

On the road with Alice B. Toeclips

By Francine Nemitz

It was raining when I first met Jacquie Phelan. She was waiting for me near the entrance of the Caffè Nuvo in San Anselmo, her bicycle parked in the entrance of what used to be The Winery. Her face was moist and flushed, her brown eyes clear and vibrant. She'd pedaled from her home in Fairfax to meet me there. "Thanks for getting me out in the rain," she said as we shook hands. "The ride was exhilarating, just what I needed today."

Phelan's been pedaling since she was a little freckle-faced tomboy growing up in Tarzana, California. Although her parents had visions of an "intellectual" career for their daughter, Phelan didn't share it. She used to pedal every day to and from the beach, school, anywhere. That's all she really ever wanted to do.

Today at 28, Phelan is still a tomboy, a self-proclaimed "jock" and proud of it. She's the current national off-road women's champion and, as she puts it, "(I) don't plan to give that up." She's given her bicyclist persona the name of Alice B. Toeclips (she has toeclips on her bike and is a devotee of Gertrude Stein).

In college Phelan majored in languages and she speaks French, Swedish, German and Italian. She also writes articles for sports publications and has a letter-writing service called "My Sentiments Exactly." But her heart has room for only two things — off-road biking, and her boyfriend, off-road bike pioneer Charlie Cunningham. "We're a team," she says, eyes sparkling. "We're into the same thing." He made the bike she rides, a Cunningham Aluminum Ballooner.

IN 1981 PHELAN ENTERED and won the female division in her first off-road competition — the

Fred Mertz



Jacquie Phelan, aka Alice B. Toeclips, has won every bike race she's entered.

Whiskey Town Downhill Race. Since then she's won every race she's entered, usually placing in the first ten, with the next woman not placing for 40 or more entries down the line. She gets a kick out of the fact that she ranks above so many male competitors. Although she recognizes things have changed, she's still pedaling an uphill battle against sexism. "No one wants to be called a 'feminist' these days, but I don't mind," she says. Until recently off-road biking was a sport dominated by men. Phelan is compelled to

change that. She considers it her mission to introduce people, especially women, to the sport and to get them hooked.

Her devotion to off-road biking reaches beyond the fun of the physical experience. She believes that off-road biking is an essential part of well-being, a step away from our automobile-controlled society. "I'm on a visionary quest to turn people on to off-road biking. When you bike everywhere you're stronger, you eat better, you appreciate the environment and are aware of subtle changes. You see the acacias in bloom. You can't notice those things while you're whizzing by in a car."

As their name suggests, off-road bikes are intended for use off the road and are made to traverse dirt, stone, rocks and sand. They have heavier-gauge tubing than their on-road counterparts, a longer steel base for more comfort, wide-range gears and fat, knobby tires. They're higher off the ground (for ease in passing over obstacles) and have a straight-upright handlebar. (Phelan's bike has a dropped bar for racing purposes.) The result is that you can go up a hill with far less exertion than on a road bike and you can cross rougher terrain without ruining the bike or falling off; and because of its lightweight construction, the bike seems to handle itself on straight-road cycling.

Phelan explains that off-road biking is a relatively new sport, which got started about eight years ago in Marin. A few guys who used to truck their bikes up to Mount Tam so they could race them down decided to create a bike that could also *climb* the mountain. "The guys were unemployed bike racers who'd gone corporate — Gary Fisher was the wheeler-dealer," says Phelan, "and Charlie Kelly was the PR man par excellence."

The design Fisher (who owns Mountain Bikes in San Anselmo) and Kelly came up with worked, and is currently being manufactured in every part of the country. In 1978 the custom bikes sold for about \$1200; now that interest in off-road biking has zoomed, so has mass production of the new breed of bike.

Off-road bikes are made by a number of companies and with \$400 you can now get a respectable one. (But note that it's possible to spend much more — Phelan's aluminum bike would sell for about \$4000.)

PHELAN AND CHARLIE CUNNINGHAM got together after a moonlight picnic on top of Mount Tam with a group of friends and new acquaintances. She wasn't sure of the way down, and she wanted a guide; Cunningham got the part. "We fell for each other on the descent." She smiles. An unmistakable glow warms her face. "The owls were hooting, it was a full moon — the whole thing. Charlie is profoundly spiritual; I'm earthy. We complement each other. I never felt I wanted to commit myself so totally to someone until I met Charlie."

Phelan is an energetic woman full of spirit and strong convictions. She has a ruddy outdoor look and her body is tight, muscular and strong — the new accepted look for women in the Eighties, according to Phelan. She's convinced that women have not even begun to show their real strength in the sports world and that this decade will be a landmark in that direction.

For biking she usually wears her hair in one long braid. Her clothing consists of a woolen T-shirt, a sweat shirt or other over-sweater, sweat pants and running shoes. Having wool against the skin is very important, she explains. On downhill rides the wind against cotton or synthetics gives the body an unpleasant cold chill, whereas wool acts as an insulator. She says that layered clothing is always a good idea and that extra warmth should be saved for the downhill ride.

Phelan convinced me that the only way to know what off-road biking feels like is to try it. So I did. She's right. If you're used to road bikes, the difference is remarkable. Sometimes you feel that you're riding on air. We took a 2½-hour ride through the Marin Municipal Water District. On some uphill climbs I had to dismount and watch Ms. Toeclips whiz by with

continued on page 12

Alice B. Toeclips

continued from page 9

no apparent effort. But the experience of those downhill rides is worth all the trouble and you get a good sense of workout and accomplishment trudging uphill and over muddy, rock-filled terrain. As we rode Phelan would point out a wildflower, a mushroom, a mountain in the distance.

Phelan works out six days a week. Her day off from biking was established only after she suffered several painful leg injuries, and learned first-hand the dangers of overtraining. "Sometimes food is the real incentive behind an overzealous athlete," she says, "They know that after a rugged workout they can eat to heart's content and not even flinch about the calorie intake."

AT THIS POINT PHELAN was pedaling beside me and I was on foot pushing my bike uphill. She got down from hers, told me to get up on mine and to start pedaling as she gave me a push. I did, and I was soon on my way. "There you go," she called after me. "Now you're getting it — are you hooked yet?"