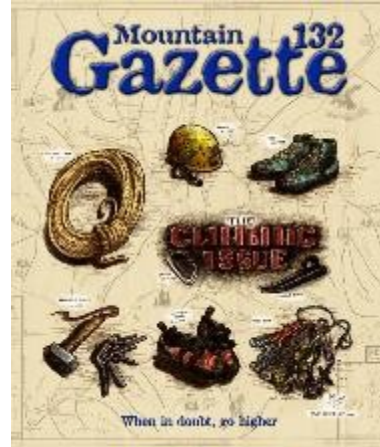


My Friend Bruce: The legend of El Lobo Grande

By Brendan Leonard
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A couple Januaries ago, my friend Bruce, then 58, stopped by his Phoenix climbing gym to do a couple of routes on one of the self-belay walls. He had much on his mind – he'd been thinking a lot about his dad and whether they were going to have to put him in a rest home. He realized his head wasn't in it when he tried to clip into the auto-belay and looked down to see he'd forgotten to put on his harness. He went and put on his harness, walked back over to the wall, said, "OK, I've got to get all this out of my head and climb."



The route was a 5.10 or 11, overhanging, not bad for a guy who'd only taken up climbing three years earlier, when he was old enough to qualify for the senior-citizen discount at many restaurants.

He got his dad out of his head and climbed, to the top of the route. That's when he realized, 30 feet off the deck, that he'd forgotten to clip into the auto-belay.

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I met Bruce when we were both working at a chain outdoor-gear store in Phoenix. He was 56 and a couple years retired from WorldCom, and I was 25, just getting into the outdoors, a couple years sober and coming to the realization that I wasn't, in fact, going to live forever.

Bruce started all of his sentences with "dude," except when he was talking to customers. He was wiry, looked a little bit like Clint Eastwood (if Clint Eastwood was a 160-pound climber with hardly any body fat), weathered, but not beaten, and seemed like he took more time off at the shop than he actually worked. He flirted with 20-something women when they came into the shop, not letting on that he was happily married with two adult sons.

I was never sure if someone actually nicknamed him "El Lobo Grande" or if he just called himself that. He loved to slip into broken Spanish. In an email about trying to climb Weaver's Needle in the Superstition Mountains, he captioned a photo of himself in a sleeveless shirt with the sentence "Te gustan mes pistolas?"

Bruce introduced me to the art of the trip report, a mass-emailed account of his weekend adventures, from cragging to canyoneering to mountaineering to concerts – he'd been to 470-some of them (he included the list). I wrote down my email address for him at the shop one night, and the next morning, my inbox was full with his last 10 trip reports.

The formula for a good El Lobo Grande trip report included:

1. Quote from classic rock song, or old western movie.
2. Information about where Bruce spent his weekend/week.
3. Photos of the scenery.
4. Men Behaving Badly section, in which Bruce took pot shots at his friends for farting, drinking all the beer or, skipping out on the trip because they were afraid of their boss

Bruce attended a company-sponsored crack-climbing clinic at J-Tree, the oldest participant by at least 25 years. He made sure in his trip report to mention that the ladies taking part in the clinic nicknamed him HOG (Hot Old Guy). Every few months, he announced, via mass email, that he was getting fat and that he was going on the Mayo Clinic Soup Diet for a couple of weeks, and he accused his male friends of developing “bologna tits.” He listed “pounding cervezas” as part of his fitness regimen.

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Bruce was fucked, up there on the wall. He knew it. His best escape, he thought, was to traverse over to the next route and clip into one of the quickdraws hanging from the top of the route. He stepped across the wall and planted his foot on a hold. The hold moved, just enough to throw him off-balance and peel him off the wall.

It took forever for him to fall the 30 feet and smash into the floor. When he did, he landed on his right side, breaking ribs, puncturing and collapsing his lung and breaking his elbow. The adrenaline made him want to pick himself up off the ground immediately, but the people who had rushed over to him convinced him to stay put until the paramedics got there.

In the trauma center, Bruce thought back to a car accident in Culiacan, Mexico, in 1967, when he was riding in the passenger seat of a car that rear-ended a lumber truck with a piece of wood sticking out the back. The post rammed through the windshield and poked into Bruce’s chest, collapsing his lung. A priest administered the last rites. Bruce was 20. He spent several weeks in a hospital in Mexico, and his weight dropped to 90 pounds, but he survived the accident with a partial lung and missing ribs. In the following years, living on borrowed time, he was able to run several marathons.

Forty years later, looking at Bruce’s twice-battered chest in a Phoenix hospital, the doctor asked him, “Jesus Christ, how many lives you got?”

“Hopefully three,” Bruce said, sucking hard on his good lung.

People like El Lobo Grande shouldn’t die climbing indoors. He was a lifetime desert rat, growing up in Reno, returning 40 years after he graduated high school to thru-hike the Tahoe Rim Trail. He had logged more than 100 backpacking trips in the desert

Southwest and hiked 2,000 miles in the Grand Canyon. Less than a year before he fell off that climbing wall, he achieved his lifetime goal of becoming a wilderness guide, leading groups on 4- and 5-day backpack trips to Havasupai and into the Grand Canyon. He started to refer to himself as “El Guia Famoso.”

One day at the shop, he decided to tell me about the time he had been backpacking in the desert, experienced a “leakage” problem after a dinner of beans, buried his underwear and woke up later to the sounds of a coyote devouring them.

A few months later, I received this forward in my email:

[Bruce’s friend from Reno]: Hey... I had a trivia sighting. Remember the host of Hollywood Squares? (Peter Marshall). Back in the 80’s I saw him drunk on his A___. Urinating all over himself in the bathroom at the Nugget.

[Bruce]: That’s great! What you saw was him adapting himself to the Great Basin Desert. Turkey Vultures keep cool by flying high in the wind currents and by utilizing a process called urohydrosis whereas they excrete urine on their legs, cooling them by evaporation & then circulating the cooled blood back thru their body.

A few years ago (camping with Peterrrrrrda sheep) I crapped my pants after drinking 2 sixers and eating cowboy beans and steak and then crawling to my tent. I buried my underwear in the desert and a coyote dug them up and ate them.

This is another example of desert adaptation and the circle of life like Peter Marshall at the Nugget.

Grasshopper-

I know these things because I am a famous guide.

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The Lobo spent five days in the trauma center, laid up on his back. (“At this age, or any age, you don’t want to spend five days in the fuckin’ trauma ward,” he told me. “Even though there were some hot-lookin’ women in there.”)

Twenty-four days after the accident, he sent out a mass email letting everyone know that he was able to start hiking again, but no mountain biking or climbing for three to four more weeks until his broken ribs healed. The email ended with this:

“For the few that have expressed concern about us continuing with some of our recreational activities of choice – thank you for your concern, but nothing changes. We are not exactly the Kneivel family. I take, what I consider to be, prudent risk. I find this a better alternative to living a life of quiet desperation.”

Three months after his fall, El Lobo Grande was back climbing again, at the age of 58, the same age both my grandfathers were when they died of heart attacks. He still climbs 5.10, but just in the gym now.

When I first met Bruce, I figured he was out to show me how to grow old. Now I think he's showing me how to be young.