

# W GONE IN 30 SECC



» WHEN L.A.'S STREET BIKE

CULTURE STARTED MAKING *MOTORCYCLE THEFT* A MAJOR  
PROBLEM, THE CALIFORNIA HIGHWAY PATROL DEvised AN UNDERCOVER  
*STING OPERATION*. THEN THINGS REALLY SPUN OUT OF CONTROL

# 138

LOS ANGELES | MARCH 2015

# N ONDS

**NEED FOR SPEED**  
Daredevils often  
record their exploits  
and post them on  
YouTube



BY  
GREG  
NICHOLS



# 139

# IT WAS SUPPOSED TO BE A ONE-TIME THING.

Two investigators from the California Highway Patrol received a tip from a confidential source about a local motorcycle thief and figured out how to arrange an undercover deal. The suspect had been wreaking havoc on the Westside, picking the territory clean of sport bikes. Most vehicle theft cases involve tracing fraudulent paperwork, visiting junkyards, setting up surveillance. Sting operations are unusual for the CHP's Vehicle Theft Unit, a squad of auto-oriented gumshoes headquartered in a cluster of aging, bunkerlike buildings off the 101 in Koreatown. But Guy Trudeau\* and Mike Watson, longtime colleagues with impressive investigative records, lobbied their bosses and got the all clear to launch a covert bust.

The perp specialized in “crotch rockets”—lightweight, predominantly Japanese models that cost between \$5,000 and \$25,000. When he spotted one on the street or in a parking garage, he would back up a cargo van—known as a “shoe box”—pop the rear doors, and with help from an accomplice, lift the bike inside like a sack of dirty laundry. The theft would take about 30 seconds from start to finish. If he couldn't find any extra muscle, he'd skip the van, twist a screwdriver into the cheap ignition cylinder, and ride away. He would then sell the bike (or its stripped parts) for quick cash.

Trudeau and Watson tapped a young investigator, Gary Clifford, who was new to the unit. The trio came up with a plan: Watson and Clifford, a pair of tall, fit white guys who could reasonably pass for shady characters, if not entirely menacing ones, would pose as underworld players from Las Vegas. (A few high-profile vehicle theft rings had been dismantled in Vegas in recent years, so the story had an air of credibility.) The undercover officers—“UCs” in law enforcement parlance—would be introduced to the suspect through an informant and claim they were looking for bikes and parts to take back to Nevada, where vehicles registered in California are hard to trace. Trudeau, the details man, would run surveillance and coordinate a perimeter security team. Over the course of a few transactions, the UCs would build a rapport with the crotch rocket marauder, ply him for incriminating information, and take him down.

Just before the first deal, the suspect called Watson's CHP-issued undercover cell phone, an ancient flip model that by 2011 had acquired some retro cachet.

“OK,” the man said, his tone a stilted approximation of businesslike, “before we start anything, are you or is anyone you work for in any way affiliated with law enforcement?”

“Yeah,” Watson said. “You're under arrest.”

There was a pause, a moment of silent calculation. Then the suspect made that *Ah, get the hell outta here*

bleat that guys make when they're being ribbed. Minutes later the investigators met a portly black man in a Ralphs parking lot. If he'd been skittish on the phone, he was more than happy to divulge the inner workings of his operation in person. In a chatty, offhand way he told the UCs about his accomplices. He also let on that a vast network of motorcycle thieves had been operating on the margins of L.A.'s booming sport biker community.

## THE MOST STOLEN BIKE IN L.A.

→ In the worst kind of popularity contest, the Suzuki GSXR 750 regularly tops the list of most sought-after models for thieves, according to the CHP. Here's a breakdown of a few of its valuable parts, in retail and street value (often a 75 percent “discount”). — G. N.

### 2012 SUZUKI GSXR 750 MOTORCYCLE

**PLASTICS AND FAIRINGS (INCLUDING TANK)**  
Retail price: \$4,000 to \$5,600  
Street value: \$1,000 to \$1,400

**EXHAUST SYSTEM**  
Retail: \$500 to \$2,500  
Street: \$125 to \$625

**THROTTLE BODIES**  
Retail: \$500  
Street: \$125

**WIRING HARNESES/ CABLES**  
Retail: \$700 to \$1,120  
Street: \$175 to \$280

**WHEELS (INCLUDING RIMS, TIRES, AND ROTORS)**  
Retail: \$3,000 to \$4,600  
Street: \$750 to \$1,150

**L**OS ANGELES IS A CITY OF subcultures. Most of us glide through these intersecting worlds on the long drive home: the Orthodox Jewish family in the crosswalk on Friday evening passing the cabal of film nerds headed to the New Beverly Cinema. But the loud ones who don't keep to side streets and blaze a path right down Santa Monica Boulevard de-

mand our attention. Since the early 2000s, thanks to savvy Japanese marketers, spiking gas prices, and near year-round sunshine, sport bike sales have surged here. Frollicking packs of twentysomethings gather together atop their Hondas, Yamahas, Kawasakis, and Suzukis to rip through neighborhoods from Crenshaw to the Valley, their roaring engines triggering car alarms. During the week, stunt riders (who refer to themselves as “stunters”) hone their skills in empty parking lots and open industrial spaces—it’s easy to tell where they’ve been by the looping black calligraphy their tires leave behind.

But the point ultimately is to be seen, and you’ve probably caught a few of these guys barreling down Melrose on a Sunday afternoon, popping wheelies, sending plumes of smoke into the air, and leaving rattled pedestrians in their wake. Most of their antics stray just far enough over the line to incur stern warnings and steep tickets from the cops, but by pushing their bikes as hard as they do, these daredevils have inadvertently created an accelerated demand for parts and, with that demand, a secondary economy fueled by widespread theft and orchestrated by illegal enterprises.

Last summer at the Antelope Valley Fairgrounds, a young woman known as Randie Raige was hanging off a red and yellow sport bike. “Hanging” isn’t quite accurate; she was being dragged behind it, with her back arched. Her boyfriend, Enrique “Birdman” Ponce, was on the throttle, gripping the handlebars and concentrating to keep the CBR 600’s front wheel in the air. Raige’s legs were wrapped around his torso, and the back of her helmet skipped gently along the asphalt like a bouncing record player needle. Her black riding jacket had inched up to expose a midriff of milky white skin, and with her arms splayed, she looked like Christ in the throes of crucifixion—if Christ wore skintight hot pink pants.

Raige and Birdman (whose monikers are stage names) are professional stunters based in Santa Clarita. They perform at events all over the world and represent the legitimate face of the underground stunter culture. Raige got her start at bike nights that flourished across Southern California in the 1990s and early 2000s. Riders met at local haunts to trade tips and kick back with like-minded souls. “Picture *The Fast and the Furious* gone biker style,” says Raige, who was 16 when she started attending meetups on the back of her cousin’s motorcycle. “Every color, every race, every kind of bike. It was energetic and enlightening. There was



**THRILLS, CHILLS, AND VERY FEW SPILLS**

Professional riders Enrique “Birdman” Ponce and Randie Raige tour the world with their two-wheel acrobatics

this sense of freedom, and you just felt like it was the cool crowd.”

In this world the normal L.A. fault lines of race and class don’t seem to apply, but skills do. Riders modify their bikes so they’ll have greater control during technical stunts, pounding their bulbous metal gas tanks flat to give them a stable seat for tricks that bring their legs over the handlebars. Bike nights have given rise to a new kind of motorcycle club. Unlike the Hell’s Angels or the Mongols, hard-core outlaw motorcycle gangs with long histories of violent crime, these clubs cater more to thrill seekers and part-time scofflaws. Confrontations between rival clubs are rare. The real battles play out online. Only the best (and riskiest) moves make it to YouTube, where stunters’ videos generate hundreds of thousands of views.

Of course stunters crash a lot, which means the search for new parts never stops. Thefts increased countywide through the late aughts. Connected guys in various clubs would track down black market deals, and some members of the bigger clubs started buying shoe boxes and sending out theft crews. At first club-backed theft crews sold only to their own, but Craigslist and eBay broadened the market.

Ads containing coded language popped up: “Parting out” meant selling everything but the frame and the engine—both carry identifying numbers—and a “track bike” was a complete motorcycle that couldn’t be registered through the DMV.

Club members who were tired of having their bikes ripped off came up with a solution. The Southern California Biker Alliance includes 11 clubs and ostensibly exists to quash beefs and foster cooperation. But the real benefit is that members’ bikes are now off-limits to alliance-affiliated theft crews. A sticker on the windshield is like lamb’s blood on the doorpost for trolling motorcycle

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 179)



**RUBBER MEETS THE ROAD**

The undercover CHP investigators purchase two stolen motorcycles from the suspects

THIS PAGE (FROM TOP), DAVID WEATHERS; COURTESY CALIFORNIA HIGHWAY PATROL

\* Some names have been changed to protect identities.







## Gone in 30 Seconds

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 141

thieves, which means the hunt for parts extends beyond the circle, often at the expense of the unsuspecting independent rider.

In recent years L.A. County has led the country in motorcycle thefts. Law enforcement hasn't known what to do about the problem and hasn't felt compelled to help. Bikers are regarded as a nuisance, a menace to cops and law-abiding four-wheeled commuters alike. Compared with cars, most sport bikes aren't worth much, and only a small segment of the population uses them. It's no surprise they've been a low priority for auto theft detectives. But in 2010, Trudeau and his two ambitious colleagues from the CHP's Investigative Services Unit decided to crack down. The first phase of Operation Wheel Spin, a sting that would last more than two years and recover nearly \$1 million in stolen goods, was off and running.

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**A**FTER A handful of successful deals, Trudeau, Watson, and Clifford let their initial suspect walk. If they hauled him in now, it would mean an end to their Vegas cover story, and they were thinking of expanding their investigation. Trudeau, an inveterate worrier, was gloomy about their chances. He believed they'd pressed their luck by asking to go undercover in the first place. This was the CHP, he reminded his team, an agency with a well-earned reputation for restraint, not for antics that sounded like throwaway plots from *21 Jump Street*. He and Watson had both served on the Taskforce for Regional Auto Theft Prevention, a multiagency collaboration run by the Sheriff's Department that did plenty of undercover work, so they knew how important modern equipment, proper funding, and dedicated personnel were to a successful operation. The CHP's Investigative Services Unit just wasn't kitted out that way.

"Don't even worry about it," Watson persisted. Habitually cheerful, with a baritone voice and tattoos up and down his arms, he devised a scheme to dismantle bike theft rings throughout the region. Trudeau thought the idea was ludicrous, but he agreed to put in the request. To his surprise, it was swiftly approved.

Watson took Clifford under his wing. To maintain his sanity while dealing with the nascent operation's administrative duties, Trudeau recruited a fourth team member. Tim Vega's hair was always perfect, his desk always clean, which caught the senior investigator's eye. Trudeau was the most analytical guy in the unit, a trait that made him an uncommonly talented logistician but also a world-class stress case. He sensed some of the same fastidiousness in his protégé.

With the team members in place, they set to work finding a second suspect. Scores of thieves were scooping up sport bikes around Los Angeles, but that didn't make them easy to locate. Combing through Craigslist and eBay, the investigators scanned for ads containing suspicious language. Watson asked insurance companies to provide bike parts. Looking for leads, he and Clifford wrapped their inventory in cellophane, stepped into character, and went around to local motorcycle shops offering tidbits for sale or trade. Watson, always animated, did most of the talking. Clifford was younger, a good kid from a small town in Northern California. He was stiff at first, and cusswords tumbled out of his mouth with the overenunciated eagerness of a parent using slang. Incredible shop owners sized up the short-haired white boys bearing gift-wrapped parts and said no thanks. The CHP had sprung for fake business cards, which the investigators passed out all over town, but nobody seemed eager to follow up with them.

Then Watson realized he had a teenager's gift for social media. His humor and goofiness played well online. Watson joined motorcycle forums and set up a Facebook account to get close to club members. Men were slow to respond, but women seemed happy to accept his friend requests. The more female friends he acquired, the more the male bikers warmed to him. Soon he had a cyberposse of unwitting informants. Using those contacts, and cross-referencing frequent posters on Craigslist and eBay, the team discovered a likely suspect. When Clifford called about a Suzuki GSXR posted on Craigslist, the man introduced himself as Biscuit.

In August 2011, Watson and Clifford met Biscuit at the gated entrance of a landscap-

ing business owned by his uncle in South L.A. He was in his early twenties, with a pudgy face and light brown complexion. Biscuit had a motorcycle workshop at the back of the building. The makeshift shop reeked of amateur hour; parts and tools were strewn all over the floor. As the undercover investigators studied the Suzuki, Biscuit mentioned in an offhand way that he didn't have registration for it, and his voice trailed off conspicuously when asked why.

To arrest someone for selling stolen goods, investigators usually need to demonstrate the suspect has knowledge the merchandise has been illegally obtained. Watson and Clifford had been working on their rap, the give-take of a solid undercover duo. Watson, a natural storyteller, was good at disarming people, although sometimes he succeeded entirely by accident. "So I used to sleep with this dude," he said, attempting a quick anecdote about his army days. Biscuit shot Clifford a look and then burst out laughing. Monitoring the conversation from inside the surveillance truck, Trudeau and Vega did, too. Clifford was beginning to find his undercover stride, and he used the unguarded moment to ask about the Suzuki. Biscuit insisted it wasn't stolen, so Clifford pressed a little.

"I have a supplier who sells complete stolen motorcycles for 300 dollars," he said.

In the surveillance pickup, Trudeau and Vega held their breath.

"Where do you buy them for 300 bucks, man?" Biscuit asked. "Everybody sells them to me for a G."

Back at headquarters in K-Town, the investigators were exuberant. So what if Biscuit was a young punk running a Mickey Mouse outfit from his uncle's shop? He was a criminal, a bona fide parts distributor for a major motorcycle club. Even Trudeau began to envision the kind of sweeping maneuvers that Watson had outlined from the beginning.

The team targeted Biscuits all over L.A. County, and after a slow start, word began to spread: Some new cats from Vegas were buying up sport bikes to export out of state. A crew from Long Beach offered to sell them a couple of stolen cars. They had enough money for only one, which they promptly purchased. New deals gave them additional credibility, and by 2012, thieves were making contact to introduce themselves. The initial suspect, the one who'd asked Watson whether he was a cop, was arrested for an unrelated crime, and Clifford was surprised to get a call from the man's wife. She was looking for some help with bail money. Watson then

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# SHOPPING DIRECTORY

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**PAGES 50-51:** Ermenegildo Zegna suit at zegna.com. Salvatore Ferragamo shirt at Salvatore Ferragamo, Beverly Hills, 310-273-9990. Original Penguin tie at Original Penguin, West Hollywood, 323-655-0401. Rolex watch at Gearys Rodeo Drive, Beverly Hills, 310-887-4200. Brunello Cucinelli bag at Brunello Cucinelli, Beverly Hills, 310-724-8118. **PAGE 52:** Salvatore Ferragamo suit and shirt at Salvatore Ferragamo, Beverly Hills, 310-273-9990. Patek Philippe watch at Gearys Rodeo Drive, Beverly Hills, 310-887-4200. **PAGE 53:** Salvatore Ferragamo suit at Salvatore Ferragamo, Beverly Hills, 310-273-9990. John Varvatos shirt at John Varvatos, West Hollywood, 310-859-2791. Bottega Veneta shoes at Bottega Veneta, West Hollywood, 323-782-4970. Drake's pocket square at Bloomingdale's, Santa Monica Place, Santa Monica, 310-985-6400. **PAGE 54:** Ermenegildo Zegna suit at zegna.com. Hugo Boss shirt at Bloomingdale's, Santa Monica Place, Santa Monica, 310-985-6400. Salvatore Ferragamo tie at Salvatore Ferragamo, Beverly Hills, 310-273-9990. **PAGE 55:** John Varvatos suit at John Varvatos, West Hollywood, 310-859-2791. Ermenegildo Zegna shirt at zegna.com. Salvatore Ferragamo tie at Salvatore Ferragamo, Beverly Hills, 310-273-9990.

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received a call from the man's neighbor, who was taking advantage of the arrest to expand his own burgeoning enterprise. "You used to deal with him; now you deal with me," he said threateningly, offering further confirmation that their cover was solid.

To transport bikes and parts, the team searched for a dedicated vehicle. In 2002, Watson had arrested a suspect driving a beat-up Chevy Astro, and the van had been sitting in storage ever since. It had bald tires and bad brakes, but they figured the CHP mechanics could bring it back to life. No higher-up wanted to assume authority over the unusual request, so it pinged around the massive CHP bureaucracy interminably. The UCs grew tired of waiting. Clifford's work truck needed new tires, so the old ones found a home on the Astro. Before making a deal, Watson and Clifford would put on their recording devices, load the parts they planned to swap, and mentally prepare themselves to go undercover. Then the van would fail to start. They had a blowout on the way to one transaction, and when Clifford stuck his head out the window to assess the damage, the wind took his hat. Scrambling, they found a doughnut tire in the back of the van. It was cracked and ancient, but they gladly would have used it if only they had a jack. Instead they showed up to the buy galumphing along on the flat.

If the van was a hassle, paperwork was a trial of faith. Each interaction with a suspect

required a report from the UCs, which became part of a larger report placing the deal in the broader context of the sting. Phone calls, recorded conversations, and taped transactions had to be meticulously logged, as did every item the team purchased or swapped. Much of this recordkeeping fell to Trudeau and Vega, who spent manic hours finessing Excel spreadsheets.

The UCs got leads from across the county, which meant lots of driving and waiting around for deals that only sometimes materialized. Motorcycle thieves were never punctual, and they didn't keep normal business hours. Watson and Clifford had to take calls in the middle of the night, snapping into character while half asleep. Since the Investigative Services Unit couldn't spare the manpower, team members had to work a regular caseload on top of everything else. Each morning the investigators guzzled pots of coffee, and it was only a matter of time before mistakes began to happen.



**T**RUDEAU STOOD inside the Fish Bowl, a sweaty briefing room with floor-to-ceiling windows that trapped the autumn sun, doubling its heat. He walked slowly through the day's plan. It was the height of the investigation, and the officers had the routine down pat, but Trudeau still seemed

incapable of a quick summary. They'd be doing another deal with another new suspect that afternoon, he said. They'd have another "takedown word" in case something went wrong, and a safety hand signal. Their wires were prone to going on the fritz, like much of their equipment. In case that fail-safe failed, Trudeau had mapped out an escape route for his UCs. He wanted them to pay attention to various signs that might indicate an ambush on the part of the seller—darting eyes, nervous twitches. Watson and Clifford had memorized the spiel, and squished breath-close with a supervisor in the Fish Bowl, they just wanted to get on with the job. "Perimeter team," Trudeau insisted, "you need to be in location, staged, and ready, with vests and gear in position."

The day didn't get off to a good start. Trudeau and Vega were sweltering in their surveillance vehicle. A hundred yards away, in the sun-baked parking lot of a Tujunga Vons, the wired undercover officers sat in the Astro. They'd been talking to the suspect on the phone, sending texts, jumping in and out of the van, cursing. The seller got cold feet. Why couldn't they come to his house instead? he wanted to know. No way, Trudeau thought. A private residence was an uncontrolled environment. Too risky.

As afternoon edged toward dusk, Watson became impatient. He thought they should drive to the suspect's house. Trudeau compromised. It would be crazy to go to the guy's house, but if they moved the deal closer to the suspect, maybe he would agree to meet them. The surveillance truck pulled away from the Vons ahead of the UCs and drove a mile and a half down the road, setting up outside a busy McDonald's. Trudeau and Vega listened, waiting for the concealed wires the UCs were wearing to come into range. Anticipation hung in the french fry-scented air.

A few hundred yards away, the battered Astro pulled up to the suspect's house. Disobeying orders, Watson veered from the plan. As the suspect came out to greet them, Watson stormed out of the van and began cussing him out for making him wait. Clifford, who wasn't comfortable going rogue, emerged slowly from the van and was soon waylaid by a neighbor who didn't want people walking across his lawn. Inspecting the bike they were supposed to purchase, Watson began to argue with the suspect about price. In the end the UCs didn't have enough money to make the buy. As Watson and the suspect continued haggling, a car cruised down the street. Inside was the head of that afternoon's perimeter security team. In the

frantic moments after the UCs went off the grid, officers had fanned out to look for them. Trudeau was sitting inside the surveillance truck, spitting mad. He struggled to understand how his careful plan had been shot to hell.

The ruined deal strained everyone's nerves, and another blow was waiting. In the course of buying dozens of motorcycles, the UCs had done their fair share of heavy lifting. Most sport bikes weigh less than 400 pounds, light enough for two people lifting one wheel at a time to load and unload. Following a successful buy, Watson and Clifford would take their stable of stolen bikes to a CHP-affiliated tow yard. One afternoon as they were unloading, a bike slipped. Watson strained to keep it from crashing out of the van. His next sensation wasn't pain exactly; it felt as if hot liquid had been poured down his back. After limping through a few more days of work, he went to see a doctor and discovered he had a herniated disc and a torn tendon in his elbow. The recovery would keep him off the job for months.

Watson had been a source of goodwill and bawdy cheer, and he was a counterbalance to Trudeau. The loss hit Clifford the hardest. Watson was his buddy, his professional better half, and now he was on his own. With his partner's help, he had become more animated and confident during deals. He would have to supply the undercover charisma himself, along with the procedural know-how to get suspects to admit to crimes.

By mid-2013, the operation had grown onerous. The team could have gone on building new cases indefinitely, but the personal toll was too great. Down a man, the three remaining investigators were exhausted. Trudeau and Vega began preparing reports for the District Attorney's office. Since the investigation had started more than two years ago, they had lost contact with most of their early sellers. To make their busts, they first had to reestablish contact.

Clifford called Biscuit, who, improbably, seemed to have risen far and fast. He'd moved out of his uncle's business and into a shop of his own. From the sound of it, he'd become a major motorcycle parts supplier for L.A. County. The investigators recalled the clueless kid who'd copped to selling them stolen merchandise at their first meeting. They decided to do one more deal to update their case on him. Clifford had been going undercover alone after Watson's injury, but for the meeting with Biscuit he decided to pull in a young investigator named Jason Gonzalez. The kid had never worked under-

cover before, and Clifford wanted to show him the ropes, as Watson had done for him.

Biscuit's new shop was in Huntington Park. When the UCs arrived at a nearby Burger King, Biscuit rolled up in a Nissan pickup truck and led them back to his place, the entrance of which was in an alley. Clifford and Gonzalez had concocted a cover that was sure to appeal to Biscuit. The two of them had met at a party in Vegas, hit it off, and now were on their way to do some harder partying in San Diego.

"Oh man, you're going to love the Gaslamp," Biscuit said.

His shop was impressive, a clean, open space full of professional-grade tools, a long way from the dingy corner at his uncle's landscaping business. Biscuit took them to a loft space upstairs. A disco ball hung from the ceiling, and a giant bong leaned against a wall. Biscuit asked if they wanted beers, but then he remembered he had only one left, and the offer was awkwardly rescinded. He had taken a trip to Europe, a sign of his growing stature, and he was eager to tell Gonzalez all about his female conquests. In the background Clifford wandered around taking photos of the shop.

As they were driving away with a Yamaha R6 motor, the investigators noticed a black Suzuki pulling up. Trudeau, watching from the surveillance truck, called Clifford's cell and asked if they could go back inside to ID the driver. It was never too late to snare a new suspect, and Trudeau took enormous pride in the unit's increasing stack of case files. The UCs returned, saying they had changed their mind about the second engine. With Biscuit vouching for them, the Suzuki rider spoke openly about his criminal dealings. The suspect list had grown by one.

The arrests were carried out strategically over a six-month period by the CHP's warrant services team. Dressed head to toe in tactical gear, Operation Wheel Spin investigators spread out to see the culmination of their more than two-and-a-half years of hard work. Fittingly, Trudeau oversaw Biscuit's takedown. As the warrant team moved in on Biscuit's shop, they found his Nissan pickup parked at the entrance to the alleyway. They would need to break down the shop door if Biscuit didn't comply, and so they needed clear access to the alley. A tow truck backed up and pulled the Nissan out of the way. A member of the warrant team did a knock-and-notice. "Search warrant! Police! Open the door!" An officer with a battering ram stood at the ready, but after a few moments Biscuit appeared in the doorway. The police grabbed him, and members

of the team rushed in to clear the shop. Biscuit was handcuffed and passed back to Trudeau. Biscuit had never seen the man who was escorting him before—just another cop in an alley full of commando-looking dudes—but Trudeau had been watching Biscuit through the windshield of a surveillance truck for years. Back at the Investigative Services Unit, a roomful of Trudeau's immediate superiors and top CHP brass received a play-by-play of the action with real-time photos and text updates. A cheer went up when they saw an image of Trudeau arresting Biscuit.

Operation Wheel Spin yielded 51 arrests. In all, the team recovered 110 stolen vehicles with a market value of \$848,140. Defense attorneys are quick to home in on minor reporting errors in complex investigations such as Wheel Spin, and they pull hard on those loose threads. But the pairing of Trudeau and Vega, armed with their dossier of carefully organized spreadsheets, left little chance of that happening. As of this writing, only one suspect's case has gone as far as a preliminary trial, while the other suspects have pleaded guilty or no contest in exchange for reduced sentences.

Biscuit, whose record before Wheel Spin was negligible, pleaded guilty to 18 felonies and is serving five years' probation. For all the investigators' anxiety, sleepless nights, and physical pain, the lack of prison time for the biggest players has been dispiriting. Still they're hopeful that the true success of Wheel Spin will be evident when the 2014 motorcycle theft statistics come out. There were 1,589 motorcycles stolen countywide in 2013, and early indications are that the numbers this year will be notably lower. There's no question that L.A.'s law-abiding riders will have the CHP to thank.

Despite the success of Operation Wheel Spin, Trudeau declared to anyone who would listen that he would never lead another undercover investigation again. He fronts a heavy metal band and would focus on the upcoming release of an EP. "He's just going to need a little time to cool off," Clifford predicted. He was right. In January Trudeau transferred to a new unit. When asked if he'd consider another sting, Trudeau replied with a knowing chuckle, "Never say never." ■

*Greg Nichols is a journalist based in Los Angeles. His first book, Striking Gridiron: A Town's Pride and a Team's Shot at Glory During the Biggest Strike in American History, was published last year. He rides a motorcycle.*