

HOLY SPOOKIES

Every year hundreds of cyclists traverse the conflict-torn borders of the Jewish holy land in a gruelling, three-day, 260km mountain-bike race known as Epic Israel. MH travelled to the ancient hills of Galilee to witness a contest of biblical proportions

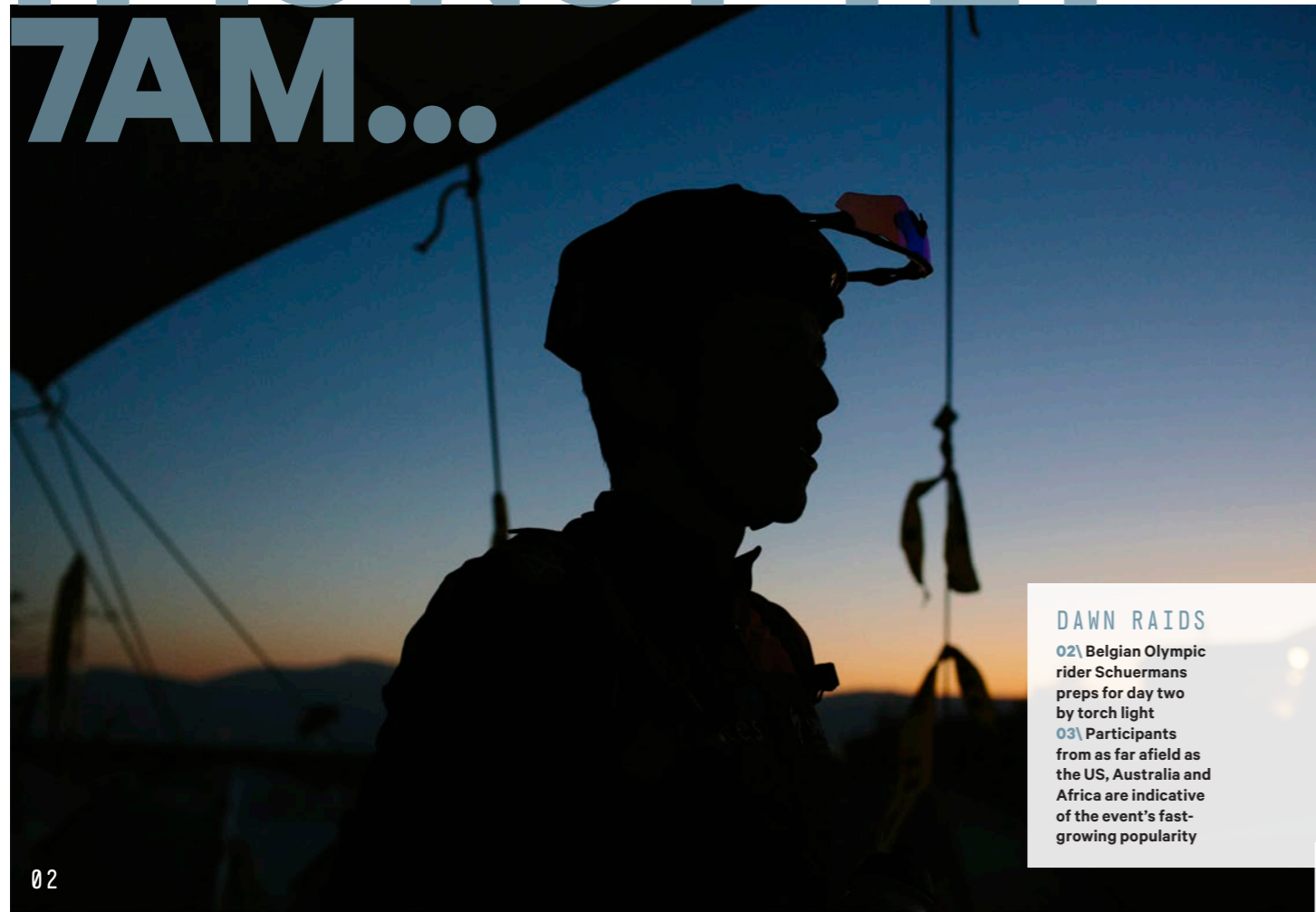
WORDS BY TOM WARD — PHOTOGRAPHY BY GREG FUNNELL



TERMS OF ENDURANCE

01 Riders battle through a brutal dawn sprint beside the conflict-torn River Jordan, with a further 95km to go before the afternoon's rest

IT IS NOT YET 7AM...



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DAWN RAIDS

02\ Belgian Olympic rider Schuermans preps for day two by torch light
03\ Participants from as far afield as the US, Australia and Africa are indicative of the event's fast-growing popularity



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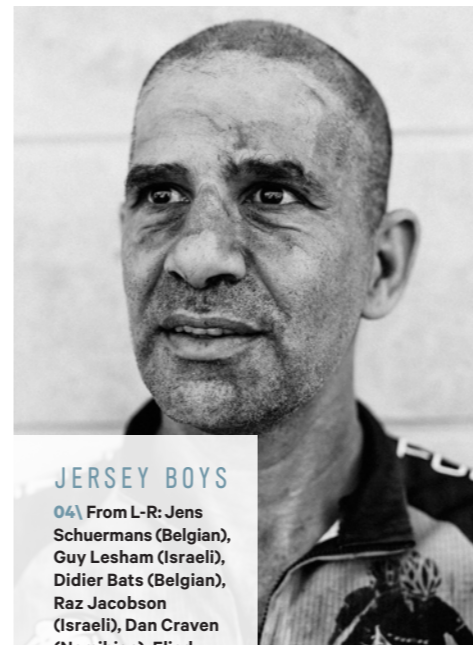
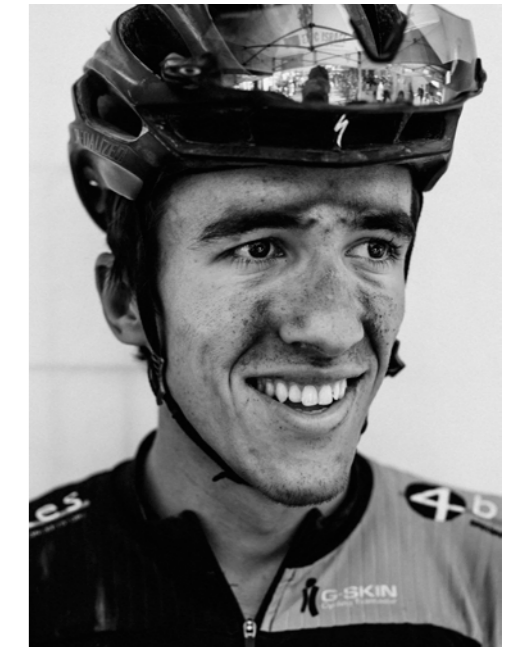
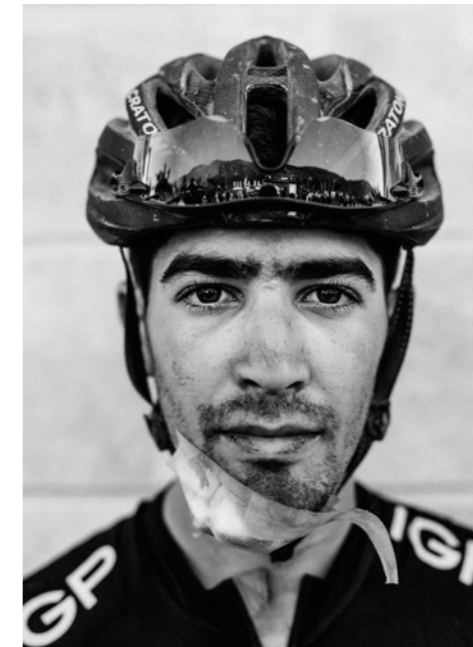
when the sun crests over the dry, rocky mountains of the Bar'am national park in Israel's northern Galilee region. As the bleached cattle bones littering the dirt trails testify, the area is home to wolves, hyenas and wild boars. This morning, however, it is empty but for a cloud of brown dust on the horizon.

As that cloud moves across the undulating terrain it appears to gather pace and volume, swelling and ballooning like a sand storm. Moments later, the first set of cyclists emerge from the soup, heads bowed and shoulders braced, their faces already streaked with sweat. Their collective posture is a profound picture of studied determination.

Ten metres further along the trail, the riders hit the first of the day's rest stops. Bananas and isotonic drinks are snatched; empty water bottles are crushed under tyres. Some cyclists drench their faces, spilling water down their chins. And then, as the next wave streams in behind them, the first group push off once again. Twenty-three kilometres in, they still

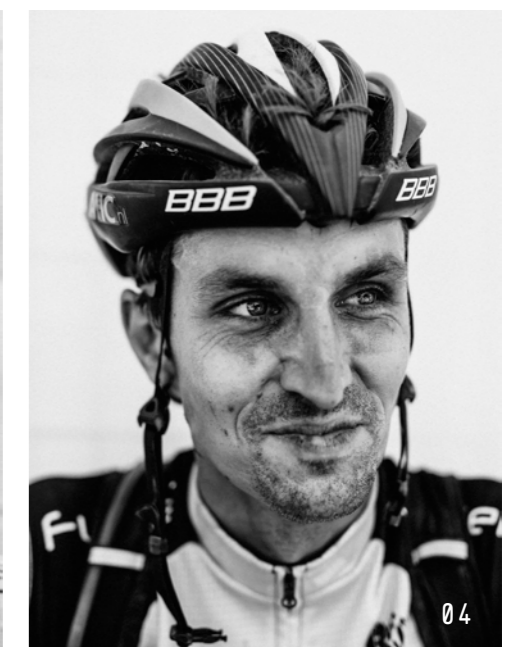
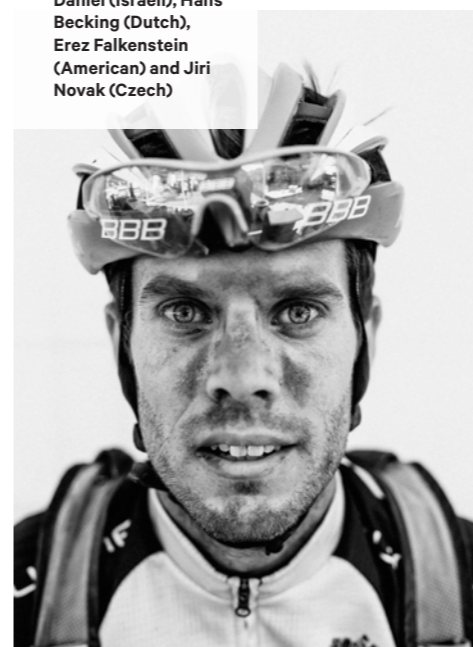
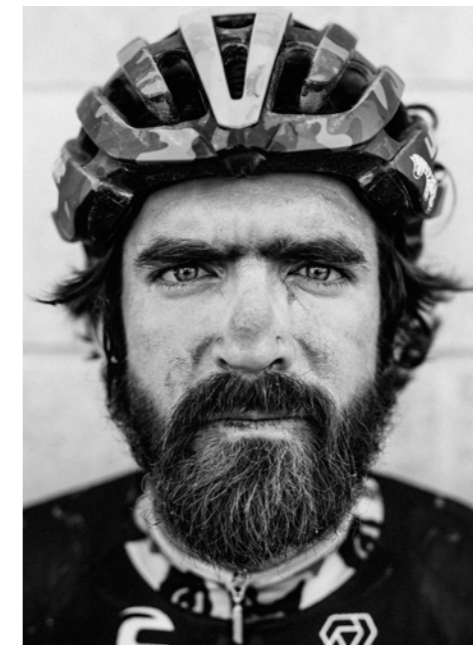
have another 75km to go, with more than 100km waiting for them tomorrow, and a further 60km the day after that. With temperatures set to soar into the mid-30s and numerous mountain- and woodland-climbs ahead, it is only a matter of time before the race becomes a torturous slog in the baking midday heat.

Almost 700 cyclists – from Israel, Australia, Europe and the US – have gathered here in this far northern corner of a troubled country to compete. Now in its fourth year, Epic Israel is a doubles mountain-bike race to challenge road and cross-country athletes alike. Comfortably the country's largest sporting event, the race was founded by cyclist Gal Tsachor in honour of his late father, a senior commander in Israel's Mossad intelligence service, killed in a traffic accident while cycling in 2012. Having competed numerous times in South Africa's Cape Epic, Tsachor knew that to properly commemorate his father, he



JERSEY BOYS

04\ From L-R: Jens Schuermans (Belgian), Guy Lesham (Israeli), Didier Bats (Belgian), Raz Jacobson (Israeli), Dan Craven (Namibian), Eliad Daniel (Israeli), Hans Becking (Dutch), Erez Falkenstein (American) and Jiri Novak (Czech)



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would have to bring something of equally grand proportions to his homeland.

For a small country, it is unsurprising that hosting an event on this scale is also a matter of national pride. Israeli Olympic representative Shlomi Haimy – who rides in the white and blue colours of the national flag – and his German partner Martin Gluth are favourites to win. As the riders sprint across the finish line four hours later, it is indeed a dust-streaked Haimy and Gluth who take pole position. It is 10.40am and they have evaded the sun – for today at least.

BORDERS AND CROSSINGS

At 5am on day two the first riders begin to stir. Such was the demand for accommodation at the base camp hotel that a makeshift site has been erected on the lawn, with torch-lit riders beginning the day's preparations among the neat rows of white tents. A start time of 6.30am is necessary in order to avoid the heat. But before that there is breakfast to be eaten, last-minute bike maintenance to be performed and a quick spin to flush out yesterday's lactic acid.

The first stretch of today's race is a long, flat trail flanked by bulrushes beside the Jordan River. As brittle pink daylight clears the rising fog at their backs, the riders thunder along in a spear-like formation. Two riders suddenly break away. They are Namibian Olympian Dan Craven, 33, and his partner Roy Goldstein, 23, from Israel. Both race for Israel's Team Road Cycling Academy as road riders, so a treacherous three-day mountain trail is far from their natural habitat. "This is Israel's biggest cycling event, so naturally we wanted to come and put the fox among the chickens," explains an exhausted Craven later on. "As road riders, we're



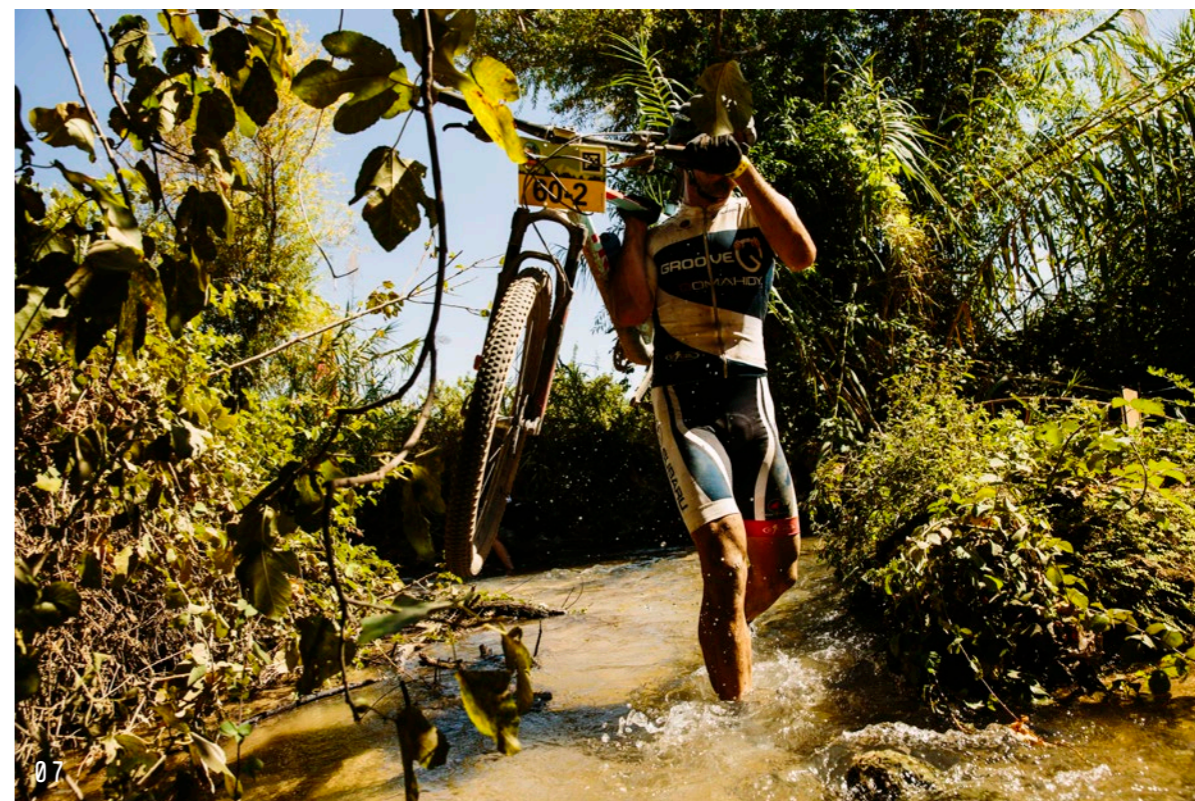
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ROAD TO PERDITION

05 Competitors begin to the sounds of the Red Hot Chili Peppers – an Israeli favourite
06 An underpass funnels riders into a bottleneck. Plans are underway to open cyclist roads, but until then the death toll on Israeli highways remains uncommonly high

WITHOUT A PEDAL

07 A cyclist dismounts to carry his bike through a shaded stream. It is a moment of brief respite before a gruelling zig-zag across baking fields
08 Mountain bike tyres are filled with latex to withstand punctures. But here Schuermans and Bats deal with their third of the race



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at a huge disadvantage in the technical sections, but flat sprints is where we excel, so we decided to show the other boys what we could do." Against the odds, they manage to finish the day in 15th place.

“Conflict could start any time, but we cannot be afraid”

Technically, the arena for this stage of the race is the conflict-ridden West Bank. The majority of the fighting is limited to the Jordan Valley to the south, but this far north the country is penned in by enemies on all sides. Syria lies 20km or so beyond the Golan Heights to the east, while another part of the course takes riders through the orchard town of Manara, close to the Lebanese border. It was Manara that was on the receiving end of some of the heaviest damage

when Islamist militant group Hezbollah launched a campaign of rocket attacks in 2006. As the race passes by, a middle-aged matron emerges from her coffee shop to cheer riders on. "We are not at war," she explains, pointing across the hills. "But we are not at peace. Conflict could start at any time, but we cannot be afraid. This is our home."

While international incidents are thankfully avoided, accidents on the course remain plentiful. Navigating a cattle field, Israeli rider Yotam Novik, 28, is cut up by someone trying to overtake and consequently crashes to the ground. He waits to be collected and taken to an ambulance, lying back in the shade beneath a tree, the entire rear section of his bike sheared in half. He winces as he is loaded into the back of a truck, his bruised thigh shiny with blood. Helmet and bicycle go in the truck bed, both rendered useless.

Guy Leshem, a 19-year-old Israeli amateur, has suffered a similar mishap. Forty kilometres into the second day's ride, he attempted an overtake on a downhill section. It did not go to plan. A length of wire flew into his wheel, throwing him over the handlebars. After a dizzy few minutes he pushed on, miraculously finishing the race in fourth place, though this was followed



by three hours in hospital and seven stitches. Later, at the hotel, Leshem is confident that the injury will not affect his performance on the third day. As is the obligation of every Israeli over the age of 18, he is in the middle of his two years of national military service, where he works as a gym instructor as part of a special programme to develop the country's athletes alongside his military duties. "I do think conscription teaches a lot,"

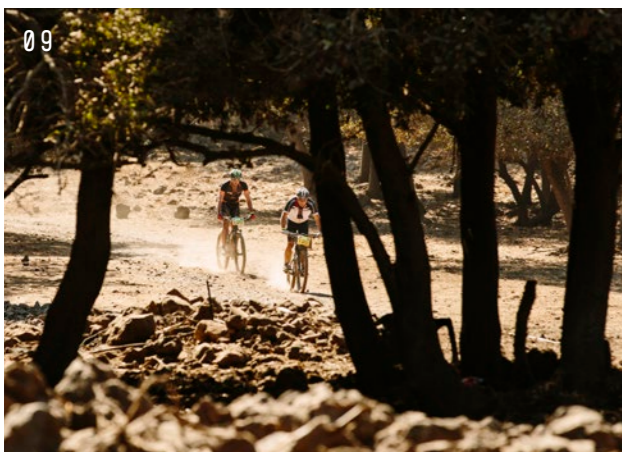
"Many dismount and push up the hill, sucking in the hot air"

he says, a grubby bandage stuck to his chin. "It reinforces discipline, but as an athlete I like to think I have a good level of discipline anyway."

After a gruelling day of injuries and 105km worth of toil, it is clear that every rider is feeling the effects as they stagger about base camp, hosing the mud from their bikes, arms and legs before a scheduled afternoon of ice baths, massages and refuelling on chicken and carbohydrates. The final stage may only be 60km, but it will take everything these battered and bruised riders can muster to complete it.

ENDURANCE WHEELS

After another dawn start, the final day's race takes the riders through a grassy meadow overlooking the Hula Valley. One comes off on a downhill section, causing the cyclists behind to momentarily bunch up as their fallen comrade picks himself up and gets back on his bike. Later, the course enters an orchard close to the Lebanon border where signs advising caution proclaim the area a militarised zone. The riders, however, have other things on their mind. One of the final stretches is a punishing kilometre-long climb through the apple trees. Although it is still early, the air shimmers on the horizon as many within the peloton



dismount and push their way uphill, sucking in hot air with deep, tired gulps.

By 9am it is all over and the relief on all of the riders' faces is palpable. A Dutch competitor, Hans Becking, 30, and his Czech partner, Jiri Novak, 31, have taken victory having outdone Haimy and Gluth on the last two days. With a three and a half minute accumulative lead going into the final day, their tactic was to hold back and attack when they could, explains Becking. But despite this, it was far from an easy win. "Today was hard," says an exhausted Novak. "We're from a colder part of Europe so the heat was unbearable. We had lots of flat tyres, too, and the last hill was horrible." But their victory has been well-earned. In addition to training five or six hours per day, they also focus hard on core strength training. "I do twice-weekly TRX work in the winter," says Becking, "and because I'm not used to it I put on muscle quickly. But during the season I end up losing it all. I started this year at 73kg and now I've shrunk down to 69kg."

Despite getting lost on the first day, two flat tyres on the second, and a few more for good luck on the third, Belgian riders Jens Schuermans and Didier Bats, both 23, secure a solid fourth place. "It was a relatively short stage today, so we rode as hard as we could," says Schuermans, who came 18th in the cross-country event at the Rio Olympics. "But mountains



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SPIN OFF

09 A quiet cow field offers a moment of shade halfway through the final day's racing

10 A rider ponders the second day's competition while keeping out of the midday heat. Each afternoon riders must try to mitigate the damage on their bodies as best they can



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BREAK THE CYCLE

11 Yotam Novik is loaded into the back of a support vehicle after a race-ending collision. Support staff feed him beer and falafel, but the damage could have months-long implications

12 A bottle of water and another of isotonic drink provide optimum racing hydration between rest stops

are difficult because you have to dig deep for a very long time." Bats shrugs. "I enjoyed the uphill," he says, as Schuermans laughs.

Today they will celebrate, but in just a few weeks time training for the following season begins. "Next month we will start doing three gym sessions of two and a half hours every week," says Schuermans. "We focus on core stability using unstable movements. It's essential for creating a stable position on the bike but it requires a lot of focus because much of it is about mind-muscle coordination. It even helps you go faster downhill because if your core is strong, you're able to look further ahead, rather than focusing on picking out your immediate route."

Inevitably, there's also some leg work involved, but not as much as you might assume. "More than 50% of your power comes from your back and abdominals," says Schuermans. "As



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a mountain biker you have to be very diverse. You have to be technically good and very fit, so we do sprints of three to four minutes to help us perform over our threshold for extended periods."

As the high-ranking competitors reflect on their past three days and the season ahead, the amateur contingent of the race continues to cross the finishing line over the course of the next hour in varying states of repair.

Many of the top 20 riders are international professionals, for whom the event is becoming an increasingly important fixture on the yearly circuit. But the Israeli Cycling Federation is nevertheless keen to encourage amateur riders to compete, and this year has the equivalent of £1 million at its disposal to promote Israel as the go-to holiday destination for European cyclists.

While Israeli-Palestinian tensions remain heated and peace teeters on a precarious knife-edge, it may be a good while before it realises this noble ambition. Even so, for many, it's the very confluence of latent, simmering conflict and beautiful, holy terrain that's at the heart of Epic Israel's appeal. Sign up for next year at epicisrael.org.il