

2007: Pair of old hippies, 2008: Pair of new hips

This may be the first column you have ever read that is accompanied by an internal post-surgical view of the columnist. Kick back and read on. We are talking cutting edge (literally, and perhaps even figuratively) journalism right here in The Rangeley Highlander.

I am unabashedly showing off my brand new hip joints, and showing them in the visual context of an (almost) one-of-a-kind tie-dyed shirt, and the cover of the most recent Backpacker Magazine. The three items in this curious collage are related. I feel compelled to explain:

It actually goes back to the summer of 2006 and the most recent of four backpacking trips in the High Sierra with my good friend and grad school classmate, Ray Burdett. Regular readers may recognize that name, as it has appeared in this column (for good reason) three or four times over the past 5+ years. The occasion was the only proper way we could think of to commemorate the fact that both of us had reached the 60-year mark...return to our favorite mountain range, and pack in a few semi-vertical miles and back over Bishop Pass (elev. 12,000 ft.) while spending a few days in some of the most beautiful and inspiring wilderness geography in America. You may recall the cover photo and column that summer recounting the details.

One detail that couldn't have been recounted in that column was a suspicion that I developed retrospectively. The fact that Ray has a PhD in biomechanics and had the opportunity to observe and analyze my backpack-laden gait pattern for about half (give or take a few hundred plodding steps) of those rugged miles over Bishop Pass and back, is central to my ret-

rospective suspicion.

Fast forward to the winter of 2007: It is mid-winter when our plans for the coming summer's trip into the wilds takes shape. Ray suggested, in a January email, that we break our past pattern and take a camping road trip to the southern Appalachians in his vintage Volkswagen bus and day-hike some of the highest mountains in 5 states.

I mulled over his suggestion for a few days. My enthusiasm for the idea increased significantly when I heard Steppenwolf's iconic anthem of the Sixties: "Born to be Wild" on the car radio one snowy day in February...it got my creative juices flowing. The t-shirts, the

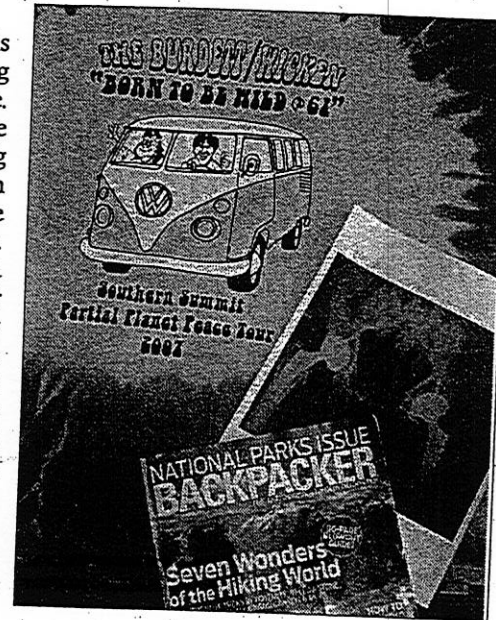
enjoyable trip, and its theme "The Burdett/Wicken Born to be Wild @ 61 Partial Planet Peace Tour 2007" are now firmly recorded in the annals of our hiking history.

In retrospect, it was clear to me that Ray's concern for my deteriorating, and increasingly uncomfortable, hip joints was central to his suggestion. Those increasingly osteoarthritic hips were also central to my eventual enthusiasm for his VW bus trip idea.

My problem started in the early Sixties during a high school football game. A very badly compound fracture of my left tibia and fibula (lower leg bones), whereby I subsequently lost a bit of the length of those bones, have had a latent effect on my lifestyle. The subsequent 35 years of physical activity of all sorts didn't seem to bother my hips. However, the last 10 or 12 years have become a period of increasing bilateral pain and loss of joint motion thanks to abnormal wear and tear on those joints.



By Allen Wicken



Fast forward to early last December: While cross-country skiing on the beautifully groomed trails at the Rangeley Lakes Trails Center, I found myself stopping at the top of a hill due to the pain and saying to myself something on the order of "Damn!, this isn't nearly as much fun as it should be anymore".

I immediately headed to a location with good cellphone reception, called my long-standing primary care physician in South Portland (he was already well aware of the plight of my hips and their increasingly grim arthritic changes), and had an appointment the next week. In short order, I had a referral to the orthopedic surgeon we both agreed was the man for the task(s) at hand.

For years I had been researching the latest in total hip replacement surgery techniques. I guess it helped that I directed the

physical therapy division at Maine Medical Center for about 17 years. I had many colleagues to confer with, as you might expect.

The consensus: George Babikian, M.D., trauma and hip replacement orthopedist. His "minimally-invasive" technique was clearly the way to go. He is a highly skilled, and widely respected, surgeon for sure. My two total hip replacement surgeries, each followed by a single overnight stay at Maine Med in early March and late May respectively, have gone exceedingly well. By the time you read this column, I will have hiked to the top of at least one local mountain, and have continued to log miles of walking and cycling.

I'm hoping to get back into singles tennis by the end of summer. And I look forward to comfortably, and more aggressively, return to serious downhill and nordic skiing next winter. I very much look forward to doing something I have never been able to do: To painlessly skate-ski at the Trails Center where my critical decision to finally get on with the inevitable was made last December.

Oh yes...the Backpacker Magazine in the photo. There are a number of great backcountry trails reviewed in this July, 2008 issue. I have my eye on one particular route in Glacier National Park. I can't wait until next winter's planning for our Summer of 2009 adventure.

Per usual, your thoughts and comments are welcome. Simply tape them to a voucher for a round-trip plane ticket to Great Falls, Montana (close to Glacier NP, and the town where I got my first pair of hips in 1946) and mail them my way....or simply send an email to HYPERLINK "mailto:allenwicken@yahoo.com" allenwicken@yahoo.com!