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WHEN PERFORMANCE COUNTS

AUGUST 2001

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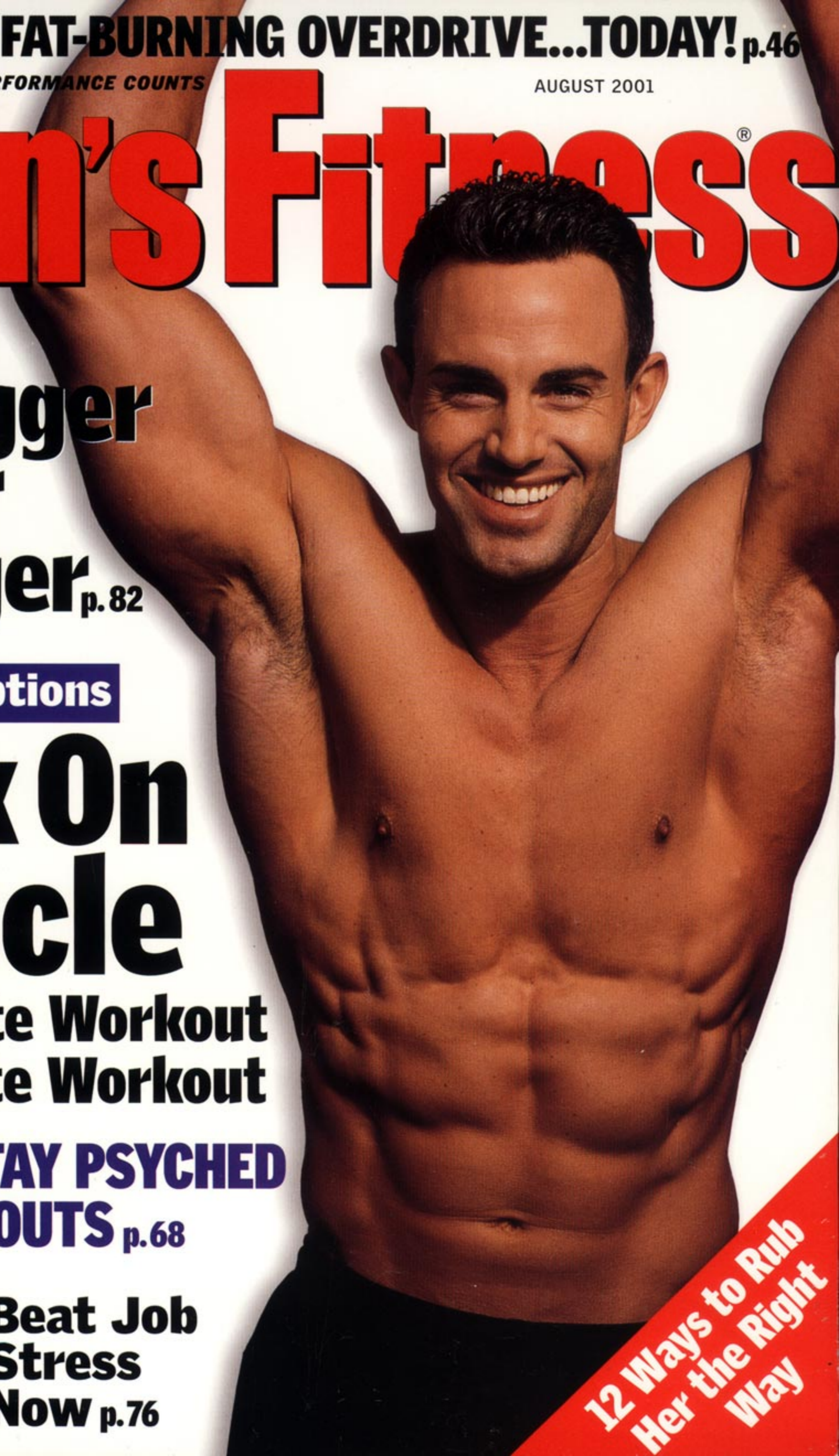
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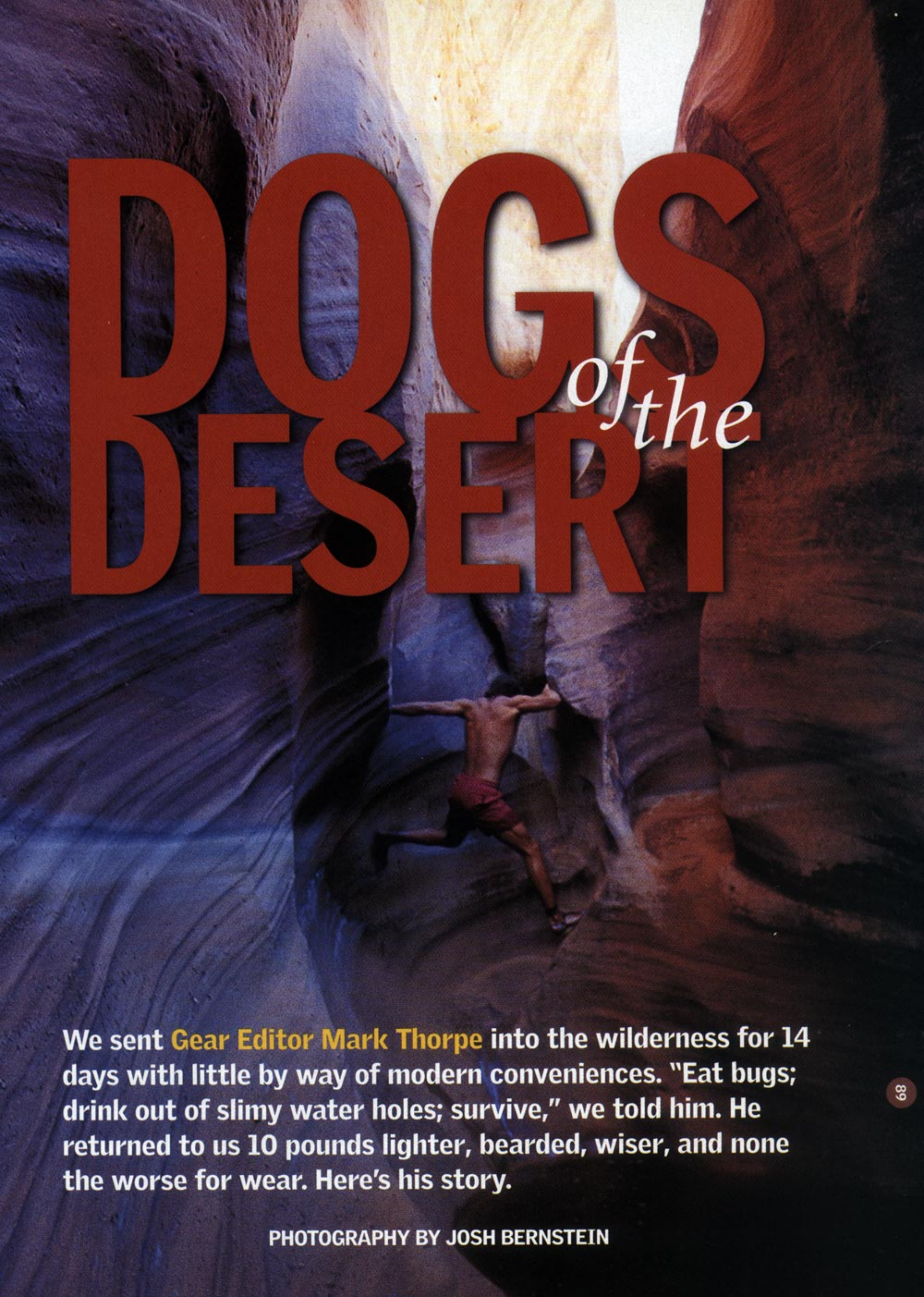
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**12 Ways to Rub
Her the Right
Way**



A survival-skills student coaxes fire from a tinder nest after creating a coal with tools made from rock and wood.



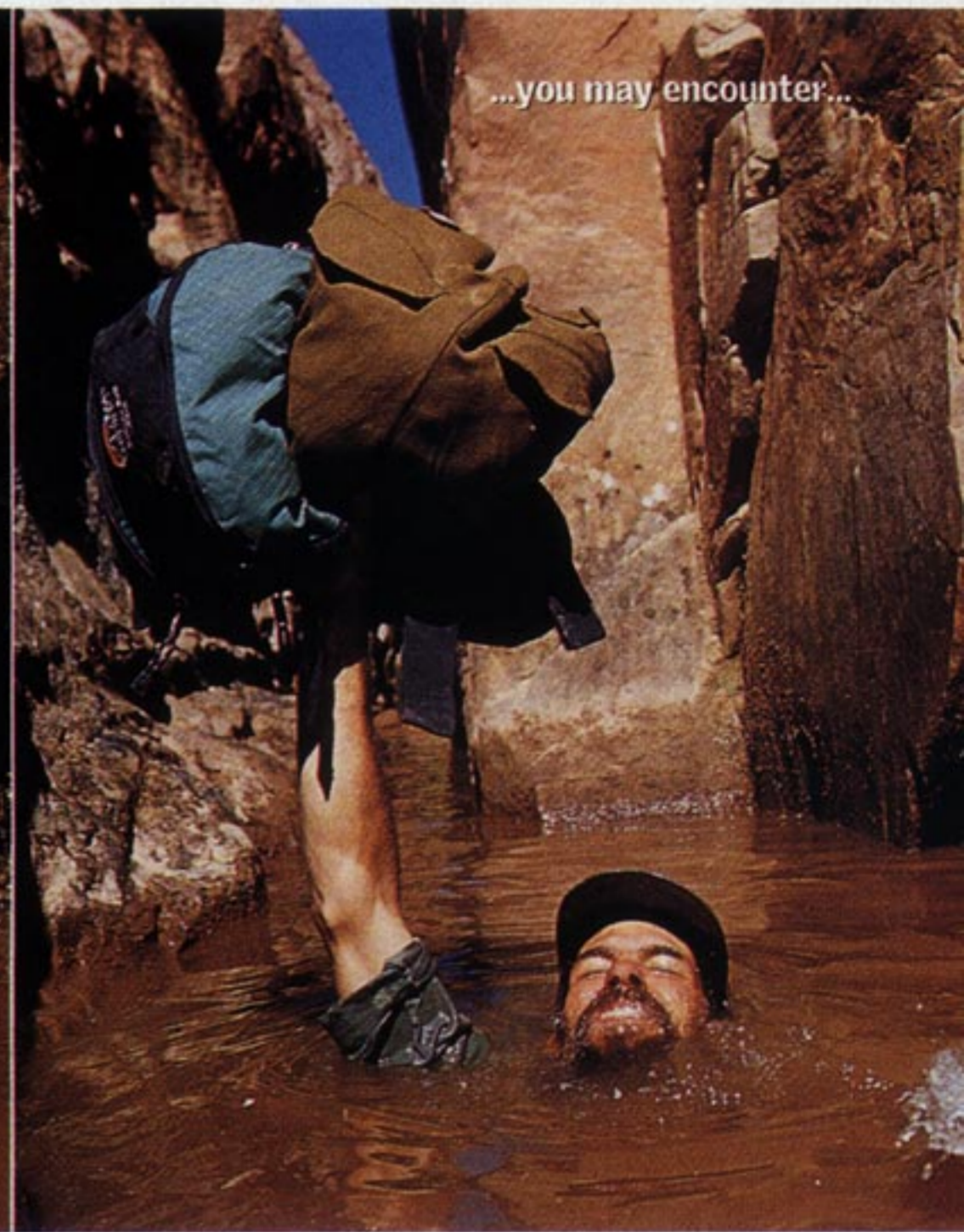
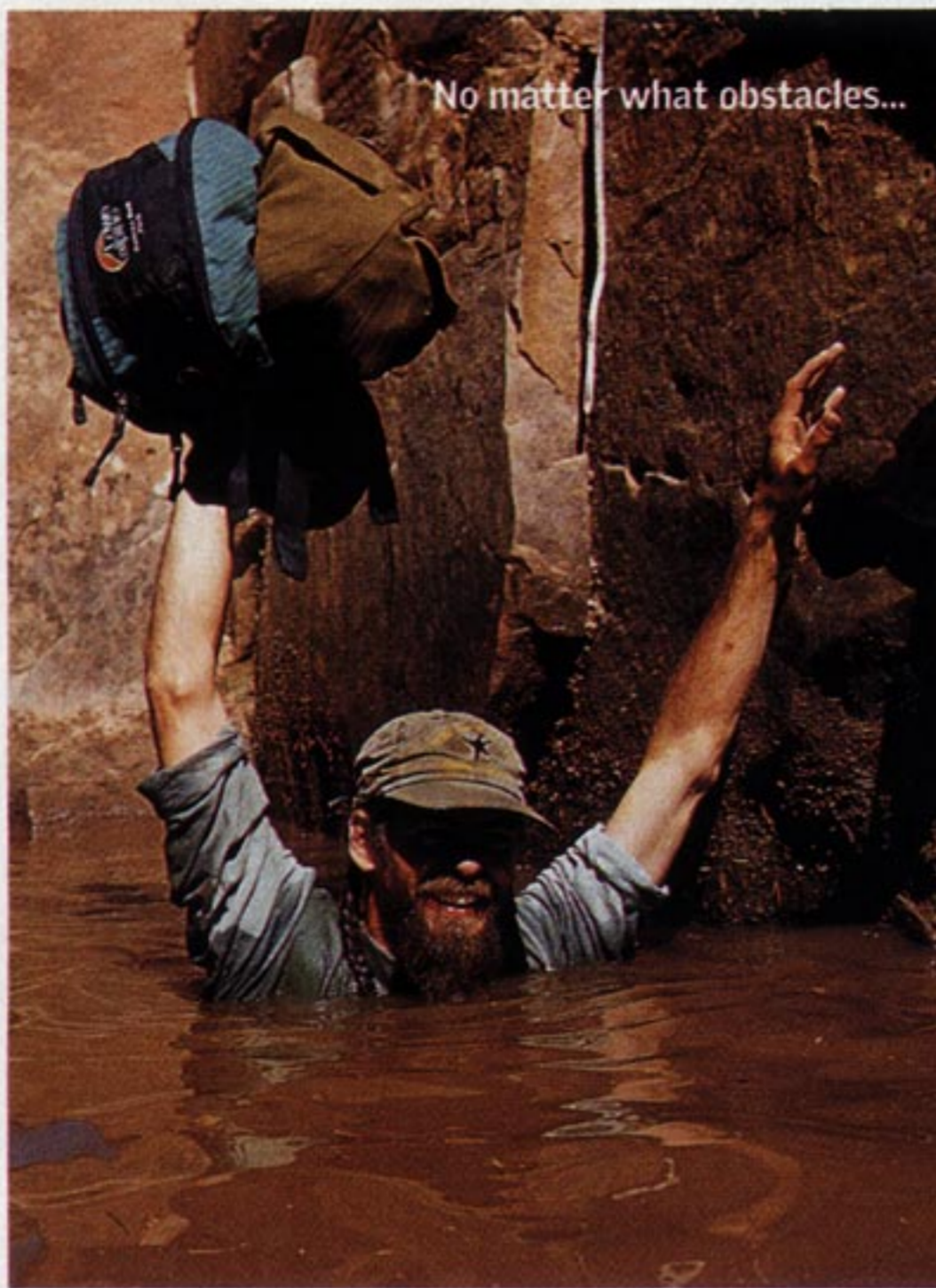
A photograph of a person rappelling down a rock face in a desert canyon. The person is shirtless and wearing red shorts, positioned in the lower center of the frame. The rock face is a mix of reddish-brown and greyish-blue, with a bright light source at the top center creating a vertical beam of light. The overall scene is dramatic and adventurous.

DOGS *of the* DESERT

We sent **Gear Editor Mark Thorpe** into the wilderness for 14 days with little by way of modern conveniences. "Eat bugs; drink out of slimy water holes; survive," we told him. He returned to us 10 pounds lighter, bearded, wiser, and none the worse for wear. Here's his story.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOSH BERNSTEIN

DOGS OF THE DESERT



rink up, boys. Who knows if we'll find water again?" Dave Holladay, one of our guides, strokes his beard and waits while eight of us stare at the filthy smear of water as if it were a corpse. The sun drops behind us; tendrils of shadow finger the arid hide of Big Spenser Flats as a lizard scuttles over a spit of sandstone. To nudge us along, Holladay gets on his knees and begins lapping at the water like a dingo, thirst driving his tongue through a gloss of pond scum, the threat of giardia an afterthought to the instinct for survival. Waiting their turn, two members from our group pick at juniper berries and joylessly masticate a bitter evening snack.

In the gathering gloam of the mesa, I nose up to the trough as though I'm a regular. Spittle bubbles on the surface; tadpoles and life forms I can only guess at flourish in the murky depths. Even though my mouth is parched, the drink goes down like bathwater. As I rise, a fist of bile lifts in my throat, a buzz commences in my head: I'm not in Kansas anymore. A few deep breaths, and I squelch the urge to leave my last meal for the coyotes.

We bed down late that evening on a slab of slickrock with nothing but the clothes on our backs. The cold flushes through our veins like an opiate, and for the first few hours I drift in and out of sleep like an addict, cold one moment, sore the next, before dismissing all hope of sleep or warmth and spending the early-morning

hours turning like a chicken on a cold rotisserie, trying to divine the forgiving heart of the rock.

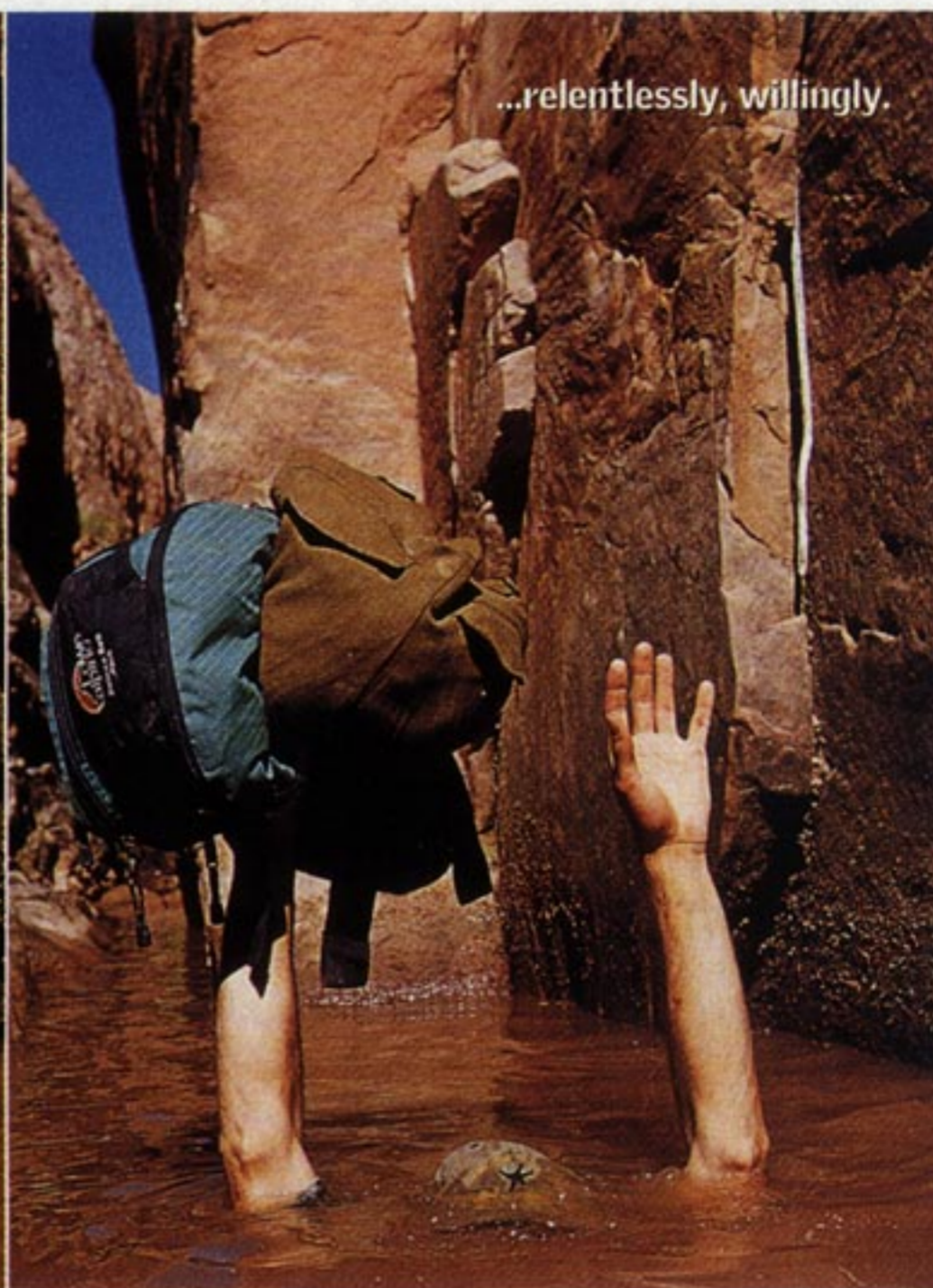
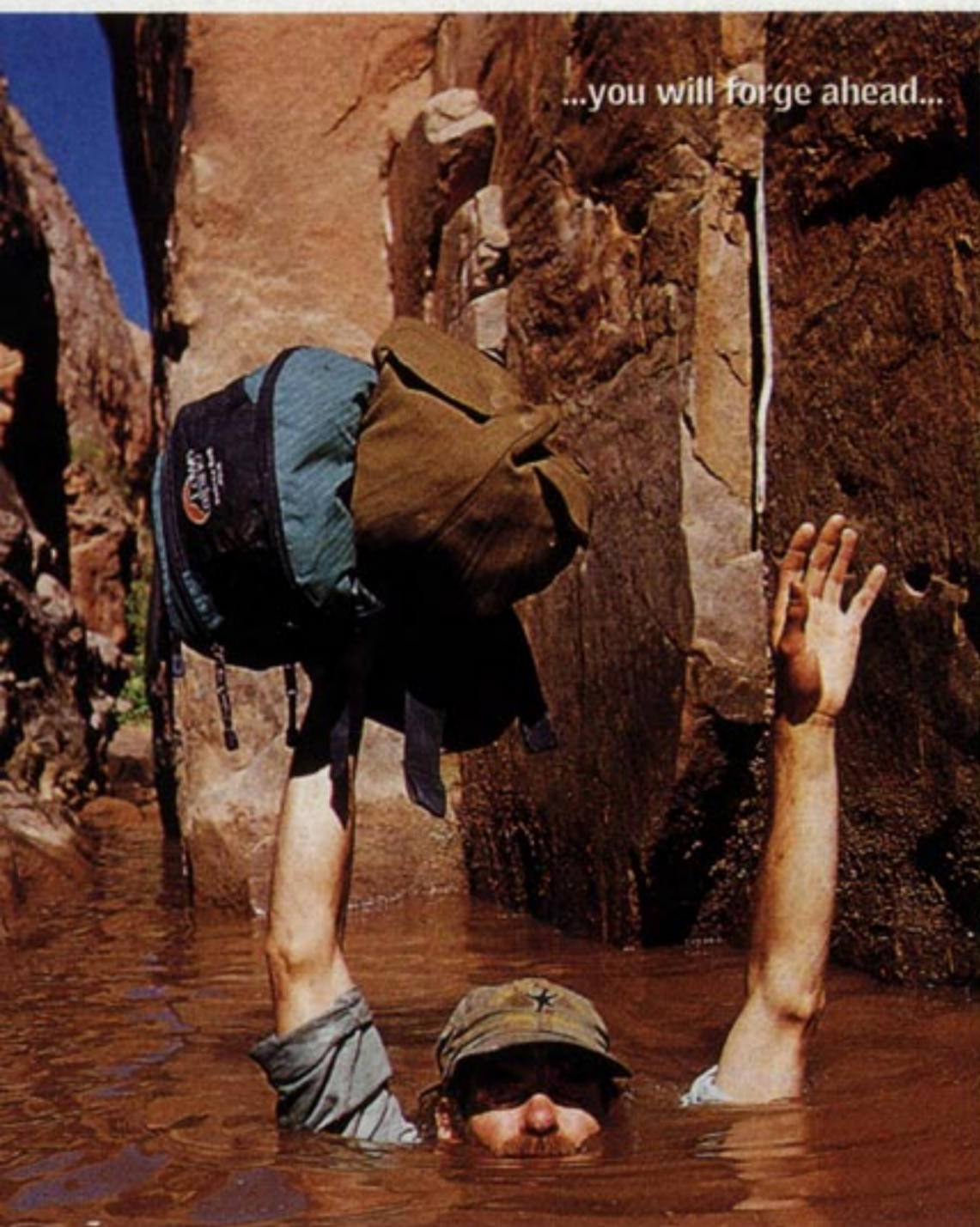
EIGHT GUYS AND A DESERT

I'm as urban as an oil stain, and an anachronism in the wilderness. That's why I accepted the mission to spend 14 days in the desert with the Boulder Outdoor Survival School. I was curious to see how dependent I'd become on the soft fandango of city life and to find out whether I could shake off the sterile solemnity of my cubicle and tap into some feral sensibility, into that Old Yeller gene—without actually getting shot in the end.

BOSS focuses on traditional-living skills and designs its courses to cultivate a pulse of antiquity amidst the superabundance of modern technology. Instructors teach you how to husband rocks, woods and plants—the plush amenities of aboriginal life—and fashion fire-starting tools, shelter, knives, cord and food. Along the way they hope to revivify some small part of your survival reflex, and show you what is possible in the wild when the bejeweled crutch of technology abandons you and life dances in confusing proximity to death.

Eight guys are enrolled in the field course, from high school seniors to a fifty-something psychotherapist who once performed in the circus. Like me, they're here to burrow into themselves. And BOSS wastes no time in nudging you toward that discovery.

The first step is a convict's welcome: We're stripped



of the chattel of convenience. No sunglasses or watches, cell phones or GPS systems, matches or gasoline, sleeping bags or tents—and no toilet paper. Think Odysseus afloat on the wine-dark sea, Linus without his blanket. After orientation in Boulder, Utah, a mile-and-a-half fitness-test run, and some rudimentary instruction on how to make a backpack with a wool blanket, we're stuffed into a van and driven to what looks to be the absolute middle of nowhere.

In short order, we're released into Utah's Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument with neither food nor water, only an enamel-coated cup, a fanny pack stuffed with thermal underwear, a medical kit and a knife. We begin eking out a living by feasting from the desert's meager cupboard, brushing our teeth with willow branches, wiping our backsides with sagebrush and sand, and slurping water from fetid pools.

TODDLERS ON PARADE

After the first numbing, sleepless night on the rock, we scramble off Big Spenser Flats and down a slot canyon, where we inch along, through steep narrow passages, using our backs and knees, our arms and feet, then swim in foul-smelling water holes thick with desert sludge before emerging in the winding basin of the Escalante river. Cavernous sandstone walls erupt over us in sheer cliffs and half domes, the jagged, arresting

incisors in Mother Nature's unruly maw.

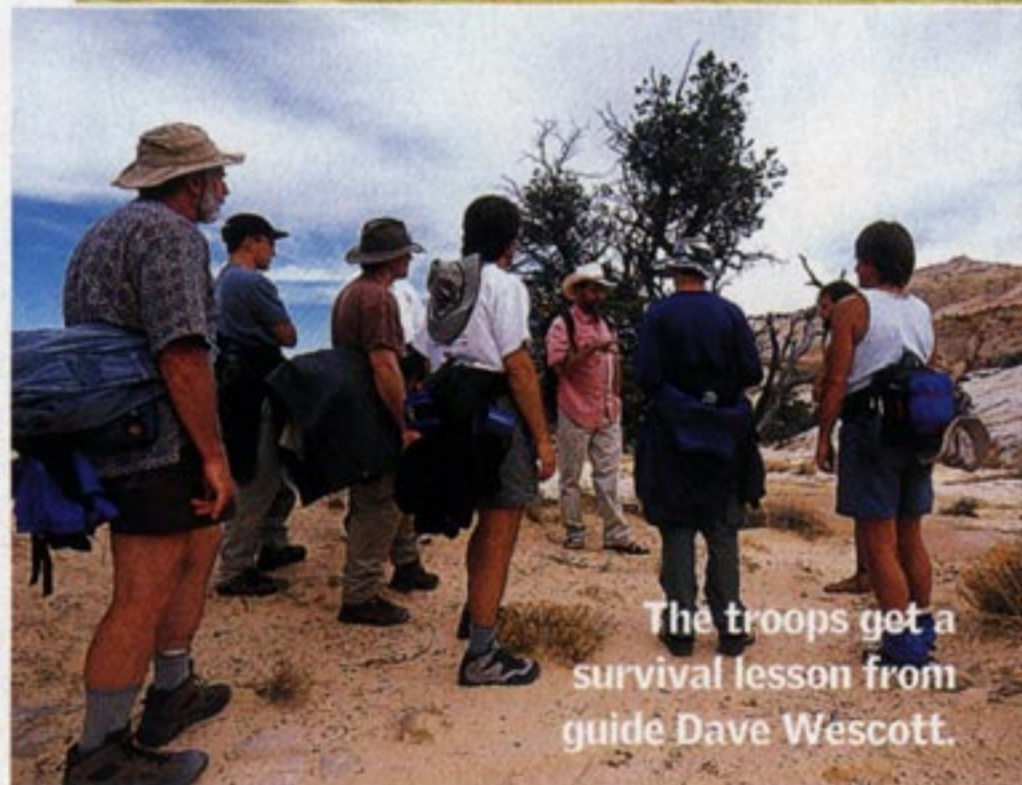
"Impact," the first phase, is two and a half days of monotonous, restless wandering, broken only by an afternoon of frantic but successful fishing with homemade spears. We nibble on plant life as we walk, but for the most part we go without food, subsisting only on unappetizing mouthfuls of water as the salmagundi of the desert—the cattails and wild onions, the milkweed and mint—waves in our sweaty wake.

The second night, after slogging nine miles upriver on empty stomachs, we hover like raptors over the paltry bounty of the sucker and the carp, speared earlier in the day. Our hunger spilling over, we gouge at the meat with filthy fingers, pulling at fins and dislodging bones, digging out eyes and prying loose tasty cheek meat.

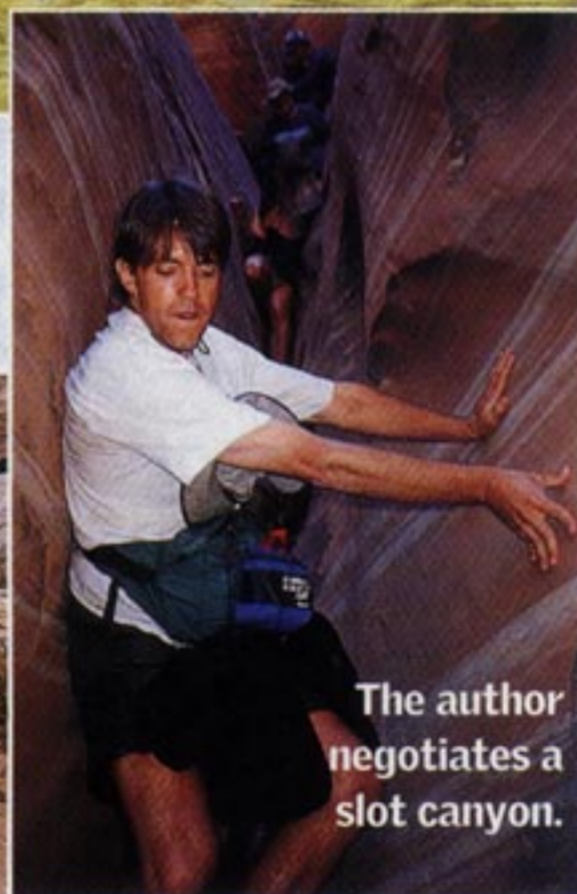
On the third day, we're each given a wool blanket, two water bottles, a rain poncho, a change of clothes and some camp shoes. Enough food for 1,500 calories a day is also handed out. And when we're not hiking 13 miles on a cup of oatmeal, we're being drilled in the finer points of desert survival, such as how to read topographical maps and use a compass, the proper way to hold and skin with a knife, and how to find and build shelter. Then we're given the gift of fire, or rather the instruments—willow, cottonwood, sage and rock—with which to conceive it. And it comes to us much in the way it must have come to the first humans: slowly, laboriously, smoke in our eyes.



Guide Matt Graham spearfishes in the Escalante river.



The troops get a survival lesson from guide Dave Wescott.



The author negotiates a slot canyon.

I've lost the ember, an audible sigh shudders through the group, then the nest bursts to life in a whoosh of flame—Prometheus unbound. I drop it into the kindling, proud as a new father.

FAMINE TO FEAST

Near the end of the first week, after a night without dinner, a morning without breakfast, and a five-mile hike through a thicket of biting scrub oak—in other words, business as usual—Dave Wescott, another of our guides, summons us from our newly turned camp and asks us to bring our knives. We meander back up the trail about a quarter of a mile, hunger tying sailor's knots in our stomachs. A few yards off the trail, tied to an oak tree, is a black ram.

"Who thinks they're capable of taking this animal's life?" asks Wescott. We all shuffle about a bit, look at the ground, then, along with three others, I

raise my hand. Wescott holds out four thin sticks tucked between palm and thumb. We draw. Jeff Sanders, an REI salesman and a BOSS apprentice, gets the short one and unsheathes his knife.

Under the tree, Dave Holladay holds the ram on his side. We gather around him and are told to secure the legs, the back and the head. I press down on his rib cage, his stomach rising and falling under my hands.

"Make sure you get both arteries at the same time, so he doesn't suffer too much," says Holladay. The sheep's head is pulled back, exposing the neck; his eyes are covered. Jeff hunches over him, looking for the best angle. When the knife slices through flesh, the ram tenses as if shocked, a guttural groan sounding in his throat. We hold him down while the blood ebbs from his body, until his stomach no longer rises and falls beneath our pressure and his eyes fill with a gray cloud.

Although I'm unaccustomed to killing for my meals, hunger becomes the mother of resolve. I quibbled at first with the idea of participating in the sheep's death, but soon enough accepted the reality confronting me. Forced to make such a decision on my own, were life

After a second guide, Matt Graham, coaxes us through the fire drill the first two nights, the responsibility is left in our laps, with one stipulation: no fire, no food. Hunched over my tools, I attack the task with the finesse of Quasimodo in the bell tower. And despite my wobbly, awkward bow strokes, the spindle starts smoking in the baseboard. A glowing ember emerges in my mind's eye, golden and resplendent in the dark ash.

Then my forearms begin to ache. Fatigue creeps into my muscles and sweat drips from my nose. Urgently sawing the bow back and forth, I feel my heart jump excitedly in my chest. Exhausted, I come to a grinding halt, my hands shaking, my head light. But a pile of ash sits at the base of the fireboard. Gingerly I sift through it with a twig, and there, nestled like Jesus in the manger, is a burning coal.

I scoop it up, drop it into the tinder nest and blow. Billowing clouds shroud my head in a nimbus of smoke. My eyes burn. I can't see what I'm doing, and I gulp for air like a goldfish left on the counter. Everyone stares in strange fascination. When it seems

"Pacing my camp in the simmering heat, strangely euphoric, I feel elevated above the fray of my fears."

and death to rise before me without the safety net of a guide, I would kill to survive.

We skin the carcass with knives made of obsidian and spend the next three days processing the mutton. We save the kidneys and the liver, the fat and the heart, the intestines and the testicles. We render oil from the fat, stuff sausages, string jerky, and glut on mutton stir-fry until our stomachs bloat and rumble.

ALONE IN THE DESERT

Just as any desert community knows, famine invariably follows feast. After the days of mutton, we trek down off the mesa back into the river basin, where we are separated into solo camps for three days of unsupervised solitary confinement.

"Solo" is a time for reflection," explains Wescott. "It's a time to think about why you've come here and what you've learned." We're asked to stay within a 100-yard radius of our camp. No fires are allowed and we're each given a handful of food, but I opt to fast, and to pursue a vision quest by picking through the meager bones of my thoughts.

From the beginning, though, I'm confronted with the poverty of my interior life. The conspicuous absence of food and sex sends my mind into gluttonous fantasies of both, each vault of introspection dripping with the glistening allure of basic instinct.

Above me, ravens and swallows zip indifferently along the canyon walls. Passing planes carry my starved and empty psyche toward the sustenance of family and home.

On the last day of Solo, I again shove determinedly into the life of the mind, grasping for a sop of wisdom, a single-celled epiphany, something to take home with me

to accompany my batch of survival skills, my blisters and my loose stool. Then, with my head reeling from hunger and heat, a calm, easy optimism defogs my normally austere pragmatism. Once-formidable barriers tumble into this diaphanous sea. I recognize my life for what it is—privileged, fortunate, arrested by fear—in all of its striped permutations.

Pacing my camp in the simmering heat, strangely euphoric, I feel elevated above the fray of my fears. Resolve, discipline and sacrifice nudge toward me like old friends. I've spent a fortnight in the desert on little more than its own bounty, and I've faced uncertainty, with its looming side-kicks, failure and death, and I have prevailed. While some small part of me *has* shriveled up and blown off into the rabbitbrush, I'm better off because of it.

The two remaining days left in the course, which include what BOSS calls, in the argot of ultimatum, the "Final Challenge," weigh on me as lightly as water on a duck's back. I'm less vulnerable now, annealed against fickle emotion. In theory, this course is about survival and learning to appreciate a less complicated way of life, but what you really learn about is yourself, about what makes you tick. Maybe for the first and only time in your life you will be exposed to the unvarnished reality of your limitations—and

TAKING THE BOSS CHALLENGE



Although you'll learn to peel back opaque layers of desert life and develop a comfort level you don't anticipate, the Boulder Outdoor Survival School course quickly becomes a battle of attrition, an effort not to succumb to the wail of hunger, the pull of fatigue, or the vast uncertainty of where you're going and when you'll get there.

Tackle BOSS in poor physical condition and you're likely to submit to these insistent urges, your mental stamina faltering as your muscles cramp and a tongue thickened by thirst fills your mouth. Despite having put in hundreds of miles of beach running to prepare, I felt my confidence flutter at times like a faulty film reel.

Ideally, you should follow a three-month cardio program before signing up. You'll be asked to take a fitness test prior to starting the course, since the demands on you will be great. But keep in mind that you'll be asked to rely as much on your resolve as on your conditioning.

BOSS offers 7-, 10-, 14- and 28-day field courses as well as a host of workshops and skills classes. The school can be contacted at 800-335-7404 or at www.boss-inc.com.

your surprising capacity to endure.

When I clawed my way back to city life, I was 10 pounds shy of my fighting weight and as fragrant and filthy as a junkyard dog. But I had also glimpsed, however briefly, the fertile heart of this land and had removed, in grudging increments, some of its cloak of austerity—and I am a stronger person for it. □