

NEW SECTION: RAISE YOUR BIKE I.Q. p. 100

# MOUNTAIN BIKE

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## GEAR OF THE YEAR

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THE GNARLY CRASH,  
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p.97

GARY FISHER  
AND WONDER WOMAN:  
THE UNTOLD STORY

Monique  
"Pua" Sawicki  
on the  
challenges  
of being a  
24-hour soloist—  
and about  
overcoming a  
gruesome  
crash. See p. 42.

## THE FACE

TEXT BY JOHN GALVIN | PHOTOGRAPH BY KEVIN MIYAZAKI

MONIQUE "PUA" SAWICKI CAME OUT OF NOWHERE TO DOMINATE MARATHON AND 24-HOUR SOLO EVENTS, BUT COMING BACK AFTER A BRUTAL CRASH MAY BE HER HARDEST CHALLENGE EVER.

## KILLER ON THE COURSE

*"I remember exactly what happened. It was about 45 minutes from the start, and I was riding down a trail. It was kind of like a fire road, but it wasn't, because it also had these big boulders. That section had a good grade and I was flying through it. I was looking up at my line and where I wanted to go, and then I looked down, and there was a big hole—I didn't see it earlier because of the angle I was riding—and a big boulder right behind it.*

*"My front tire went into the hole and I flew headfirst into the boulder, and then I must have flipped over because when I woke up I was facing the opposite direction. I don't remember actually hitting the rock, but my glasses were completely shattered. I had a lot of pain in my jaw, but I thought for a split second that I could get back up and keep racing. Then I turned my head and I saw a huge pool of blood on the ground next to me. I thought for sure all of my teeth were gone."*

On June 17, 2006, at a mountain bike marathon at Mount-Sainte-Anne, Quebec, 26-year-old Pua Sawicki's plan for an all-star year smashed, quite literally, into a giant rock. A fellow racer, a physician, came up behind Pua and sent for help. She was placed on a backboard, taken by ATV to the nearest road, and loaded into an ambulance that screamed its sirens all the way to the hospital in Quebec City.

Pua's gums and teeth were completely separated from her lower jaw—a sight so shocking that it nearly caused her husband, Ron Sawicki, to pass out. Most of the skin on the left side of her face and in the area between her nose and upper lip was scraped off. Her ribs were bruised and her head ached, but an X-ray showed no skull fractures. After a seven-hour wait in the hospital, a specialist operated on her mouth, and the next day she and Ron drove to Niagara Falls, Ontario, to recuperate. She wore a bandanna bandit-style to cover her oozing face. Scabs formed and, in what seemed like a divine miracle to Ron, fell off in a week, leaving hardly a trace of the previous damage. Her

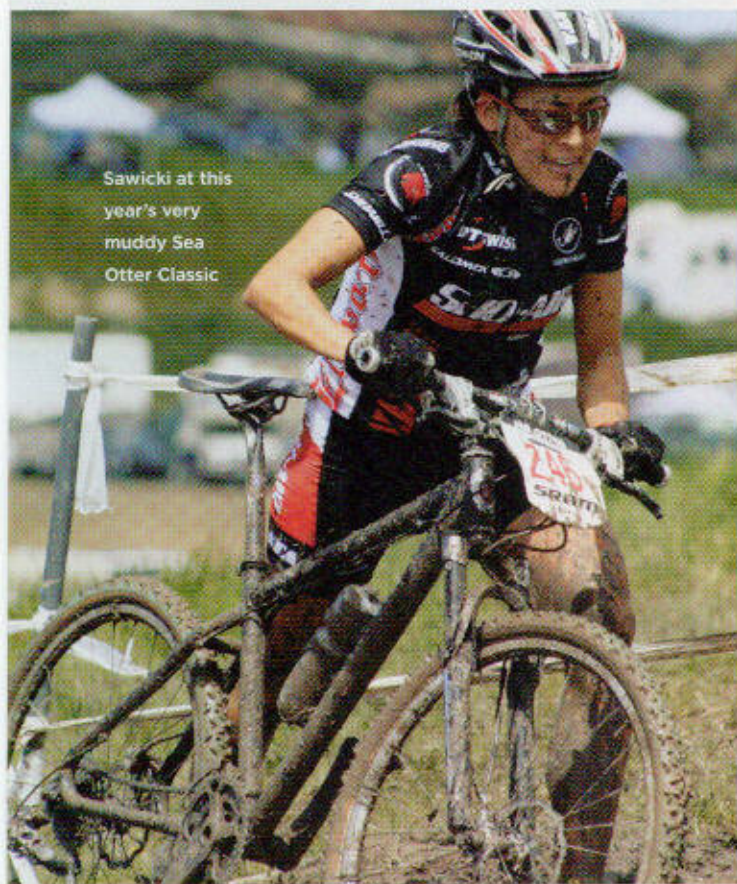
face had healed, but her body's condition was still a mystery.

## LAP ONE

It's a scorching July 29, exactly six weeks since Pua's monumental faceplant. And believe it or not, she thinks she's okay—she feels great, actually. This is only Pua's second year as a pro, and she and Ron, who is also her manager and sole member of her pit crew, are hoping this could be her year for big-time recognition. The accident, they hope, has been overcome. And maybe they're right.

Just two weeks after the crash, Pua competed in the national championships in the mountain bike marathon event in Sonoma, California, and placed a respectable third. Third doesn't sound bad, but because it wasn't first, Pua simply chalked it up as a defeat—she had planned all-out domination of the marathon and 24-hour categories this year. Pua hopes that today's 24-Hour Solo Mountain Bike National Championship in Wausau, Wisconsin, will help her regain her momentum.





Sawicki at this year's very muddy Sea Otter Classic

After one lap at the Nine Mile County Forest, she has set a fairly blistering pace of 1 hour and 10 minutes—a minute and 44 seconds ahead of Rebecca Rusch, and way ahead of the pack. "It's really hot out here today," says Ron after the first lap. "Pua didn't say anything as she came in, but I put cold towels on her back and gave her some ice water. She didn't complain about anything. That's good. If she complains, I know it's bad."

In the spring of 2002, Monique Pualani ("Flower of Heaven") Mata had just graduated from Chaminade University in Honolulu, and was making a name for herself on the local triathlon circuit. As she says, she could've been a big fish in a little pond, but if she wanted to compete seriously in triathlon, she'd have to move to the mainland, where the competition was better.

By the fall of that year, she had moved to Orange County, California. In October 2002, she met a group of adventure racers through an online forum, and joined them for a mountain bike ride in the Cleveland National Forest. She'd ridden mountain bikes casually, but most of her riding had been on road bikes. Also, there was a sometime adventure racer and window-covering contractor named Ron Sawicki on this ride. "I'd never seen another rider like her," says Ron. "After that day, she wanted to ride all of the time. She had incredible focus, and I knew that she could be great at mountain biking." The two continued

to train together, but still casually. Pua supported herself by moving from job to job—working at a Finish Line store in the mall, as a customer-service rep at Oakley and filling out insurance forms for Pacificare insurance.

In March 2003, after riding mountain bikes for only six months, Pua entered California's legendarily tortuous, 52-mile Vision Quest race, and won the women's division. Meanwhile, Pua and Ron got engaged and the couple started entering mountain bike and adventure races in California. By September of that year the two had convinced Brandon Grove, a physician and long-time friend of Ron's, to be Pua's coach.

**“When I woke up I thought I could keep racing. Then I saw a huge pool of blood; I thought for sure that all my teeth were gone.”**

In 2004, Pua quit her job, went to work at Ron's firm installing draperies and took aim at becoming a professional mountain biker. On the weekends the two would ride or go to races. It was the same year that NORBA started its marathon series and, best of all for Pua, didn't require a pro license to compete—anyone could enter the fledgling competition. She finished third in her first NORBA race and won her next. She finished third at the national championships, and by the time the five-race season was over, ended up winning the series title. She had come out of nowhere, but, as Pua says below, the bike industry hadn't caught on.

*“We went to Interbike at the end of the 2004 season with a video and a résumé, and we tried to get sponsorship. We got some product sponsors, but no money. We really wanted to stay independent and not join a team. For one reason, I like to try a lot of different things—triathlon, road racing—and when you're on a team they tell you what to do. And being independent was a way for Ron and me to keep doing this together. Because of Ron's business, we could set our own hours, which meant we could compete when we wanted to. That's how we supported ourselves, but we could never really catch up financially, because if you don't work for a week it's hard to make that money up.”*

#### LAP FIVE

It's just over six hours into the Wausau race and Pua is starting to feel the long-term effects of her Canadian crash. The pace of her last two laps has slowed to an hour and 19 minutes, almost 10 minutes slower per lap than her earlier circuits. After taking the lead on the second lap, Rusch is progressively stretching out a 10-minute gap in front of Pua.

"Pua had to take a bathroom break," says Ron, who has been in constant phone contact with coach Grove, who is back in Huntington, California. "She's not feeling well, and that lost her about four minutes." Coach Grove is at his desk, crunching numbers on his computer, and looking up Rusch's last races. He thinks Pua can still catch her as nighttime arrives.

After her breakout 2004 season, Pua got her pro license in 2005 and named her one-woman squad Team Mata—Mata is her maiden name and means "kill" in Hawaiian. If 2004's success was surprising, 2005 was downright astonishing. She quickly won successive NORBA marathon events in West Virginia, Colorado and Idaho, and those victories earned her another marathon championship title. At a World Cup marathon race at Mount-Sainte-Anne, Quebec, Pua was the first American to cross the line, and the fourth finisher overall.

Feeling confident, and somewhat addicted to taxing herself, she also decided to try her legs at 24-hour mountain bike racing. Her first 24-hour event was the 2005 national championships in Spokane, Washington, and she says it was rough.

*"It was a bad experience. I won. But it was bad. I didn't even know if I could ride for 24 hours. I was fine for the first 15 hours, and I had lapped Cristina Begy by midnight, and I won by something like five laps. But when the sun came up I really started to feel it. I got these huge hiccups that I couldn't control—people along the course*

**"Once you cross the finish line everything starts hurting. I couldn't even sleep afterward, I was in so much pain. It's kind of weird, but I love the challenge of it."**

*could bear me, they were so loud, and they really hurt. Then I would come through and drink water and it would literally go right through me, so I had to jump off my bike right after I drank and, needless to say, I didn't always make it. Then, during a pit stop, Steve Born from Hammer Nutrition came over and gave me some salt tablets, and that helped me retain water. By the end of the race my hands were numb and I'd lost a toenail. Nothing at all is comfortable after you finish a 24. When I'm riding I usually feel fine. But once you cross the finish line everything starts hurting. I couldn't even sleep afterward, I was in so much pain. I know it's kind of weird, but I love the challenge of it."*

At the 2005 edition of the 24-Hour Worlds, she went for a repeat victory, but her headlight went out twice—costing her 45 minutes in the pits both times—and her chain broke halfway

through a lap, and yet she still finished second. Just a few days later, fatigued but determined, she entered the marathon national championships and finished second there as well.

As the 2005 season came to a close, Pua had cemented her out-of-nowhere status, but she and Ron were \$30,000 in the red and looking at a long off-season in the window-covering business to try and regain some money. They also had to figure out how to avoid going completely broke in 2006 and still maintain Pua's elite status. That September they went to the Interbike trade show again and had better luck. Ellsworth kicked in a bike and a little money, and other gear makers donated supplies. Then they got an e-mail from Scott Tedro, CEO of a Southern California shipping company called Sho-Air. Tedro had read a story about Pua, and he was impressed. He wanted to sponsor her with enough cash so that she could devote all her time to racing.

#### LAP NINE

It's 10:45 p.m. in Wausau, and Pua has dropped way back. Her time on her ninth lap was 2:17:38—more than an hour slower than her first lap. It's become clear to Ron and coach Grove, and to Pua, that she pushed it too soon after her crash.

"My body is kicking back on me," she tells Ron when she rolls into the pits. Her arms are numb, her head aches and her lower back is killing her. She's completely spent; they decide to pull out. Pua is crushed. "It's been a tough year for me," she says. "I've always been able to bounce back, and I thought I was ready. And now I'm worried that people will think that I'm some kind of flash in the pan."

The 2006 season was supposed to be better than this. The Sawickis shelved Ron's business and gave up a permanent address, because the sponsorship money helped purchase a Ford F-350 pickup and the 40-foot RV that has become their new home. The couple travels from competition to competition, and between races can be found at high-altitude training grounds in Utah and Colorado. And then came the accident in Quebec. For an athlete whose body has always been able to do more, the physical pain, and the pain of pulling out of the Wausau event, has raised the specter of self-doubt. In the early morning after the race, Pua and Ron climb into their RV and drive to Utah to reassess the rest of the season. The 24-Hour Worlds—now the biggest event of the year—is this October, two months away, in Conyers, Georgia, and for Sawicki, everything is at stake.

*"I felt bad about Nationals. But I'm better now. I think I can learn from it. A friend of mine who is a pro racer came up to me afterward and he was talking about how this happens to everyone at some point, and a race like that really reminds you that you're human. But it also gave me a fire inside. I want to conquer the next race. I've got two months, and my one goal is to be stronger for 24 Worlds. It's everything I'm working toward."*

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