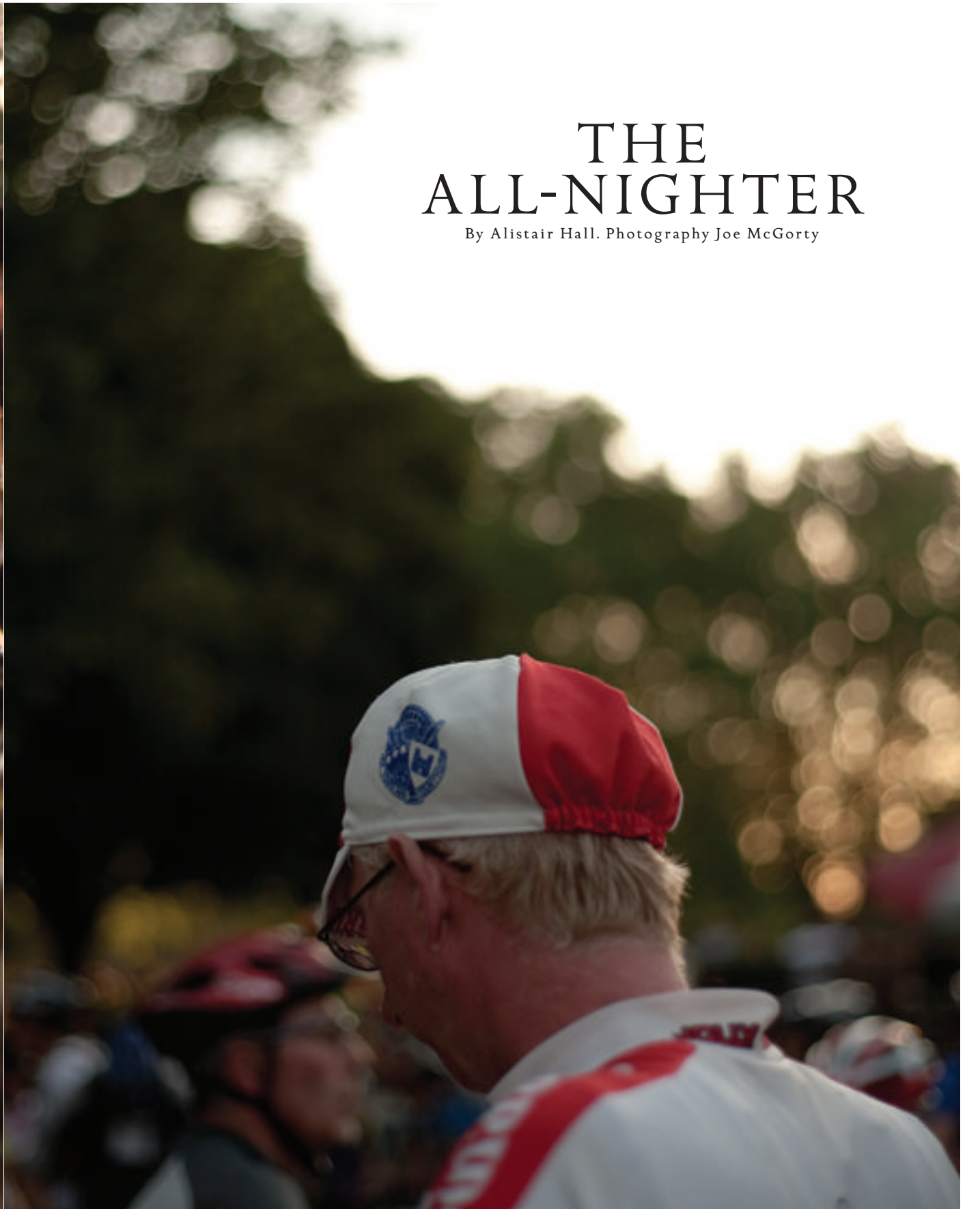


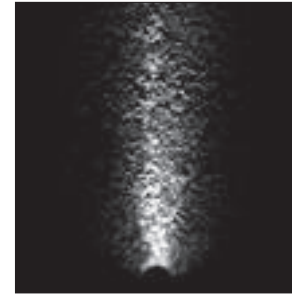


THE ALL-NIGHTER

By Alistair Hall. Photography Joe McGorty







It's around 2am when I realise that I'm a little bit in love with my bike.

Six hours and 60 miles earlier myself and my riding buddy Dafydd had threaded our way across town for the start of the Dunwich Dynamo, the annual all-night bike ride from London to the Suffolk coast.

It was my first time doing the Dynamo, and at around 120 miles, it was double the longest distance I'd ever attempted in one burst, and we'd be doing a fair amount of it in the dark: it's fair to say that I was feeling nervous and excited in pretty equal measures. And not entirely sure why doing a ride at night was a good idea.

We arrived at London Fields to find a warm-hearted crowd drinking, eating and chatting, lazing in the mellow glow of a perfect summer evening. But for the yards of Lycra, and the banks of bikes stacked against trees, you'd hardly know that a serious ride was imminent.

Almost imperceptibly though, the group began to stir. Helmets were tightened. Route sheets pocketed. Watches checked. Clusters of riders rose to pick up their bikes, transforming into a loose pack with a single fixed purpose: to ride right through the night.

As the pinks and reds of a setting sun gave way to the deeper hues of night, we gently paced our way out of the tight, bright urban sprawl into the space and calm of the countryside. Up ahead, the column of cyclists formed a shifting string of blinking red lights, stretched out along the road, twisting lithely like a living organism next to the stationary lights of the queuing traffic. It was a fantastic sight.

We continued on and on, leaving the artificial glow of streetlights behind, relying instead on our lights and an almost-full moon. At first this was wildly disconcerting, and I kept slowing down at the mildest incline or corner, particularly after clunking into an unseen pothole or two. Gradually though, I began to trust my bike and the road, settling into a definite rhythm. Instead of focusing on what I couldn't see, I noticed what I could feel and hear. The steady thrum of tyres turning on tarmac. A lone dog barking as we passed through an otherwise silently slumbering village. The changing pressure on my legs as the road inclined up and down.

Night lights guided the way at confusing junctions, as if put out by pixies, gently nudging us in the right direction; a perfect illustration of the quiet but sophisticated organisation by Southwark Cyclists, the folks behind the ride.

Sometimes we were riding in large groups, gently buzzing with conversation and nods of encouragement, but the further we rode, the smaller the packs became, as the gaps between riders stretched and stretched. So it was that I found myself cruising along in the early hours of the morning, with the road to myself, the moon breaking through the clouds, a light breeze pushing gently at my back, my legs feeling strong and comfortable, my bike fluid and smooth. The distinction between myself and my bike began to blur: we were eating up the miles, it was as if we could go on forever. It was probably just the lack of sleep, but heck it felt good.

At around the 65-mile mark, we stopped at the village hall at Great Waldingfield, specially opened to serve food and drinks to the riders. The grass verge was awash with bikes of every shape and size – Bromptons, fixed gears, road bikes, recumbents, hybrids, even a penny-farthing. Tired cyclists chatted, rested, ate, stretched and dozed.

After the stop, a light but persistent rain began: at other times it would have been mildly unpleasant, but here it helped keep us fresh and awake. Gradually the soft light of dawn began to bruise the skyline; and then suddenly, as we neared the crest of yet another hill, the sun broke across the horizon. We paused a while to drink it in. Then we were off again, cycling now in daylight, having made it through the night.

Steadily we got nearer and nearer our destination, and despite the continuing rain, I felt good. Even a puncture a couple of hours later somehow seemed right.

At around 8am, to whoops and cheers, we passed the first signpost to Dunwich. A few more miles, and then, some 12 hours or so after we set off, we cycled into Dunwich. We'd done it. We were tired for sure, but not exhausted. And after a hearty breakfast in the beachside café, the sun even came out again.

We walked stiffly onto the beach, where a mess of cyclists were basking in the sun like seals: warming up, drying out and sleeping. Turns out that an all-night bike ride is actually a great idea.

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