

tunately, Odyssey 2000 failed to live up to this dream.

"We knew the world was going to be out of our control," TK&A President David Timothy Kneeland said after running into financial problems at the end of October last year. "So to assume that we could go around the world and not have problems would be naïve and ridiculous. We knew we were going to have lots of challenges. We also knew ... that we had a right to (alter) the ride in any way we wanted to."

And alter the ride he did.

He had his group tour Japan on the bus instead of on their bikes due to unforeseen regulatory problems with his charter flight on Malaysian Airlines that prevented the plane from landing in Japan. Kneeland also had to skip a country or two because of insurance requirements, high costs and border-crossing delays. And he gave his riders an unfore-

A report on Tim Kneeland's ambitious ride around the world

seen ultimatum in October: Fork over an extra \$3,000 each to complete the trip, or go home. Kneeland had run out of money.

Of the 246 people who started the trip, only about 75 made it back to Pasadena a year later. As a result of the many alterations, a score of riders wanted their money back. Most riders had paid \$36,000 in nonrefundable fees to the Seattle-based company. Some paid less if they signed up early, as early as 1994 or 1995.

Whatever the payment, this small group of dissatisfied cyclists started the process of mediation during the trip. They were consumers, after all, and felt they didn't get what they paid for. Kneeland's budget shortfall, which sent about 70% of his group home in November, bolstered this frustration. The legal attack against TK&Agrew. In December, a handful of riders filed a class-action lawsuit against Kneeland. They wanted to stop Kneeland from selling, and operating, trips like Odyssey 2000 altogether. They didn't want anyone else to be suckered.

WHERE'S THE DOCTOR?

Fred Sheppard, who started paying for Odyssey 2000 in 1995, joined the class-action lawsuit in December 2000. The suit charges TK&A with violating the Washington Seller of Travel Act and the Consumer Protection Act. The state travel act requires any person or business that sells travel plans to put the money into a trust account, which can be withdrawn only at the time of travel. TK&A did not do this, the suit alleges. And Washington's Consumer Protection Act prohibits deception and fraud when selling any product.

"I think the whole thing is chockfull of deceptive practices," Sheppard said.

Sheppard alleges that TK&A failed to provide, as promised, medical personnel and medical facilities, a staff of 34 persons, and trips to Russia, the Expo 2000, and the 2000 Olympics in Sydney, Australia.

In Australia, the cyclists stayed at Wollongong University, a few hours commute to Sydney, said Barb Schwartz, another rider. This doused the hopes of many Odyssey participants that they would be able to walk to the Olympics from their camp or hotel. TK&A's promotional materials

had cultivated these hopes for years.

Most riders, however, had grown accustomed to these letdowns. The trip was more than halfway through the year at this point, and Odyssey participants were accustomed to sleeping on planes, soccer fields, or two to a single bed, when beds were available, Schwartz said.

The reason for these inconveniences, they divulged, and Kneeland's budget eventually proved, was money. Or better yet, lack of it. Kneeland agreed that he always looked to find inexpensive accommodations in order to make good on his claim of touring the world for \$99 a day.

But, while Kneeland acknowledged that his brainchild tour was unsuccessful in many ways, he would not admit to breaking any promises. He provided the food and shelter needed throughout the trip, he said. He conceded that he didn't provide a medical doctor during the entire trip, nor did he take all the riders to the countries promised in his promotional materials — these qualify as disappointments, not broken promises, according to Kneeland.

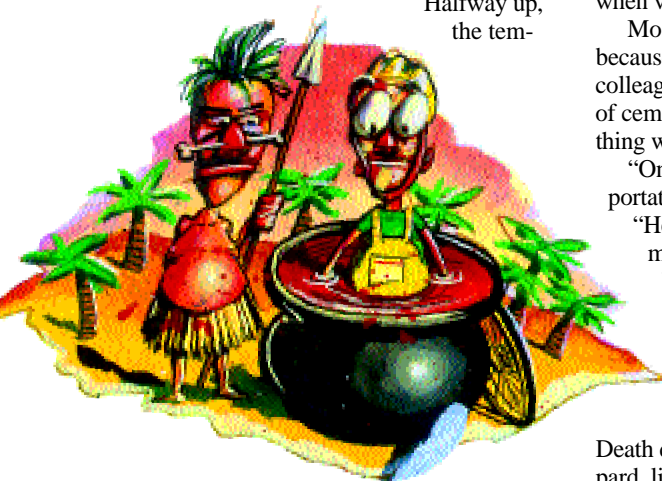
"There's a big difference between a promise and a disappointment," he said. "A very big difference."

But Sheppard, an outspoken chiropractor, sees these issues as broken promises; business promises that started to fall apart on the first day of the trip. On the first day, the Odyssey cyclists didn't ride as part of the Rose Parade as they were told they would. Rather, they rode on the parade's periphery, with little to no television coverage. Perhaps this could be dismissed as a bit of harmless fudging of the truth, but the lack of medical personnel or qualified support staff became a glaring and consistent concern.

Other Odyssey riders began to warm to Sheppard's critical point of view regarding Kneeland when they experi-

enced the infamous “Mountain of Death,” or Cerro de la Muerta, at the end of January 2000. This mountain in Costa Rica is 11,171 feet high. Most riders started merrily chugging up the pass, excited that some local cyclists joined them and cheered them on. But the locals turned around quickly when they learned about Odyssey’s plan to go over the mountain.

Halfway up, the tem-



perature started to drop, reaching near zero degrees at the top, according to one rider. Feet started to

freeze, equipment began to fail, and hypothermia set in for many of the riders.

While many Odyssey cyclists anticipated these conditions, they also expected staff support when things got rough. But on the Mountain of Death, support was nowhere in sight, many riders said. Staff vehicles circulating to pick up stranded or sick riders passed by scores of cyclists who sought relief by sticking their fists up in the air when vehicles approached.

Most riders made it over the pass only because of the help of a Spanish-speaking colleague who got people rides in the backs of cement trucks and cattle wagons — anything with four wheels.

“One guy got a ride with a cattle transportation truck,” one Odyssey cyclist said.

“He was standing in six inches of manure and was yelling [with joy] because he was so psyched he got a ride.”

But Sheppard didn’t want to rely on manure to save him in the future. So about five

months after the Mountain of Death debacle, he filed for mediation. Sheppard, like everyone else who signed up for the trip, could not file a lawsuit at the beginning of the journey, because the Odyssey contract precluded such a step; all riders with complaints were required to use medi-

ation and arbitration methods first.

In September 2000, deciding that TK&Ahad ignored his mediation attempts, Sheppard took the next step and served arbitration papers to Kneeland. About a week later, Sheppard swerved to miss an oncoming car in Australia. He woke up in the hospital, semi-conscious, with a broken hand. Sheppard’s accident upped the total number of serious injuries on Odyssey 2000 to approximately 18.

A week after his accident, just as Sheppard was beginning to recover, Kneeland kicked him off the trip.

“You know, people can bitch and complain and they won’t be thrown off the trip,” Kneeland said after booting Sheppard.

“When they go beyond a certain line, they need to be thrown off. For the peace and serenity of the group, they need to be thrown off.”

Kneeland saw Sheppard as part of the “dark side of the tour.” Sheppard would criticize the trip and other riders, making it more difficult for everyone to pedal through the day, Kneeland said.

Kneeland made sure that he put a clause into his contract that gave him the right to throw people off the trip if they threatened its success. A former U.S. Air Force trainer who taught soldiers to survive if they were stranded in Vietnam during the war, he knew that some Odyssey riders might lack the mental strength needed to ride in harsh conditions and still maintain a positive outlook on the trip.

A month after the trip ended this past January, Kneeland filed a counterclaim against Sheppard, charging him with reckless defamation and conspiracy.

“We have a right to protect our interests,” he said.

MISSED EXPECTATIONS

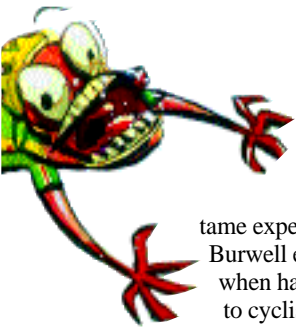
Rusty Burwell, assistant vice president of development for the American Lung Association, understands why Kneeland had to take such drastic measures against some of his riders. Long bicycle trips create problems due to the differences in individual perception, he says.

As an official who organizes cross-country tours himself, and a former employee of Kneeland, Burwell knows that long bike trips can be filled with conflict.

“Those (kinds of trips) are fraught with challenges. The cycling is the least part of it,” he said.

Even if everything goes as planned, uncontrollable weather changes or mechanical breakdowns may plague a trip, and





cloud the perceptions of the riders. In these situations, every problem is magnified, Burwell said. Therefore, it's good practice to

tame expectations as much as possible. Burwell explained the tactics he uses when handing out water, for example, to cyclists riding 70 miles a day across country.

If a cyclist asks him what the terrain ahead is like, he tells him it's all hills, to prepare him for the worst. If the hills are difficult, the cyclist will thank Burwell for the warning. If the hills are easy, the cyclist will see himself as stronger than the other cyclists, Burwell explained. If there are no hills, there are generally no complaints either.

"It's critical what people's expectations are," he said.

Kneeland may have fallen prey to unrealistic expectations on the part of his participants, Burwell said. Kneeland agreed that some of Odyssey cyclists may have joined the trip expecting to tour the world without riding through the harsh and demanding conditions they found themselves dealing with.

In South Africa, for instance, cyclists had to ride up to 100 miles a day through a politically charged area called Transkei. Several locals tried to attack the cyclists with knives, forcing most riders to group together in small bands to ensure their safety. It's times like these when the psychological nuances of a trip such as Odyssey 2000 explode.

Many riders had the same concerns as Sheppard early on, but were afraid to speak out publicly during the trip. If they berated the staff or the trip, they could be kicked off the trip, or, worse, be subject to subtle forms of revenge. A safety vehicle, for instance, may pass them by even if they were stranded on the Transkei road. When complaints slipped out of some riders' mouths, they noticed that food wasn't as plentiful at the end of the day, or mechanical repairs for their bikes were more difficult to obtain. The good hotel rooms were given to the cyclists who consistently touted TK&A, while others had to sleep on the floor. They felt as if they had to modify their behavior in order to survive.

Was it real? Or was it their imagination? Whatever it was, one rider likened the social psychology of the trip to that of a

cult.

In a letter posted on a Web site started by another dissatisfied Odyssey rider, Matt Newcomb, the anonymous rider explained that cults survive because a group of people becomes utterly dependant upon each other

— every rider depended on Kneeland and his staff for food, water, shelter, directions and safety.

Cult leaders demand all of their followers' monies, he wrote, which is often

so high a sum that followers have no other source of funding to get out — many of the riders would not criticize TK&A because they had no other resources

to leave if they wanted or were fearful of rebuke. The leader of a cult will quickly divide the group into the faithful and the others. Extreme disbelievers will be gotten rid of — Kneeland threw off three people altogether. Others left due to dissatisfaction with his treatment of them.

While this cult analogy was just an observation by one of the riders, Matt Newcomb was kicked off the trip for allowing comments like these to be posted on his Web site. Newcomb, a recent college graduate, registered for the Web site, Odyssey2003.com, last summer, trumping Kneeland for an electronic address that TK&A would obviously like to have, as Kneeland plans to do another round-the-world trip in 2003, and another in 2006. Newcomb says he wanted an outlet for his colleagues to post their feelings about the trip, as well as a medium to warn other potential Odyssey riders of any pitfalls.

"It just feels like I worked my ass off to

pay for this trip and I'm not getting what I paid for," Newcomb said.

"I TOOK A BACK SEAT TO A STUFFED ORANGUTAN"

One of the most controversial issues addressed on Newcomb's site was the behavior of Kneeland's business and personal partner at the time, Karen Ann Sutter. Sutter was the strangest psychological twist to the whole trip, according to a handful of riders.

With brightly dyed orange hair bundled on top of her head and mismatched socks on her feet, Sutter helped organize the safety vehicles, travel arrangements, and accommodations for Odyssey 2000. In the eyes of many riders, however, Sutter failed to provide the support needed.

"She would tell us 'You're not a customer. You're a member of this community. We're not your slaves,'" Newcomb said.

It seemed to some participants that Sutter treated her stuffed animals better than the Odyssey cyclists. Apparently, Sutter brought her toys with her wherever she went, ensuring their safety on treacherous roads such as the "Mountain of Death," and on international flights. A few cyclists recall Sutter sitting her animals in a row of first-class airplane seats on one of the international flights after a long day's ride, forcing some of the exhausted, and tall, participants to crunch into economy class seats.

"I can't believe I took a back seat to a stuffed orangutan," one of the riders said.

Kneeland was quick to deny the stuffed-animal scenario, and said Sutter just put the animals there for a photograph. As for Sutter's personality conflicts, Kneeland explained that sometimes she offended people by speaking "too soon," or without tact.

"I do feel bad about that when it did occur," he said.

It appears that Sutter's unpleasant manner started long before Odyssey 2000 launched in California.

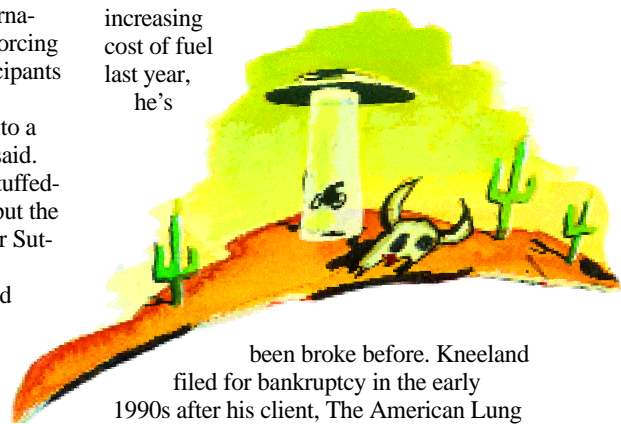
Sutter's "complaining was so bad I

chose to ride my bike the last day with my knee hurting for 83 miles," said Anita Heiling, a woman in her 50s who took a trip with TK&A in Washington state three years ago. Although Heiling was told by an orthopedic surgeon to stop riding at the time, she chose pain over the wrath of Sutter. While Heiling did not sign up for Odyssey 2000, her experiences hint at a problematic pattern within the tour company.

Heiling said Kneeland egged her on to sign up for the Washington trip, even though she explained she was a beginner as a cyclist. Kneeland brushed that aside, and told Heiling that they would ride only about 30 miles a day, she said. But, by the end of Heiling's trip, that daily total of miles had almost tripled. It appears that Kneeland used similar tactics for Odyssey.

A few cyclists dropped out in the first few days of Odyssey 2000 after realizing the riding requirements were more than originally pitched by TK&A. Only 2%, or five out of some 246 Odyssey 2000 participants, rode every mile of the trip. Most riders, of course, left the trip in November, after Kneeland announced his budget shortfall.

While Kneeland attributed the money shortfall to the increasing cost of fuel last year, he's



been broke before. Kneeland filed for bankruptcy in the early 1990s after his client, The American Lung Association, pulled his contract.

"The contract was discontinued by our national office because of financial difficulties for his company," said Astrid Berg,

executive director of the American Lung Association in Washington State. "They couldn't make ends meet ... His ability to have enough cash flow to run the business was not there and it was true that the Lung Association was, if not his only contract, at least his major contract."

Kneeland was the sole organizer and operator of the association's cross-country bike tours more than a decade ago. After the audit, the association filed suit against Kneeland, asking for the \$874,000 it fronted him. The lawsuit charged Kneeland with using this money for the "purpose of supporting his own business schemes and future ventures having nothing to do with plaintiff."

Eventually, however, the suit was dropped. The lung association's legal attack was partially started because of personality conflicts in the first place, the association's Burwell explained. Kneeland ran good trips but his strong ego rubbed some people the wrong way.

"Tim has a very strong personality," Burwell said. "But he's upbeat and visionary. I mean who in the hell else would come up with an around-the-world, year-long trip?"

After spending a decade paying off his bankruptcy debts, Kneeland said, "if you can survive a bankruptcy and come through it, you can survive anything." He paused and chuckled, adding, "If you can survive Odyssey for that matter, you can survive anything."

"I CAN'T BE ANY HAPPIER"

Kneeland's upbeat vision was what sold Scott Driggs on Odyssey 2000. The 29-year-old production supervisor of a machine company in Pennsylvania worked 12 hours a day for about three years in order to save enough money for the trip.

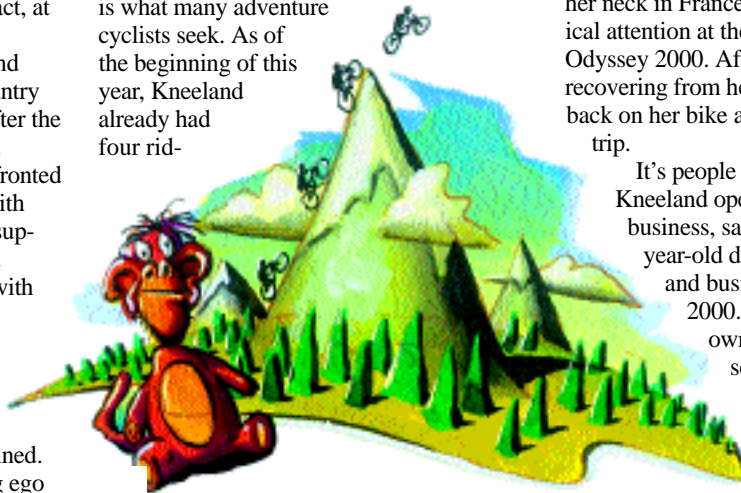
"I didn't really think it was going to be a possibility," he said. "All I can tell you is that Tim told me that dreams can happen."

Despite some of the unplanned events,

Driggs enjoyed every minute of Odyssey 2000.

"I can't be any happier," he said. "It's a life-changing experience for sure."

This kind of experience is what many adventure cyclists seek. As of the beginning of this year, Kneeland already had four rid-



ers signed up for Odyssey World Cycling Tours, set to depart Los Angeles on January 1, 2003, despite the negative press surrounding the inaugural event. Two of those riders dropped out after finding out that Kneeland ran out of money last year.

Kneeland hopes that more riders will sign the dotted line for Odyssey World Cycling Tours in 2003. He learned from his mistakes, he explained. On the next round-the-world trip, Kneeland will reduce the mileage to less than 65 miles a day, the number of riders to about 125, and the areas visited to 12 segments covering the globe, paid for separately, if so desired. And, he added, Karen-Ann Sutter probably won't come on the next trip. He refused to disclose the reasons why.

For anyone looking into a future trip with Kneeland, the tour company's past record with Washington's Better Business Bureau shows good results. For more than 20 years of operation, no significant complaints have been filed with the bureau

against Kneeland, even after Odyssey 2000 ended, said Danielle Rick, director of consumer and business services for the bureau, at the end of January.

Even Al Young, the woman who broke her neck in France, and received little medical attention at the time, spoke highly of Odyssey 2000. After a few months of recovering from her fall, Young jumped back on her bike and rode the rest of the trip.

It's people like Young who keep Kneeland operating his "fraudulent" business, said Richard Sulkes, a 59-year-old dentist who sold his home and business to go on Odyssey 2000. Sulkes left the trip of his own accord due to the poor services provided by

TK&A, including a lack of medical personnel and staff support.

"I kept asking myself, 'How could I let myself be taken by this guy?'" My answer is that most of us were buying a dream. This was such an adventure," Sulkes said, adding that he planned to join the legal battle against Kneeland because, "the dream I signed up for was not provided." ●

Andrea Figler is a Los Angeles-based journalist who has covered issues ranging from municipal bond fraud to an East Los Angeles judge candidate's questionable record. Her mother, Susan Figler, was a participant on Odyssey 2000 who left the trip of her own accord.