much more because it had to become who I was and where I was at that time. I had no notion of getting as personal as I did—it just happened."

And so the blog became, in effect, the written record of one man's crossing "into more critical, challenging and worthy fullness," hand-in-hand with his son, who himself was experiencing a crossing of his own. Castelaz's willingness to allow readers into his experience, as well as his perspective on life and the lives of his family and friends, is beautiful and reaffirming in showing how illness can bring an entire community together to love and support one cool little kid and his family. What has happened as a result of the journey is that Castelaz's world has expanded, his own purpose has been enlarged and his sense of what is truly important in life has been defined clearer than he ever thought imaginable. As he simply writes: "It's in moments like this that I see the true nature of humanity. We are all here to be kind, give and receive love, and smile. That's pretty much as hard as it gets."

The second important ritual act for Castelaz during this time was to ride. The day he discovered the protrusion on his son's abdomen, he had been out on the bike; during treatments at Children's Hospital Los Angeles (CHLA), he would have his bike with him, ready to ride out of Silverlake and into the Angeles National Forest, once his wife arrived to be with Pablo; many of the doctors and nurses who treated Pablo were cyclists; at stage 7 of the Tour of California in Pasadena, Jeff and Pablo randomly met the woman who "runs the manufacturing for Neulasta and Neupogen, the two Amgen shots Pablo gets all the time;" Lance Armstrong visited Pablo at CHLA, and later remembered him and the family by pedaling in his honor during stage 16 of the Tour de France.

Pablo himself was becoming a cyclist in his own right, either linked to Jeff's road bike (what Pablo called the "connect bike") or wildly flying down the grassy banks of Griffith Park on his own dirt bike. "This is where I always dreamed I would be riding with him and he would be kicking my ass up Trash Truck Hill, Castelaz

says. Even his final resting place was carefully planned from the perspective of a cyclist. "In order to get to Pablo, it's like seven, eight, nine percent, this gradual build, and we went there on bikes and sighted where we wanted to have his grave." "And so," as Castelaz says, "cycling is woven into our story intrinsically."

The sport has been important to Jeff's life, from his days growing up in Milwaukee and riding his first road bike on the 76 Trail, to his return to cycling after becoming a father, wanting to get back on the bike to get in shape, experience the "freedom, excitement and clarity of cycling," and to introduce Pablo to that same familiar feeling. Castelaz says:

I had a spot in my life as a 35-year-old that was the exact shape of a bicycle. And the combination of hiring a nutritionist and learning how to eat, and then buying a used bike; all that that bike has brought me has really been something, and it happened at exactly the right time.

What the bike has brought him has proven to be immeasurable. "I read that cycling can have the same effect on someone as meditation...that state of euphoria and self-made rhythm," is, Castelaz says, an "esteemable act"

for anyone open to experiencing the sport on this level. In reading the PABLOg! it is clear to see how cycling provides a powerful refuge for him, a space to get away, to reflect and to suffer physically while at the same time gaining strength, health and perspective for himself.

The bike also provides an opportunity to be in the peloton, that special place where everyone signs on to uphold the unspoken rules of the road to not attack during hardships, and where rivals can agree to work together at the front for a shared benefit. There is comfort in the understanding the peloton offers. In this way, Castelaz and his family have experienced the incredible support of their local cycling community, namely Hrach Gevrikyan, owner of Velo Pasadena, who back in July, 2008 organized The Velo Pasadena Cycling Club on a Sunday "Pablove" ride, where 100 or so riders came together to support Pablo and raise money to fight childhood cancer. Jeff later wrote of his experience: "The cool thing is, when we are out there riding, it doesn't matter what we do for a living, what kind of car we drive...especially comforting in Los Angeles. It's just about the two wheels we're floating on. I love it. That's what keeps me riding every day."






As I write this (October, 2009), I know one thing for sure: Jeff is riding every day. The most personal expression of Castelez's connection his son and to cycling is now being lived out through his creation of the Pablove Foundation, and it's first large fundraising effort, Pablove Across America. Beginning on October 10, Castelez and his cycling coach, Rick Babington, set out to ride from St. Augustine, Florida to Pablo's gravesite at Forest Lawn in Los Angeles. Over the course of 30 days and 3,000 miles on the bike, they will have met up with Lance Armstrong for a ride in Austin, spoken with kids and parents dealing with Wilms Tumor, remembered those who have passed and voiced their mission on a national level, on radio, video and television, as well as online and in print:

Pablove Across America is about standing up, hammering the pedals, speaking out and FIGHTING back—to raise awareness that kids get cancer, families need help and hope—hope not only to find a cure, but in the day-to-day grind of treatment.

Again, the cycling community stepped up to lend a hand. Felt, SRAM, Zipp, Giro, Garmin, Velo Pasadena, Livestrong and Capoforma have all donated to the cause, helping to bring this very personal, meaningful challenge into reality. During the first week of the ride, Casetelaz posted the following video message which gets at the essence of the ride:

It's always been clear to me that riding a bike from St. Augustine to Los Angeles is a metaphor for a lot of things in the Pablove Foundation.

What we're doing is the closest we can get to experiencing the cancer experience for a kid whose going through treatment. We're going to put our bodies through hell, in our case willingly. We're going to accept the elements around us, in our case willingly. We're going to rely on the care of others. The final component of what we are doing, as a goal of the Pablove Foundation, is to do it happily and to seek joy.

"Bikes, as they always do, gave us freedom." They inspire us to see things as they are, rapidly coming in and out of view, and therefore aligning us with that most basic force in the universe: motion. We all know that simple feeling of freedom that cycling offers. It's that sense every kid experiences as he makes his first solo flight on a bike, a feeling of being grounded to the earth, but in a new, better way. The body magically becomes lighter, happier and easier. Perspective changes, as the world is now understood in terms of how things flow and not as solid, stable objects in space. Pablo Castelaz knew, like all kids, the spirit of adventure, the thrill of going fast, of jumping off walls and playing as long and hard as possible. And through his own his words of PABLOg!, the mission and fundraising efforts of The Pablove Foundation to help pediatric cancer patients and their families, and the physical and emotional endurance of the Pablove Across America ride, Jeff Castelez reminds us that the things which truly sustain us in life are always pretty simple: a father, a son and a bike. 



join the fight.

> pablove.org
> getwellpablo.blogspot.com

JOHN MADRUGA holds a Ph.D. from the University of Southern California. He lives and writes in Los Angeles.