

THE 1990 WORLD MOUNTAIN BIKE CHAMPIONSHIPS

Durango, Colorado, USA

September 11-16



1990 WORLD MOUNTAIN BIKE CHAMPIONSHIPS



DURANGO, COLORADO USA

Program produced by:

VELONEWS

WHAT A LONG, STRANGE TRIP IT'S BEEN

Back in 1976, a fun-loving group of Californians started staging informal races for a new category of bicycle. These bikes went under a variety of names, such as "cruisers" or "clunkers." For the most part, they constituted balloon-tire frames modified by the addition of heavy-duty brakes and derailleur gearing systems. In contrast to the bicycles used in most forms of road-bike racing, these were usually rusty relics that had a tendency to explode into a pile of components at awkward times, such as between take-off and landing. No long-range plan was considered for these races; reaching the finish line of a two-mile race was the most long-range goal. The participants most likely felt that the members of their small group were the only people who would ever care for this off-beat brand of competition.

One of the first, and certainly the wildest and best known of the early races, was the Repack Downhill, held on a steep dirt road in Marin County. Organized as a downhill time trial in 1976, this became the model for downhill mountain bike racing. Despite its legendary status, no more than 200 individuals raced there over the eight-year history of the event. Some of these people later became known as founders of the sport, and eight of the 20 people in the Mountain Bike Hall of Fame entered their first mountain bike races in Marin, including course record holder Gary Fisher, Tom Ritchey, Joe Breeze, Mike Sinyard, Charlie Cunningham, Jacques Phelan, Charles Kelly, and Wende Cragg.

When these races were brought to the attention of various local authorities, they were horrified and banned them instantly. This was the type of movement that had to be crushed before it could spread to impressionable youth, they thought. But it was too late. Impressionable youth were already in charge.

Meanwhile, in other parts of California, cross-country mountain bike races were the rage. In 1976, Hall of Famer Tom Hillard put on the first of many annual Punk Bike Enduro races in Santa Rosa, events which raised bike damage to an art form. Another Hall of Famer, Victor Vincente of America, organized the Reseda-to-the-Sea race in 1980 in Southern California.

No one involved in the early days of off-road racing would have guessed that Lycra clothing or helmets would ever be popular — or even worse, required. Standard uniforms were jeans (sometimes cut off), long-sleeve work shirts (to prevent elbow



Otis Guy on the legendary Repack Downhill in 1977.

When these races were brought to the attention of various local authorities, they were horrified and banned them instantly. This was the type of movement that had to be crushed before it could spread to impressionable youth, they thought. But it was too late. Impressionable youth were already in charge.



Pioneers Gary Fisher, Joe Breeze and Monte Ward at San Rafael Reef near Green River, Utah.

Woods Group/Julian Dierckx Archives photo

abrasions), heavy leather work gloves, and standard head protection was a baseball cap turned around backwards.

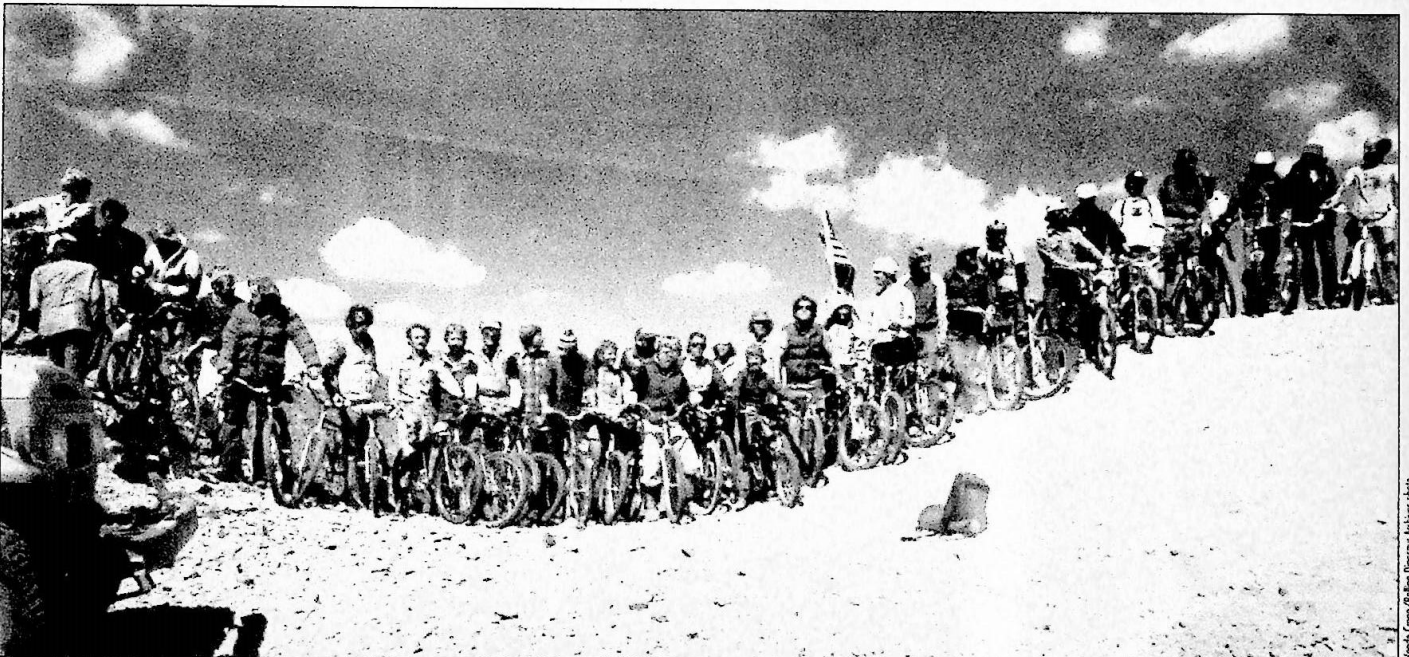
Rules? Of course there were rules. Carrying weapons, for example, was generally frowned upon. The basic rule was the first one to the finish line

was the winner, and if you had a problem with that or thought something was unfair, you could always complain. (Complaining wouldn't get you anywhere, but no one said you couldn't do it.)

By the early 1980s, mass-produced mountain bikes were available and

racing was becoming more organized, but not because racers wanted organization. As far as they were concerned, the less the better. However, the underground network of off-road competitors was expanding, and as riders ventured into other territories, even if they didn't

care for organization, they needed to know what to expect. At the same time, promoters felt the increasing pressure of their liability exposure, and without some form of insurance protection mountain bike racing may have rolled into obscurity. *(Please turn to page 32)*



No neon Lycra here: Group shot on top of Colorado's Pearl Pass, 1981.

Woods Group/Julian Dierckx Archives photo

(Continued from page 31)

Instead, the National Off-Road Bicycle Association, now known universally as NORBA, formed in 1983 with meetings held in the Bay Area. It was hardly a national body when it was founded. Initially, the purpose was twofold: first, the rules (or their absence) had to be documented, and second, someone had to take responsibility for providing an insurance package. The first set of NORBA rules drew a definite line between mountain bike racing and the other, more traditional form of off-road cyclo-cross, by stating clearly that riders had to conduct their own repairs and that they had to ride the distance on the same bike.

As much as the first participants may have wanted mountain bike racing to remain an underground sport, the formation of a national body was the beginning of respectability for fat tires. The first NORBA-sanctioned U.S. national championship for mountain bikes was held in the fall of 1983, and by this time some of the Repack racers were starting to appear at the bicycle trade shows (in suits, no less) pushing their new products on a generally skeptical bicycle industry. Several trade magazines stated that this was just another California fad. Industry experts determined the real future of the bicycle lay in aerodynamic components which, after all, improved performance by at least 2.5 percent. They said the average bike rider didn't want a rugged bike



The author descends the Repack Downhill.

that rarely broke down and could go "anywhere a road bike could go — as well as a lot of places a road bike couldn't go. "Grow up and get real," said the experts. "Get aerodynamic."

History proved the industry experts wrong. The average cyclist today has little use for the type of bicycle ridden by a professional road racer. The unsophisticated public failed to read the trade magazines, and in their ignorance they bought mountain bikes in ever-increasing numbers. Now fat-tire bikes represent half the U.S. market.

Although NORBA started as a privately held operation, the growth in the importance of mountain biking worldwide brought the organization in conflict with the other sanctioning bodies for cycling. Mountain bikers often raced in road events also, and an agreement with the road sanctioning bodies was necessary. By 1987, several European countries had national organizations similar to NORBA for sanctioning mountain bike racing, and in that year the first world championships were held.

Unfortunately, in the absence of international agreements on what constituted a world championship, two versions were held, one in the United States and one in Europe. Whose world is this, anyway?

This problem was solved when the United States Cycling Federation, which is affiliated with the international cycling body — called the Union Cycliste International — assumed control of NORBA in early

1989. The stage was finally set for worldwide agreement on rules, regulations and world championships in mountain biking. As the country where the sport originated, and which has dominated international competition so far, the United States has been selected for the honor of holding the first unified world championships.

In a little more than 10 years, off-road bicycle racing has gone from an obscure sport practiced by an unorganized gang of free-spirited cyclists to a mainstream sport with participants in all parts of the world. Not since the beginning of bicycle racing 100 years ago has any aspect of cycling become so important to the industry as quickly as mountain biking. Although parallels exist between the developments of mountain biking and the other American-born cycle sport, BMX, mountain biking has the adult appeal BMX lacks. There is even talk that mountain biking will become an Olympic sport in the next 10 years.

With the rise of a new category of professional riders and with money and athletic careers at stake, new pressure is on promoters, manufacturers, sanctioning officials, and team managers to bring a professional attitude to mountain bike racing. The sport has come a long way since the days just a few years back when the only prizes were handshakes and the only recognition was a round of applause from the other riders.