

# PETER ARTERY/ THUNDERDOME

Peter's first Burning Man was in 2009, thanks to a ticket gifted by his sister, who was a main organizer of Thunderdome—a well-known camp celebrated for its theatrical play fights under a massive dome, reminiscent of Mad Max. Passionate about active participation, he initially volunteered at Arctica, the ice-selling station at Burning Man, before becoming deeply involved in Thunderdome as a puller. In 2017, at the age of 48, he started his journey with the Department of Public Works (DPW) by joining the Artery Construction Department, a wooden structure that housed information about art installations on the Playa.

This interview was conducted by “Flo”, Flore Muguet, a French anthropologist, in 2017. Most of Flo's questions have been omitted to improve reading flow.



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I'm forty-eight and I've gone to Burning Man seven times now since 2009 (skipped a couple of years). What really brought me up here was that my sister gave me a ticket which was gifted to her by one of the organizers who had heard how notoriously frugal I was. I came up and really liked it. After about a day and a half I was a little bored because I was just looking at things and not actually getting involved. For me, participation means working. So, I started volunteering at Arctica, which was very nice in the afternoons because it's a little cooler moving ice around! I've been doing that every year since I came up here. So, my sister is one of the main organizers of Thunderdome. When she brought me in, she only brought me in as her brother and not as a camp member. I could camp with them, but I was not joining as a sponsee of Thunderdome. That first year I also started pulling a couple of fights and learning about the positions we have in the dome. It's a very well-orchestrated performance where we all work very hard to make sure that nobody is injured.

So now I'm a puller. Basically, it helps if you're of a certain size and weight so that you can pull different people and break up tangled fighters and things like that. That's one position. There're also the people who run the winches; they control the heights of the fighters which is one of the things that controls most of the interaction in the fight. If you can get your footing really well then it becomes a problem. So, we try to keep everybody off balance.

Then there's harnessers; they put the climbing harnesses on people; partly because when people think they can do it themselves they do it wrong and then they get hurt. We have de-harnessers who, of course, take the harnesses off. Those are

both very hard jobs because you work with people up close, get down low, and deal with their junk. Then there's the officiant, who is the person waving the stick. They start the fights, stop the fights, and watch for problems, all while adding flair to the performance. Actually, a lot of us can stop the fights. Anytime one of us sees a problem, we stop the fight.

We have people taking care of the weapons; they make sure fighters always have safe batons. We have people working the line. We are also lucky to have a number of DJs and guest DJs. We have somebody on “mouth” which is what we call the person on the microphone who is trying to be silly or gently insulting so that everybody is laughing—including the person being insulted. So, yeah that's most of the substantive positions in terms of the actual interactions of fighting. We've got what we call dome monkeys to keep people off our lights & speakers and keep folks from going too high. That's really the biggest danger in the dome. The biggest injuries we get in the dome are just drunk and high people falling off when they're not as capable or coherent as they think they are. It's a real risk to them and to innocent people below them.

Thunderdome's first year, I believe, was 1999. I think they went through two domes in terms of structural safety; they had two domes fail a little bit because they had people climbing all over it, so they got rid of those and got a higher quality one. So, now we have the heaviest dome on the playa. It has a very thick grade conduit. That's so you don't have to worry how many people get on. It's that strong.

It's also, consequently, a little harder to build. You can't just rig it up with a few people so having a crane is essential. There are some



Peter in the Thunderdome. Photo credit: Avens.me.

older Thunderdome crew who were DPW and were there for a while. So yeah, there's some strong connections between them. My understanding of both cultures [DPW and Thunderdome] is that they used to be a lot more aggressive and a lot wilder. They're probably closely matched both in terms of their trajectory and in terms of their overall natures as people.

People in DPW are a bit more rancorous and like to have a good time. You're equally likely to hear people in DPW and Thunderdome making jokes about hippies, sparkle-ponies, etc.; they have a sort of similar outlook on the event. They are both very hard-working crews. Obviously the Thunderdome folks don't work as many days as your average DPW

person, but we have our workdays, and the performance is definitely work. That's why I think the Friends & Family night on Tuesdays is the night that people look forward to; both in Thunderdome and in DPW. I think it's remarkable how well they mesh together.

That's the night everybody has the most fun in the Thunderdome because we can make jokes about people we know, but in a way that is understood and appreciated by the crowd much more than the average crowd on Wednesday through Saturday nights. Wednesday through Saturday nights are generally random Burning Man folks. There are always people who avoid the Dome (maybe 30%) but we, and DPW, aren't for everyone.

So, in terms of what we do on DPW night... we manage the dome a little differently. The best thing about DPW (Friends & Family) night is that we can let the fighters fight a little bit more. We generally don't allow participants to go quite as far as DPW. The DPW folks, if they start getting into a (how to put this more delicately) non-baton/weapon fighting match, we might give them a few extra seconds before we break them up. Of course, Makeout Queen does mouth, which makes it much more entertaining for everybody. She knows everyone on DPW way better than we do. In terms of highlights, some of those fights are absolutely the best.



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It’s a stress release valve. For DPW that’s incredibly important. DPW folks get in arguments during build season and other people will sometimes jump in to say “hey, hey, save it for the dome!” which is really a compliment to know that we provide that stress valve. I’ve seen a lot of stress out here at DPW, and now that I’m in here I can see why they love it so much. It’s a necessary function. For your average person at Burning Man, it can be important if they’ve had too much Burning Man. It’s a safe way for people to get out their aggression. People get into conflicts and anger gets pent up. I think it’s a great way to prevent people from getting really angry or really harming somebody. It’s a very physically taxing way to get out your aggression in a way where you only focus on hitting and winning for a brief time.

It’s like laser tag. You can’t think about anything except hitting or being hit. That’s your only goal. And it’s basically 3-4 minutes for each fight. About a minute at a time between pulls. Your mind focuses on that one thing. There are other ways to relieve stress out there, but we work to keep it safer than, say, the DPW kickball game or unsupervised art/structures.

I don’t think that we’ve ever had a really serious injury in my seven years where the person had to leave

the playa. Not inside the Dome, anyway. That is largely a function of the pullers. It is our job to bring people together safely at a safe speed and in the correct orientation... and in enough control that they can protect themselves. It’s also our responsibility to pull them apart. The officiant naturally also controls some of this. During fights we also have two people who are very expert and all they do—all they do—is just watch the fights and look for dangerous situations.

That’s generally Julie and Annetta who have been up here for many more years than I. They focus on the fight, and any moment they see something that is the slightest bit off, they throw a hand up and everyone else stops the fight. The main risk in the dome is the first swing and the first point of contact between fighters. After that, the risk of injury is very low; it’s like a bouncy house. Afterwards, people are generally euphoric and exhausted. We don’t let people in drunk or high. I think it’s remarkable that people come back year after year saying Thunderdome is their favorite thing. The overwhelming reason is that it helps them get that euphoric sense of happiness and relaxation in a natural high. And, you know, there might be other things at Burning Man that do that every year, but we’ve been doing it for almost 20.

[Besides the Thunderdome] building the Artery has been a heck of an

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**“Save it for  
Thunderdome!!”**



Peter (center) builds on Artery. Photo credit: Flore Muguet, 2018.

experience. The first day I was out there, I was painting plywood in 110-degree weather, in the sun, for the whole eight hours. I didn’t do acclimation day because I don’t do that. Came out, did that, just kept painting plywood and then I graduated to cutting things and got to help assemble trusses. We built the entire artery from scratch this year. It was an entirely new design, and it was interesting trying to get it all to work well the first time. We spent a lot of time documenting what we can do better next year; the goal being to make it more open and have good airflow.

I’ve actually not spent that much personal time with DPW. I’ve got my Thunderdome camp and my Arctica/ Frozone camp, and that’s most of my time during the event. Certainly, in the evenings, I went to the Saloon a few times and I went to the Ghetto bar a few times. But in terms of overall interaction with DPW, I didn’t camp in the Ghetto. I kind of wish I had, in terms of getting to know people, but on the other hand I also have a longstanding history with Arctica and with Thunderdome. So, I probably will camp with them in the future.

In terms of enjoying the family. There’s no question that the DPW is a family. There are people here who are far more welcoming to me than I would have expected. I look like an average person, and I don’t stick out in the default world; I think there’s a certain value placed on being a little unusual here. I look so completely normal that I was a little worried about people being less welcoming. I’ve found that these people are incredible. They are wonderful, salt of the earth people.

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**“I’m wearing the  
t-shirt with pride;  
I bought the  
hoodie too...”**