

A sticker on a messenger's ride captures our messenger culture's tongue-in-cheek spirit: opposite, looking like a lone cowboy, local messenger Jeff Shufelt goes to work

This Machine kills Hipsters

IN SEATTLE, A TIGHT COMMUNITY OF **BIKE MESSENGERS** RISKS LIFE AND LIMB TO DELIVER THE GOODS

# THE WHEEL WORLD

BY TODD MATTHEWS PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHARLES PETERSON



## LIKE AN INJURED SOLDIER RETURNING FROM BATTLE, 23-YEAR-OLD BIKE MESSENGER JEFF SHUFELT REVEALS HIS WOUNDS.

He lifts the sleeves of his black hooded sweatshirt to expose dime-sized holes on his forearms, purple with bruises and rust-colored from dried blood. A dozen or so dirty, thin strips of athletic tape cover a large, nasty wound on the right side of his torso. The day before, racing down a steep freeway overpass en route from Capitol Hill to Eastlake Avenue, Shufelt hit a pothole, flew Superman style over his handlebars and slid through the middle of an intersection. Traffic stopped long enough for him to collect his gear and relay the news over his two-way radio: He was hurt and needed

someone to whom he could hand off his packages. Shufelt, a Seattle messenger for three-and-a-half years, is lucky. Aside from the cuts and bruises, he's fine. It could have been much worse, considering that, like many local messengers, he often doesn't wear a helmet. Sure, riding sans helmet is against the law, but Shufelt says it's rarely enforced by Seattle police.

Several rounds of booze the night before helped kill the pain temporarily, but now—as he hobbles into work at the Fleetfoot Messenger Service headquarters near the South Lake Union neighborhood—Shufelt

is sore, hungover and tired. Sporting a thin beard, silver piercings in each lip and streaks of purple and green in his coarse brown hair, he tosses a Social Distortion cassette into the office's old boom box, and the punk band's familiar growl fills the air. It's just before 8 a.m. He craves coffee and a cigarette. He's embarrassed by yesterday's accident but seems ready to move on.

"Usually, the first six months you work, you're worried you're going to get hit by a car," Shufelt explains while making adjustments to his bike before setting out for a full day of work. "An accident is usually going to decide whether you stay or not. A lot of people get hit, and they freak out [and quit]. Every time I fall it scares the crap out of me. But you get that adrenaline rush and keep going."

Welcome to the world of Seattle bike messengers.

Shufelt is one of an estimated 70 full-time

bike messengers risking life and limb each day to deliver, well, everything. There's the mundane: legal documents, mostly. The unusual: One messenger recalls pulling up to Pike Place Market where fishmongers packed his bag with crushed ice and several live lobsters that he could feel clawing at his back as he delivered them to a local hotel. And then there's the extraordinary: Later this morning, Shufelt will pass through heavy security at a downtown bank to deliver a shrink-wrapped block of checks worth \$2.2 million.

"It's hard to describe without sounding like I'm trying to be cool," says 27-year-old Nick Dale, a veteran messenger and co-owner of Lower Queen Anne messenger service Indy Stealth, "but messengers are the grease that makes the wheels of the city turn in the underbelly." Without messengers to shuttle stuff through the city, says Dale, businesses would suffer.



Opposite: Each year multiple messengers are injured on the job. Here, Jeff Shufelt narrowly avoids a collision with a taxi while delivering packages downtown; above, in addition to being dangerous, the job is extremely physically demanding



A messenger's pick-me-up; below, Shuffett hangs with fellow cyclists at Monorail Espresso, a popular refueling spot for messengers



**DESPITE ITS BAD WEATHER,** steep hills and poorly designed bike lanes, Seattle has a century-old history of two-wheel deliveries that began in 1907 with the formation of the American Messenger Service, a bicycle courier service that operated out of a saloon basement in Pioneer Square (the company later became international shipping giant UPS). As the city grew, the need for quick, same-day delivery increased, and today, a dozen local messenger services exist, fueling a tight-knit messenger community.

Although most messengers cringe at the idea of a "messenger lifestyle," they do tend to run in the same circles. They drink at the same bars (e.g., the Hurricane Café downtown, Shorty's in Belltown), refuel at Monorail Espresso downtown and get tune-ups at messenger-friendly bike shops such as Counterbalance Bicycles on Lower Queen Anne and downtown's Mobius Cycle. And they fit a similar demographic and appearance: mostly white men in their 20s (due to the job's dangerous nature and grueling physical demands, a messenger 30 years of age or older is hard to find) who wear cutoff jeans, layers of T-shirts or sweaters, and ride bikes that look like they were shot out of cannons. Many share a free-spirited distaste for desk jobs, a love of bikes and an irreverence toward authority.

The messenger community also extends to a number of local races, clubs and competitions that draw messengers and general cyclists alike. Two days a week, cyclists gather on Capitol Hill for bike polo—a smash-'em-up, full-contact, murderball-style game played on blacktop with custom-made mallets (see sidebar at right). There's also the Dead Baby Bike club, whose membership consists of cyclists (some messengers, some not) who build tall bikes and choppers and barhop on a monthly ride. Critical Mass, a monthly rush-hour ride, draws hundreds of cyclists (many of them messengers) who clog intersections and stop vehicle traffic to raise the awareness of cyclists on the road.

"Part of the reason why the community is so close is [because] really only bike messengers understand how difficult the job is—or only bike messengers *care* how difficult the job is," explains former messenger Matt Case, who now works at Raleigh Bicycles headquarters in Kent and remains in the messenger community. "Not a whole lot of people can really do it, and not a whole lot of people can do it for a long



Local messengers partake in a friendly game of bike polo at a Capitol Hill underground parking garage

## POLO CLUB

WHEN OFF THE CLOCK, SOME MESSENGERS STAY ON THEIR RIDES TO PLAY A FAST-PACED GAME OF BIKE POLO

A couple of times a week, 39-year-old bike messenger Phil Anderson sends his friends a simple, one-line e-mail: *Marco!* For the next couple of days, the replies he receives are just as simple: *Polo!*

If he doesn't get many replies, it's a disappointment. People are busy, tired or not interested in some friendly competition. If his inbox fills up, however, it's a good sign. It means Anderson and a few dozen other messengers will meet up for three hours of bike polo—a gritty, full-contact battle on two wheels. This week 30-odd people show up at 8:30 p.m. at "the cave," an underground parking garage on Capitol Hill. No one's sure about the arrangement between the garage's owner and the bike polo players. Though surveillance cameras supposedly monitor the area, cops or security guards rarely show up to kick people out.

Bike polo rules are simple, as explained by Anderson and his buddy Mike Dodge, veteran members of 206 Bike Polo—a loose team of polo players who post videos, photos and upcoming events on [myspace.com/seattlebikepolo](http://myspace.com/seattlebikepolo). Each team consists of three cyclists. Cones are set up on opposite sides of a parking lot, a bike-length's width apart. Using homemade mallets, the first team to score five goals with a street hockey ball wins. If a player's feet touch the ground, he or she has to circle the polo arena before returning to play. High-sticking or mallet-throwing are also violations. Games move quickly. Cyclists will tear off toward the ball, mallets scraping against the cement and shooting up sparks. If a ball careens toward a corner of the garage, a polo player will match its trajectory, squeezing the brakes just before slamming into the wall. When someone scores, everyone roars with approval. "I like the team play aspect of it, passing the ball back and forth," Anderson explains. "It's so fast-paced." It's also wildly popular among messengers for its reliance on sharp cornering, quick stops and explosive sprinting—all handy skills to have when navigating streets downtown. And clashing with each other on bikes is a good way to let off steam after work. *T.M.*





Opposite, Jeff Shufelt tunes up his fixed-gear bike (the ride of choice for local messengers) at Fleetfoot Messenger Service headquarters; this page, messengers receive calls over two-way radios and decide whether or not to take the job

**"IT'S HARD TO DESCRIBE WITHOUT SOUNDING LIKE I'M TRYING TO BE COOL... BUT MESSENGERS ARE THE GREASE THAT MAKES THE WHEELS OF THE CITY TURN IN THE UNDERBELLY."**

period of time. It's physically damaging. It's outrageously dangerous. But it's the best job I ever had. You are your own boss, and your office is everywhere."

**MOST MESSENGERS**, including Shufelt, work on commission and earn a percentage of the cost the messenger service charges for each pickup and delivery. The more packages they deliver, the more money they make (quotas are self-imposed). Shufelt says that he usually clears between \$8,000 and \$15,000 annually, standard yearly pay in the messenger biz. As a contractor, Shufelt isn't an official employee of Fleetfoot, which suits his free-spirited attitude toward life. The bad news, however, is that freedom comes without health insurance—a huge risk in an industry where the longer a messenger spends on a bicycle, the greater the odds that injuries will occur. Every messenger interviewed for this story had been in-

jured while at work: Case was hit by 10 cars in five years; in 2000, 22-year-old messenger Yianni Philippides was struck and killed by a car at Alaskan Way and Spring Street.

While the risk of accident is always there, Shufelt says he stays off the sidewalks, where it's hard to predict a pedestrian's random movement, and out of bike lanes (known in messenger speak as "gun barrels") where messengers are "doored" by drivers who open their doors without looking.

A messenger's job, says Shufelt, is simple. A dispatcher calls out jobs over a two-way radio, and messengers decide whether to claim them or not. Fleetfoot's zone (each messenger service has its own zone) is bounded by Queen Anne to the north, SoDo to the south and lower Capitol Hill to the east.

Despite the pain Shufelt feels today, he needs to pay the bills. He'll make nearly 20 stops by 10 a.m. and work until 5:30 or 6 p.m., even while saddled with an in-

experienced, slightly out-of-shape journalist. Still, he says, it's a slow day; he typically tackles twice the work. Throughout the day Shufelt delivers a bag of blood to the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center, pedals downtown to drop off that expensive bundle of checks, cycles to Pioneer Square to deliver blueprints to an architecture firm, hightails it to the waterfront (where a fire engine roars out of Station 5, lights flashing, horn blaring, barely missing the two of us) and burns rubber to ACT Theatre to deliver an oversized poster wrapped in plain brown paper. The poster, too big for his bag, Shufelt simply tucks under his arm as he navigates traffic with one hand.

All of this is done at a steady pedal, on a black, battered, fixed-gear bike, and wearing a pair of cutoff cargo shorts and a hooded sweatshirt (today he wears a helmet, ordered by Fleetfoot's owner because a reporter is in tow). Most messengers prefer fixed-gear bikes—bikes that have a single chain connecting the front and back wheels—because they are sleek, light and unencumbered by gears that slip or break. They also require a certain level of skill: You can't coast on a fixed-gear bike because the pedals constantly turn. Ultraskilled messengers prefer a fixed-gear bike without brakes (they stop by pressing against the forward rotation of

pedals). Not once does Shufelt—who drove a bicycle taxi in San Diego before hopping a train to Seattle and immersing himself in messenger culture—lift himself up off his seat to tackle a hill or hop a curb. On Madison Street, Shufelt glides effortlessly downhill for three blocks, clearing two stale yellow lights and hooking a left onto Second Avenue. "A lot of it has to do with instinct," he explains, when I catch up with him at a red light. "I tend to look at the layout of the city like I'm above it, like a bird. I know the directions of streets, the timing of lights, that sort of thing. And once I get on a roll, I can't stop."

### SCOFFLAW. RECKLESS. HELL ON WHEELS.

Most messengers have been called these names and worse. If you've been in a car and witnessed a messenger weave through traffic to get to the front of a lane or roll through a red light to shave some time off a delivery deadline, or walked down the street only to experience a messenger race past you in a *whoosh!* that makes you gasp, the same thoughts have probably crossed your mind.

"There's a stereotype out there about messengers [being reckless or dangerous]," says Niki Hurley, a former messenger and owner of Mobius Cycle, a downtown bike shop. "The funny thing is, the most dangerous riders on the road are [bike] commuters. They're the ones making dangerous moves. Messengers have a lot of hours in the saddle. They take more measured risks that seem boneheaded and reckless to the average bystander, but are actually very well thought out, and come from experience."

"I think they have a bad rap as 'crazies,'" adds Seattle-based attorney Bob Anderton, known as the Bike Attorney because he has represented cyclists and messengers hit and injured while riding their bikes. "I definitely see crazy messengers, but they're not all crazy. There's definitely a bike versus car mentality in this city."

Many messengers shy away from the press, complaining that the media portray them in a bad light. When asked for a contact for this story, David Hiller, advocacy director at the Cascade Bicycle Club who

counts messengers among the group's members, replied, "[Messengers] are not, as a group, real fans of the spotlight. As you can imagine, attention from the media draws scrutiny and ridicule from their peers."

During my ride-along with Shufelt, he braved some of this wrath. As he locked his bike outside the U.S. Bank building at Fifth and Pike, messengers on a break across the street at Monorail Espresso mocked him, flipping him off and catcalling obscenities over his two-way radio. One dispatcher's glib tone crackled over the radio: "Make sure you tell him about the *glory* of being a messenger."

"I'm not worried about it," he says. "Messengers, as a rule, are generally sarcastic."

But dig through the sarcasm and daredevil stereotypes, and you'll find a culture

person," he says. "Some people do it as just a job... [Others] fully get into it. They take every aspect of it to the fullest, and love it. It all depends on the person and their personality. That's what's cool about being a messenger. It's so individualistic."

This juxtaposition of community and the individual exists at Hurley's Mobius Cycle, where messengers trick out their bikes in unique ways and bond around the shop's pool, foosball and ping-pong tables. Though she doesn't describe it as a "messenger cafe," Hurley admits that messengers comprise most of her shop's business. "We serve the real bike messengers that ride every day," she explains.

Hurley, 29, a bike mechanic by trade, got a job as a messenger in November 2004, a time of year when it's difficult to find work



that seems to be fueled more by community than anything else. Just ask Shufelt: "Yesterday, when I crashed, I had six messengers here in no time, ready to see if I was OK, take my packages. That's the community."

Dale, the skinny, bearded co-owner of Indy Stealth, also sees a close bond in the local messenger scene. "I got into the solidarity of being a messenger," he says over beers at The Redwood, a Capitol Hill bar and messenger hangout. But he's quick to point out that being a bike messenger is as much about being an individual as it is about being part of a team. "It's all in the

at bike shops because of bad weather. "I always wanted to be a messenger because I was always a biker, but I was afraid of it," explains Hurley, who still moonlights as a messenger because she loves the pace of work and being out in the city.

But for all the freedom and individuality found in the local messenger culture, Hurley sees one common thread among the messenger community.

"They're all a little bit masochistic," she says, referring to the grueling nature of messenger work. "For some reason, that's what we all have in common." **S**