

VINEYARD

Island of Martha's Vineyard, seven miles off southeast coast of Massachusetts. Winter population, 15,007; in summer, 105,624. Twenty miles from city of New Bedford, 80 miles from Boston and 150 miles from New York.



GAZETTE

Devoted to the interest of the six towns on the Island of Martha's Vineyard, viz.: Edgartown, Oak Bluffs, Tisbury (Vineyard Haven), West Tisbury, Chilmark and Aquinnah. These, with Gosnold, constitute Dukes County.

VINEYARD NATIVE TURNS BIKING UP WRONG TREE INTO CINEMA SPECTACLE

ELIZABETH BENNETT



photo by Benny Zenga

Lucas Brunelle navigates his way through busy streets and extreme situations, a far cry from his time in Edgartown.

Lucas Brunelle is a man on a mission. The 41-year old Vineyard native wants to take people where they've never been before. That's exactly what he does in *Line of Sight*, his first full-length film, a compilation of footage shot over the past 10 years from Mr. Brunelle's unique vantage point: a two-camera set-up atop his bicycle helmet. Mr. Brunelle competes in grueling alleycat bike races all over the world.

Line of Sight premiered at two sold-out showings at New York city's Anthology Film Archives on July 1. Shown as part of the Bicycle Film Festival, the film was greeted with wild enthusiasm by a community of friends and fans who follow Mr. Brunelle on Facebook and Twitter and provide thousands of hits on his website and YouTube. Many of his friends include fellow riders whom he meets through the indie, underground network of alleycat racers. The races are often organized by the International Federation of Bike Messengers, and challenge urban cyclists who must race to a series of checkpoints and accomplish tasks before reaching a finish point. The riding style is furiously fast, daredevil and lawless: riders break traditional road rules as they dodge through traffic, pedestrians and buildings.

Mr. Brunelle is recognized as a pioneer for filming the races from a first-person perspective. The results are literally breathtaking. Viewers follow him and his fellow riders through extreme tight spots as well as scenery that is variably historic, beautiful, decaying and unknown. Through the film, the viewer experiences both the freedom and danger of these alleycat races. Mr. Brunelle describes it as "using the blindspots and existing in that area."

Mr. Brunelle started riding a bicycle as a child on the streets of Edgartown. "I never liked authority and I never liked school," he said. "The only way to get away from The Man, was to get on my BMX and be with my friends. The only way we fit in anywhere was that solidarity. We weren't really good at anything but riding those bikes."

Students at the regional high school in the late 1980s may remember young Lucas riding his Honda CR2 bicycle through the hallways at full speed. Or stealing cars and leading Island police on chases into the high school parking lot so that he would be arrested in front of the student population. These stunts had consequences, such as clamping down on the freedom he was seeking. Mr. Brunelle was sent to reform school and a psychiatric institution before graduating from the regional high school in 1990. He later served time in prison. During that period, he missed his parents Frank and Vasha, who ran Crispin's Landing in Vineyard Haven and longed to get back on his bicycle. These days he credits cycling with helping him get through the self-destructive phases of his life.

As a teenager, Mr. Brunelle competed in professional races and was even invited to train at the Olympic Training Center. While studying finance at University of Massachusetts at Amherst and also after graduation, he continued racing in competitions sanctioned by the U.S. Cycling Federation. But after a few years, the passion wore out.

"I lost inspiration because everybody was just being jerks to each other. It got super competitive," he explained. "There wasn't any camaraderie or solidarity. When you finish a race in pro cycling, everybody just jumps in their cars and goes their own way, disappears. It's not really a social scene."



Suited up for cycling, and for capturing it all on camera.

Eventually, he found the solidarity he was looking for in the bike messenger community. He began messenger work in New York city, eventually migrating to Boston. There he became friends with legendary Boston cyclist Kevin Porter and with John McLean, who filmed Critical Mass — Boston's monthly riding event — via a shoulder camera. Soon Mr. Brunelle began filming his own alleycat races and showing the films afterward at bars and for friends. Lacking film experience, he spent many "painstaking" hours educating himself, hanging out at camera stores and with people who taught him about film and editing.

"At one point, Hunt's Photo and Video was my third home," he remembered, referring to the huge Boston-based photography store. "It's like a candy store for adults. I would spend afternoons there. I bought a lot of stuff. They gave me advice and helped me a lot. They really liked what I was doing."

In 2003, he filmed a New York city race in which cyclists dressed in women's clothing. Drag Race was a huge hit at the Bicycle Film Festival, where audiences hooted, danced and screamed.

"I saw that and I cried," he said. "I thought, this is what I want. From then on, I knew how much I loved to take people where they've never been before — through good film and video." The several million online views of Drag Race prompted him to post more videos. He has continued to make his films available online.

Since 2002, Mr. Brunelle has experimented with configuring his bike helmet to hold the necessary cameras while creating as little neck strain as possible. He has been riding and filming with the current configuration for four years.

"Now it's down to a science, but it's not easy to find just the right angle for a camera," he explained. "It's got a level in the front so I know if the frame is level. The other thing it does, is it lets me judge how to bank a curve, because I don't want to go through a curve or corner with my head flat." His helmet carries cameras with nine hours of recording time and batteries that last for seven hours, enabling him to keep the cameras rolling. The long duration satisfies the videographer in him, explaining that some of the best shots are when you least expect it.

Line of Sight began after conversations between Mr. Brunelle and Bicycle Film Festival founder Brent Barbur. Lucas had extensive footage of some of the world's greatest alleycat riders, as well as some of himself. He had also continued posting short-form videos online — all at his own expense. But how to get the footage out there to a wider audience?

The answer was to self-produce a feature film.

Three years ago, Mr. Lucas began working with Vancouver-based film director Benny Zenga.

“We said we wanted to do a greatest hits compilation. It’s going to be a 20-minute short of some of the good stuff and we’ll put it out on DVD,” he remembered. But then it became an obsession as he and Mr. Zenga culled from “10 years of footage from 20 countries and 30 cities.” Line of Sight includes not just alleycat races, but also a wild-west-style paintball competition shot recently in Guatemala, as well as footage of Mr. Brunelle cycling underwater in Greece and Hawaii. By including footage shot on the Great Wall of China, Mr. Brunelle literally accomplishes his goal of taking people places they’ve never been before.

This past spring, with the Bicycle Film Festival deadline looming, the two went at the project full force.

“I took my director prisoner on Martha’s Vineyard for four weeks,” Mr. Brunelle said, laughing. “I told him ‘you’re staying in this studio on the water and we will go to the beach when you’re done.’ We got into yelling matches because I wouldn’t let him do anything but edit.”

It didn’t help that the two didn’t always agree on what should be included. Mr. Brunelle describes feeling dizzy and disoriented when looking at the huge amount of digital files they worked with, finally editing everything into 60 minutes.

Mr. Zenga and Mr. Brunelle weren’t the only people working on making the film succeed. Their lawyers struggled to obtain rights to the music central to the film’s rhythms. The reward is that Line of Sight is propelled not just by Mr. Brunelle’s literal line of sight but also by music from mainstream bands such as Van Halen, Guns ‘n’ Roses, Motorhead, The Clash and The Ramones, as well as alternative bands such as White Zombie, M.I.A. and Neurosis. The film cost Brunelle \$250,000 to make — all self-funded through money earned at Geek Choice, Brunelle’s Boston-based Internet Technology company.

After a well deserved on-Island vacation, Mr. Brunelle’s life is going to be about promoting Line of Sight. This is not so much due to concerns about recouping the financial bottom line, though he acknowledges that Line of Sight could be a financial disaster for him. Rather, Line of Sight is so important to him because the film furthers his mission.

“I want people to live life on their own accord,” he said. “Don’t have any limits. The bicycle symbolizes that. It’s the most vivid portrayal of living on your own accord.”

Mr. Brunelle understands that he will continue to encounter critics who post angry complaints about safety or who confront him during rides. He gets “hate mail” from bicycle advocates and viewers concerned about safety. Line of Sight also acknowledges the dangerous element to daredevil riding. Viewers can sometimes glimpse in the background a serious wipeout, and the film includes a scene of cyclists being reprimanded by a police officer who pronounces the riders “a hazard waiting for an accident to happen.”

Although promotion duties will probably leave him little time for riding in the immediate future, Mr. Brunelle will always long to get back on his bike. His favorite conditions are heat and humidity. His least favorite are riding through American suburbs. He dreams of riding in Rio de Janeiro.

Lucas Brunelle has ridden a lot of roads in his 30 plus years of cycling. It hasn’t always been easy, physically or mentally. But through it all, the element of rebellion that prompted the Edgartown kid to affix a rocking chair to his BMX and ride down South Water street remains.

“I’ve always ridden the way I ride now. Anybody on Martha’s Vineyard can attest to that. Anybody on the Island will tell you that this guy has not changed.”

Line of Sight is available for sale on DVD at www.lucasbrunelle.com and various retail locations, including CycleWorks in Vineyard Haven. To see a trailer of his film, visit <http://urbanvelo.org/lucas-brunelle-line-of-sight-trailer/>

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