

2010 AMERICAN RANDONNEUR AWARD

— MARK THOMAS —

Once a year, the prestigious American Randonneur Award is presented to a RUSA member who has made a significant and outstanding contribution to randonneuring in the United States. It may be an RBA who has dramatically increased brevet participation; a hard-working RUSA volunteer; or someone who has helped randonneuring flourish by a selfless act, good sportsmanship, camaraderie, or being a good samaritan. This year's honoree has met the above criteria again and again. Had he not been a sitting RUSA Board member, he would likely have been recognized with this award years ago. The RUSA Board is proud to present the 2009 American Randonneur Award to Mark Thomas.

The following is excerpted from a piece written by Carol Nussbaum (RUSA #2887) for the Seattle International Randonneurs newsletter early last year.

There is a megalomaniac working his charismatic magic on the Seattle Randonneurs. I first discovered this problem when I met some cyclists late one night in Leavenworth. They were old friends who had done some rides with us around Seattle. I pulled into a gas station and saw three cyclists with lights, saddle bags, and a cue sheet. I recognized one of them and waved. He came over to my mini-van and said, "Boy, this van looks really good right now."

Another cyclist came over and said, "Come on, we've got



Mark Thomas at the start of Australia's Great Southern Randonnée in 2008, one of the many 1200Ks he has participated in around the world.

to go. We're late already and we'll never make the next control." Both of them had glazed-over eyes and a grim, even desperate, look.

"Where are you headed?" I asked.

"Chelan, then Winthrop, and back over Washington and Rainy Pass to Arlington."

"Sounds nice," I said.

"How many days are you taking?"

"We're supposed to be there tomorrow," they said.

"Tomorrow? What are you guys doing?"

We're Randos now. We're doing a brevet, and we've got to get going or we will DNF." And with that they rode off into the night.

I was left aghast. What was going on? What was this rando thing? When I got back into town, I started my research. I found a club called SIR, whose members do outrageously long rides that are timed. Riders have to make the time limit or get a DNF

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American Randonneur Award (continued)

on their record. Despite the insanity of this type of riding, the club and the popularity of the rides is increasing, all presided over since 1998 by this megalomaniac, Mark Thomas.

Very little is known about Mark. In interviews, he is brief, even uncommunicative, giving him an air of mystery. He moved out to Seattle some years ago and quickly insinuated himself into the rando ranks. Within a year, he was in charge. His goal, as he states it, is “more rides and more riders.” He makes no bones about the religious nature of his club. He wants to make Seattle a “randonneuring Mecca.” He claims that the world looks better from the seat of a bike. Club members who talk about Mark do so with awe in their voices. One said, “Mark gets things done by getting other people to do jobs.” Another said, “When he asks you to volunteer, it’s like he twists your arm and it doesn’t even hurt.” And speaking of how he brings members into the club and keeps them under his thumb, another Rando said, “Mark has an uncanny ability to settle conflicts and bring people together.” It’s clear that Mark has built himself a huge following of loyal foot soldiers who will organize a ride, or go out and ride it, mindlessly, as if riding a bike for two or three days straight is a normal thing. Theoretically, Mark is doing these rides, too, but he always does the “pre-ride,” so no one ever questions his accomplishments, though rid-



The RBA for Seattle International Randonneurs, Mark works a control during one of his rides.

ers rarely see him riding a bike on brevets. He is usually at various stops on these insane rides, smiling and lying about how easy the next stretch is and not to worry about the wind or the rain. A little mountain pass is nothing, and you’ll feel great when you succeed. But when the riders struggle on, he laughs and says how much better the weather was on the “pre-ride.”

Mark makes no bones about his national connections. He freely admits to being recruited by RUSA (Randonneuring USA), and to participating in their planning meetings to spread the cult nationwide. Branches have sprung up in New York, California, and Texas, to name a few spots, but none of them are as large as the Seattle

branch, a testament to Mark’s uncanny ability to bend people to his will.

I had an opportunity to see Mark function first hand at the club’s annual meeting. As soon as he took the stage, a hush fell over the members. He mentioned the accomplishments of the club, and everyone cheered wildly. One of his flunkies said how much work Mark had done that year—more cheering. Then he began asking for volunteers, and hands began to pop up. A look around the room showed that usual glazed look as Mark organized another year of pain for riders, and agony for family members who cannot control the obsessions of these cult members. Mark ominously mentioned that he had a list

of everyone who had not come and would assign them jobs as well. The most appalling part of the meeting, though it might seem minor, was how everyone laughed uproariously at Mark’s jokes, even though there is little humor in the Randonneuring cult world. When the meeting broke up, cult members hung around Mark, hoping for some notice and a pat on the shoulder, but all he did was hawk Randonneuring ware to collect money from unsuspecting suckers to fund his nefarious activities.

This article is a warning. Spouses, parents, siblings, friends: do not let your loved ones come under the sway of Mark Thomas, or they are lost to you forever.