

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

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

