



DIRTY JOBS

AT THE ISDE



SOMEONE'S GOT TO DO IT (BUT IT WASN'T REALLY ME!)

Story By Pete Peterson · Photography By Shan Moore

This year I made it onto the United States' ISDE team. I didn't race a two-day qualifier, I didn't get hand-picked by the team manager, and in fact I didn't even finish the enduro I raced earlier this year. I got on the team by raising my hand and saying, "I'll help." That got me into the middle of the action in Slovakia as the drama of six straight days of international competition swirled around me. And for the cost of a flight and hotel room, it could have been you.

In the last issue we covered the race, but while doing that I was acting as a part-time support crewmember to get a look at the event from that side too. Before I come off sounding too impressed with myself, let me confess that I did a pretty poor job as a volunteer, but team manager Antti Kallonen knew I was pulling double duty, so I had it prearranged that I could join and depart my duties as the race coverage required. If you volunteer for the team, you can pick some days to work and other days to watch the event as a spectator.





GETTING THERE IS HALF THE FUN

For this away game I rendezvoused with Roving Reporter Shan Moore in the airport in Frankfurt, Germany. From there we sat on one more plane then grabbed a rental car and drove through part of Austria and part of Slovakia to reach the city of Kosice. Thanks to my driving skills we got really good gas mileage but barely arrived in time. I threw on my Team USA warm-up suit and hurried to the staging area where as a volunteer I got to walk in the event's opening day parade through town. Walking shoulder to shoulder with factory mechanics while being led by your country's flag—flown by Mike Brown—is a great way to see a foreign city. I walked with KTM factory mechanic Charles Marchant, who had most of his hard work already behind him since the riders do nearly all the maintenance themselves during the competition, though mechanics do have plenty of duties throughout the event.

MEALS WITH THE TEAM

Team USA stayed at the DoubleTree Hotel in downtown Kosice. Volunteers can stay where they choose, but buying the team package of room, breakfasts, and dinners is the way to go. Team USA had our own banquet room where nearly everyone on the team ate. The food—I if I were going to put a positive spin on it—would be described as a unique Slovak-American fusion; and each day you could see the results of requests

to the chef as the food skewed more and more American. So what looked like yellow porridge at the beginning of the week identified itself as fluffy scrambled eggs on the final morning's breakfast.

SERVICE AREA

On day one of the event I was assigned to TC2, which means the service area just before Time Check 2 on the day's loop. Each country is given a staked-off area in a small field to set up a mobile pit. So as the first riders were leaving the line in downtown Kosice, we were putting up awnings, laying out food and water, and setting up gas cans and tool sets just outside the town of Vysny Medzev.

ISDE rules state that crewmembers can't touch the riders' bikes, but they can hand over tools and do some tasks such as pour fuel (still without touching the bike). This is a mind-set you need to get yourself into—so much so that if a bike begins to fall you must be able to keep your hands away and let the bike hit the ground.

Kailub Russell was one of the three riders on the first minute, so he was the first American to reach the US pit area at TC2. When he pulled onto the work mat he was calm and stoic. He was disappointed that he was 13.90 seconds off pace in special test 1. He expected to be in the lead, but being one of the first riders on the muddy trails was a disadvantage.

He didn't say much, and he didn't say anything

to me, but you could see the "accept nothing less" personality that makes Kailub a champion (National Enduro and GNCC both this year!). As long as I didn't touch his motorcycle and stayed at the ready if one of the other support crew members needed something, I was doing my job.



When Mike Brown arrived he immediately went to work wiping off his wheels' rims with a rag. I commented to KTM factory mechanic Tanner Harding, "That's smart, he's checking the rims for cracks," to which Tanner replied, "Not really, Mike just likes to have his bike clean." Okay, if I ever complain that I'm too tired to wash my bike after a day of practice, I vow to remember Mike Brown cleaning his bike a quarter of the way into day one of six days of racing.

We stayed through the World Trophy, Junior World Trophy, and Women's World Trophy riders' stops. The crew had things handled, and check captain Ross Mauri and the others were happy to see the event get more coverage, so I was set free of further crew duties in order to allow Shan and me to duck out and shoot photos of the nearby special test 2.

THE PADDOCK

On day two I had paddock duty, which meant I would become a part of the end-of-day bike maintenance rush for the Trophy and Club teams in the US's paddock pit area. The real action starts up at about 4 p.m., but before that I oiled a few air filters and helped the team dispose of waste oil at the paddock hazardous waste tank. The experienced paddock crewmembers set up the tool sets and laid out the tires (with mouses already lubed and inserted) and other supplies the riders would need; the Trophy Team and Club riders all share the same pit, so once the lead-minute riders start showing up, it is pretty much nonstop work for a few hours.

The ISDE is a timed event, so the team knows exactly when each rider will arrive (unless they

drop trail minutes on the last transfer section). As we closed in on our first arrival, I started to get excited. There was a heightened energy, like the feeling before a race starts. Once the riders began arriving that energy unspooled into activity.

There was very little scrambling, just organized movement—and lots of it—as each rider rushed through their 15 allotted minutes of bike maintenance. In that short time most riders changed both tires, swapped out the air filter, and fixed any issues the bike was having during the day.

My role was to grab dismounted tires, write the rider's name on the tire (so the mousse would stay with that rider for the next day), and get the tires out of the way. The job is very entry level, and I even had to work under the sexist title, "Tire Babe" (lawsuit pending), but it was exciting and fun. I'd describe the feeling of jumping into the Team USA machine as like being a bug character in a cartoon where you have to run through a clock and avoid all the spinning gears and swinging levers. Heightening the sense of urgency, volunteer Michele Gutish "ran the board." That means she walked the line calling out to each rider how much time they had left to get their work done.

I was close enough that when Stew Baylor's arm separated from his shoulder with a "Pop!" during his tire change, I felt the sound. You can't buy tickets to get that close. I got my hands a little dirty and my official team T-shirt a little sweaty; this was what I consider my only true session of doing some honest work for the team.

KITCHEN DUTY

On day three I drew kitchen duty, which meant my volunteer job wouldn't begin until the afternoon when we began to prepare the meal all the riders are fed right after they impounded their bikes. The kitchen, which is set up just outside the pit area, has been run by Gordon and Carlene White for the last eight years, and their main job is to get some hot food into the riders as soon as they return from bike impound; the riders need and appreciate the late-lunch carbs.

I suspect my wife called ahead and gave Gordon and Carlene a warning about my cooking because whenever I jumped in to help I was treated like an enthusiastic youngster at "bring your child to work day" at the dynamite factory. The kitchen crew focuses on "rider maintenance," and just like the other crews, much of their work is in the preparation the week before the event; they need to find groceries in each country they visit (they do bring in some key supplies, like Kraft Macaroni &

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Cheese!) as well as sort out other issues, such as how to plug into the local electricity without blowing a fuse or losing a kitchen crewmember.

The riders came and went, eating and sharing their race day happenings with one another. It went by like a mid-speed time-lapse video as the tables filled and emptied and filled again like a benchracing tide.

SERVICE AREA

For day four I was back on Time Check duty, this time at TC1. In another case of shirking my volunteer duties to get race coverage, Shan and I elected to hike down the trail after TC1 to get some photos. Now on this whole trip Shan and I had a lot of luck go our way, but in this case it went the other way; we should have walked up the trail ahead of TC1 because that's where Thad Duvall had stator issue drama. The support crew played a critical part when one member ran a mile up the trail to tell Thad he could coast most of way to a replacement stator and a full collection tools to use.

It's things like this, being on the spot to alter a racer's day, where the volunteers often change the outcome more than any results sheet can ever show. In this case, Duvall got to the service area, made the stator change, and kept within his 30 minutes to stay in the event through the first time check. Other times just the presence of a few volunteers wearing the Team USA shirt or better, carrying the stars and stripes, lets the US racers see that they have supporters and reminds them that their team extends further than the few racers on their Trophy or Club team scorecard.

SPECIAL TEST

On day five I was assigned to help out at special test 2, which wound through the trees at the ski resort in Jahodna. The start and stop of each special test are close, so crewmembers at the special tests are mostly there to give

riders updates on their placements in the event, tell test times of other riders who have gone through already, pass along any information about the course, supply the rider with water or goggle wipes, and to hold the rider's tool pack, hydration pack, rain jacket, etc., if they want to remove them for the test.

I kept my mantra in the front of my mind, "Don't touch the bike. Don't touch the bike..." as I got to help check captain Jess McKinley with the riders. Most riders don't usually need much at these stops (many are right after a time check's service area), but it's great that the riders can see a friendly face and get a little charge of encouragement. The riders need to enter the start of the special before their minute arrives, and some

riders will take a moment to gather themselves to transition from trail pace to race pace.

MOTOCROSS TEST

Day six was a free day as far as my support crew duties went. That's because the final day is a motocross test, and not nearly as much team help is needed relative to the other days. The riders check their bikes out of impound on their own (on this day the club riders start before the Trophy Team riders), ride on city and country streets to the motocross park, then race. Some of the key crewmembers work, the rest get to spectate.

The motocross test day looks a lot like a big, regional MX race, but there is definitely a stronger undercurrent of excitement and gravity to each moto's results. Team USA volunteers could band together under a flag or spread out along the edge of the track to cheer on the racers as they put in their final kilometers of competition. This year we

got to be there when Sipes pulled in with the ISDE victory wrapped up. It felt patriotic to be part of it.

THE ROAD HOME

The following day as Shan and I tore out of Kosice in our 103-hp Skoda Fabia, we reflected on the event, the US racers, and the support crew. The ISDE is like an international race series compacted into one week. The courses are so well organized you can—with some planning—get into position to see a lot of the racing. And if you join up with the US support crew, you'll be inserting yourself right into the heart of the action.

We all see the impressive photos of the racers and give lip-service thanks to the workers who make the race effort possible, but I challenge

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anyone who truly wants to support this race effort to play a role next year. It's not cheap, and it's not easy, but it's very gratifying and you get to tap into the low-level hum of excitement that the whole week carries—from eating with the Trophy and Club riders each night, to hearing great stories from the pro mechanics during the downtime at the service areas, to looking into the eyes of the racers throughout the days as exuberance competes with exhaustion.

Working the event becomes one of those "I did that" moments that mark your personal time line. If you have the funds to travel and the time to give, consider that the 2016 ISDE will be held in northern Spain, just outside of Los Arcos, in October. The food's interesting, the pay sucks, but the rewards are huge, and you will come away with a new favorite T-shirt. **DR**

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