

Here's Mud In Your Eye

THE 1983 NORBA NATIONAL OFF-ROAD CHAMPIONSHIP PROMISED A DAY OF ENDURANCE, BUT MOTHER NATURE GAVE THE RACERS MORE (AND LESS) THAN THEY BARGAINED FOR

By John Day
Photography by James Cassimus

The National Off-Road Bicycle Association (NORBA) staged its first National Championship Race in December in the Santa Ynez mountains just north of Santa Barbara, California. As it was initially conceived, the race would consist of five laps around a tough 9.5-mile loop. As it was, the race was foreshortened by inclement weather, but every inch of the course was forever etched — by the sheer effort of tackling it — into the memories of those who raced.

"This is the toughest race we've ever had. Nobody's ever done anything this hard." Two days before he voiced that opinion, Olympic hopeful Alexi Grewal was in Aspen, the road racing season behind him. Then

Raleigh called: It looked like the NORBA championship would be a major event. Some of the best riders in the country were entered: Dale Stetina, Gavin Chilcott, Eric Heiden, Steve Cook, and Clark Roberts. Teams sponsored by Specialized, Ritchey, Steve Potts, Ross, Salsa, and Cunningham had already been fielded. If this was going to be the start of something big, Raleigh would be there, too. Steve Tilford, 1983 cyclocross champion, and Roy Knickman were already in the saddle for Team Raleigh. Could Grewal hop a flight and join them?

No matter that he had never raced (or ridden) off-road. This was the first championship of its kind. It was wide open. There were road racers, cyclocross racers and off-road racers entered. It was anybody's guess who would win. No one had ever gone this distance in an off-road race. Raleigh's thinking was that the winner would be a rider in peak condition, someone with a lot of miles and experience behind him, tough over the long haul, someone like a road racer.



One of the most fun aspects of this sport is the chance to go out and play in the mud. What isn't fun is getting your clothes clean afterwards.

So, there he was. To Grewal and the rest of the starting field, standing in a steady rain, it looked as though it would, indeed, be a particularly swampy, even perilous event. "I think," said Grewal, "that someone will break a leg. I think it is overly dangerous."

Glenn Odell, president of NORBA and architect of the Rancho Oso course, wanted this one to be something special. The first off-road championship had to be not only a race, but a standard against which future NORBA events could be measured.

With a distance of 47.5 miles the race would be almost half again as long as the heralded Whiskeytown Downhill, the longest race of the 1983 season. "The course is

very steep," said Odell, "with portions of vertical drop on some of the downhill switchbacks. Each lap gains 1,800 feet of elevation for a total of 9,000 feet of elevation gain. The rate of climb is a constant 400 feet per mile over a fire-break road (Arroyo Burro road) designed for 2-wheel drive trucks.

"Below the summit (Camino de Cielio) it turns off onto a trail and in two miles on a single track hiking trail (Arroyo Burro trail) you lose the elevation you gained in five miles. There are several hazardous switchbacks, but at each of these we have radio-equipped turn marshalls, each of whom is a trained emergency medical technician."

Although a steep downhill followed a narrow footpath on which passing would be dicey at best, it was not unduly dangerous. Nor was the course, for its steepness and the number of projected circuits to be ridden, comparatively difficult. Jim Harlow, the Whiskeytown champion who rides for Team Ross, said after the race that he had seen intrinsically more difficult courses. But then, he added, they were dry.



Is this any way to spend a Sunday afternoon? Sixty-six off-road enthusiasts decided it was when they competed in the first annual NORBA championships.

Rest assured, with all of this talk about moisture, that it would take more than a little rain to dampen the spirits of the off-road riders. It was not the rain which caused concern, nor was it — really — the resultant mud. Hell, everyone present had ridden in a little mud before. But it was the location of the mud which caused most riders to consider their strategy and prep their bikes carefully before the race.

Uphill Arroyo Burro road, because of intermittent showers during the week, was already muddy and in some sections almost impassable. The downhill run was not terribly muddy until the final mile — the horse trail — where it became a veritable morass.

Jacque Phelan, one of only three women in the starting field, had ridden the course several times before the race. Her strategy for the mud: "I'm going to hop off and carry my bike up the worst sections of road. I already know where they are. I think that it will be important to keep the bike as clean as possible.

"It will really help," she said hefting her 24-pound Cunningham Indian, "to be riding the lightest bike in the race."

John Kirkpatrick, managing Team Ross, told a reporter that his team had, like most of the riders, decided to go with "smaller tires for this race, the 1.75's. The smaller tires will sink further down through the mud and grab better." Ross' Clark Roberts elected to ride a cyclocross bike rather than a heavier, more durable mountain bike, the choice of all other riders.

Cyclocross is an off-road race run on a 6/10-mile loop. A number of dismounts — creek crossings and log hops — are included throughout the course, but the race lasts only for one hour plus one lap. Off-road races are two or three hours longer. Also, cyclocross riders are allowed to receive mechanical aid from their teams, even to the point of receiving entirely new bikes at anytime during the race. NORBA rules prohibit aid of any kind after the start, and disallows picking up other bikes on the course. Riders must be entirely self-sufficient. Ergo, the great concern among riders for protecting their bikes from the ravages of the abrasive mud.

Tom Ritchey, mountain bike frame-builder, arrived only an hour or so before the race. He and Eric Heiden flew in together from Northern California. Although he hinted at new developments on his team bikes, he preferred to say little about them, "I think we'll be able to climb a lot better, descend well, and portage our bikes with ease."

Although it was rumored that Greg LeMond would be riding for Ritchey, neither he nor Gavin Chilcott — the man who many had picked as the pre-race favorite — showed. Chilcott had injured his ankle the day before in an



The bikes get pulled, pushed, dragged and even thrown on terrain and conditions like this. And no matter how wearying, it's a sure bet everyone would willingly try it again.



Steve Tilford is king of the off-road set with victories here and at the national cyclocross championships in November.

LADIES OF THE CANYONS

By Jacquie Phelan

Casey Patterson adjusted the chin-strap on her helmet, revealing a hot-pink gypsy scarf underneath. Here was one competitor who wasn't going to let the weather get her down. After a few minutes everyone would look the same: two eyes peering out from a brown mask of adobe, legs similarly slathered thick up to the thighs, sporting a distinctive stripe up the rear. "Let's hope we don't have to do the full four laps," she shuddered.

I looked at her with surprise. This is the original all-day mama talking; with a fanny-pack full of food, she'll spend from sunup to sundown out there riding if she likes. But anyone with half a brain would recognize that we were not gathered to go on a "fun" ride. We were assembled in the rain to compete in the first off-road national championship. We'd heard about the \$400 cash first prize. We all hoped to meet some more competitive women in our sport.

Deep down I was delighted. My petition would be supported by an overwhelming two-thirds majority (there were but three women competing for that big prize). Common sense dictated that even one lap of the 9 1/2 mile Arroyo Burro loop would string us out, testing the lungs, legs and patience of the most seasoned off-road cyclist. We would insist on a curtailed, two-lap event, a whopping 19-miler.

This diminutive (5 foot, 90 pounds) woman with a big smile was persuaded to try off-roading by her son, Kyle. Patterson has taken up the sport with the zeal usually reserved for born-again Christians and recent EST graduates. The woman eats, sleeps and lives klunkers. She has a successful off-road touring company, Wilderness Bicycle Tours, and has influenced many people to try the sport. She also proves that being 39 years old doesn't slow her down a bit.

Carmen Carrouche, 26, is best known as "the girl on the Ross team." She cuts an imposing figure in her spiffy jersey and knickers. (The

Ross racing outfit seems to be designed to intimidate the competition.) Hailing from Arcadia, Calif., and armed with a master's in exercise physiology, she began both road and off-road racing last spring. Placing was no problem. Any woman



Casey Patterson, who promotes off-road touring with her Wilderness Bicycle Tours, was persuaded to try the sport by her teen-aged son.

motivated enough to attempt racing with up to 300 men is sure to do well.

This sport's appeal is aimed at grown-up boys; only certain women seem to respond. There is no distinct type, but a certain pattern holds true: She is usually in her late 20s or older; she was an active, if not sports-oriented, teen-ager; she enjoys tackling a challenge, either in a mass-start race or a long solo ride; and she rarely, if ever, rides with other women. As I said, there aren't many of us out there. Perhaps most important of all, if she does ride with a group, she is not made to feel inferior. Male or female, the slower riders are accommodated in a variety of ways by the stronger ones. One can either wait at the top of the hills, or double back throughout the ride.

As Patterson says, "If they complain about having to slow down for me, I point out that I don't see any of *their* mothers out there."

All this camaraderie is not lost when the gun goes off. True, one would like to pick 'em off on the hills and hold 'em off on the descents, but if it happens that it is a duel with the same person the whole race, acquaintance is inevitable.

Carrouche, Patterson and I have raced together for months. We know each other's weaknesses and strengths. We compare bikes, trade jokes at the starting line, and bemoan the lack of new faces in our division. Even the women on the sidelines are not spared from our recruiting efforts. They are reading this now, remembering that they promised me they would "just try ONE" race.

As we're sizing up the men's competition and securing our starting position, the rain is soaking into the clay, sand and grass on the course, guaranteeing up to a mile of bike-carrying (unless one prefers to collect 60 pounds of muck on the wheels, stays, and chain). Both Patterson and I had a distinct advantage over Carrouche here, riding lightweight Cunningham bikes. Carrouche had just gotten ahold of a lovely custom bike, but it still weighed more than 25 pounds — without the mud.

Team Cunningham was able to walk away with the honors. I finished first in 3 hours, 2 minutes. Back there in the drizzle, it was a real duel between Patterson and Carrouche. Patterson insists she owes her second-place finish to her beloved new bike, but I know better; the urge to win kept her bike on the smoothest parts of the road and gave her strength to overcome numb fingers and an empty stomach to beat Carrouche by 15 minutes. Patterson's time was 3 hours, 48 minutes.

Clearly there are plenty of gaps in the field to be filled by adventurous women who dare to attempt something entirely new. We are here, waiting . . .

auto accident and LeMond simply decided that he did not want to compete until he had more experience riding off-road.

Moments before the start Odell asked the assembled field if, because of the rapidly degenerating course, they wished to cut back from the original plan of five laps? A roar of dissent rose from the

crowd. Five it would be.

Tilford seized the lead sprinting by the ranch house and under the canopy of live oak along the river. Raleigh yellow and black dominated as 66 riders swarmed over rocks and through Arroyo Burro creek. Tilford held the lead into the uphill grade, pulling away from the pack, closely followed by Cook and

Knickman.

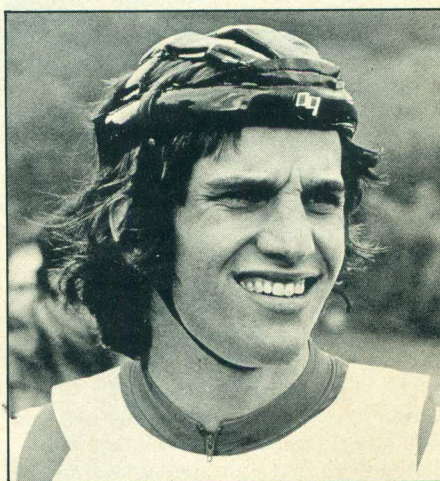
In spite of the poor condition of the road, the three leaders made only two dismounts to carry their bicycles. Topping-out, the leaders were still together. They held position down the downhill which was also marked by dismounts, a half-dozen tree and boulder crossings and another half-



It makes sense to keep an eye on the competition, but in adverse conditions like these, a kinship develops and survival of the fittest becomes a joint effort.



Alexi Grewal, a tough and highly competitive road racer, was drafted by Raleigh just days before the race. He had never ridden off-road before.



Eric Heiden, Olympic speedskater-turned-cyclist, relies on his strength and endurance to help him go the distance. On this day, though, he quit after two laps. A little slogging through ankle-deep mud goes a long way.

dozen dismounts due to short but impassable lengths of clay-based mud.

The bottom of the descent — the horse path — was passable for the leaders on the first lap, but had to be traversed on foot through the remainder of the afternoon. Past this stretch, back on the dirt road winding around to the start, Cook flatted. He had prepared well and, as a mountain bike racer, was accustomed to being his own mechanic. He had fixed the flat and was back in the saddle within an astonishing four minutes.

Both Knickman and Clark Natwick passed Cook as he worked, but Cook passed Natwick again on the climb. He also passed Knickman who flatted on the second downhill. From that point Cook was never again caught. By then, though, Tilford had about a 3 1/2 minute lead. To the disappointment of many, the race had become virtually static.



The post-race ritual of hosing down the muddied bikes was the last step before packing up and heading home.



The picture tells the tale. The race was tough on man and machine.

"The race was over by the end of the second lap," said Gary Fisher. "There was not a single sprint. They were completely spread out." Fisher's contingent, Team Ritchey, was at the front of the group following the leaders, but by the end of the first lap was about five minutes behind. At the end of lap two, Ritchey and Heiden rode into the pit area and called it a day.

Heiden later said that he was, "very letdown. It just turned into a race of attrition. If I had known that the race was going to be like that I would have stayed home and studied for finals." Although the Stanford University student is a professional road racer, Heiden is no slouch on an off-road bike. He placed second to Chilcott in the

'83 Rockhopper and is a consistently strong finisher.

Ritchey was also very unhappy with the race. "This race was not the kind of thing that shows the bike's forte. The radical, gonzo side of the sport was too emphasized. The beauty and ballet and mobility that are inherent in the sport were just not featured. This course drew attention away from that."

By the end of lap two, nearly half the field had dropped out. Knickman had flatted twice and rode the last lap-and-a-half on his rear rim. Grewal was sidelined by a mechanical failure. Although no legs were broken, his pre-race prediction came true as he sustained minor knee damage. Grewal's brake pads, like many others, were worn



A day's work done and none too soon. The race was called after three laps, shortened from the original five. One glance at this weary face tells the whole story.

down to gray paste shot through with metal filings. One of the few riders who had pad remaining was Cook, who had previously experienced the effects of abrasive wear while riding in snow in his native Colorado. Anticipating the mud, he had put on Mafacs which stood up even to the abuse of the mushy course.

It had become too much a survival exercise for Odell. He later said of his decision to stop the race after one more lap, "I could not in good conscience let it continue. There were a lot of riders close to hypothermia and most of them had lost their brakes. With those sheer drop-offs and no brakes, the downhill was just too dangerous." The race was called when the first rider completed the third lap.



Pre-race strategy discussions between competitors are hardly unusual, but when the national cyclocross champion Steve Tilford (right) confers with the current Coors Classic champ Dale Stetina (left) before a mountain bike race, the conversation must be interesting.



Fiercely determined riders were forced off the trails which had become little more than mud troughs.

Tilford held on to the lead to finish with a time of 3:27:18. Cook was second in 3:31:59 and gaining, and unattached Jon Loomis surprised everyone with a strong 3:37:47. Phelan completed two laps in 3:07:10 winning the women's championship, with Casey Patterson, also riding for Team Cunningham, placing second.

Only 37 of the starting field of 66 finished. Random grouching about the foreshortened race was heard, but no one took it too seriously. As Fisher explained, "I talked to one of the guys and he was griping about it. I said to him, 'Well, listen. Why don't you do the other two laps of the original five and just stand up and declare yourself the winner.' [Under U.S. Cycling Federation rules such a thing could be done.] That knocked him back, and he said 'uuuuuhhhnnnnn. . . .' When you got right down to it, nobody wanted to do it."

In general, everyone was happy with the decision to shorten the race. The necessity to do so was obvious. Literally everyone agreed that it was a terrific first effort from NORBA. A learning situation, granted, but indeed, the start of something big.

Fisher had the last word: "If it hadn't rained this would have been a fabulous, wonderful course that everybody would have enjoyed. Nobody could have had any gripes about it, because the course is very typical of what off-road riding is . . . typically." And the rain? ". . . Well, typically people stay inside." ☻

1983 NORBA NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP RESULTS

MEN

1. Steve Tilford, Ames, IA (Mike's Raleigh)
2. Steve Cook, Crested Butte, CO (Cunningham)
3. John Loomis, Tiburon, CA
4. Robert Stewart, Larkspur, CA (Potts)
5. Joe Murray, San Anselmo, CA (Ritchey)
6. Scot Nicol, Walnut Creek, CA (Ibis)
7. Dale Stetina, Boulder, CO (Ritchey)
8. Dave McLaughlin, Palo Alto, CA (Ritchey)
9. Mark Michel, Santa Cruz, CA (Salsa)
10. Roy Knickman, Ames, IA (Mike's Raleigh)

WOMEN

1. Jacquie Phelan, Fairfax, CA (Cunningham)
2. Casey Patterson, Topanga, CA (Cunningham)
3. Carmen Carrouche, Arcadia, CA (Ross)

AN OUTSIDER'S VIEW OF AN INSIDER'S SPORT

By Sharon Lewis Dickerson

I'm a bicycle tourist, not a racer. For me, the "thrill of victory" is making it to the top of a hill — any hill — and the "agony of defeat" is finding there's no store at the summit. Hence, no cold beer. Don't get me wrong, I do admire racers. Quite frankly, I'm a little in awe of these people and the skill, courage, and dedication they exude. Still, I find it very difficult to identify with anyone who actually looks good in a skin suit.

However, at the NORBA championships, my image of racers — those sleek, suntanned, fine-tuned machines in skin tight fluorescent shorts and jerseys — changed. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it was modified or expanded.

I must be perfectly honest and say that I had absolutely no idea what to expect. My knowledge of those funny-looking fat-tired bikes — and the people who ride them — is definitely lacking if not non-existent. Still, the idea of watching a national cycling event that featured top racers in action somehow appealed to me.

The morning of the race dawned cold, windy, and wet. Would they run the race in sloppy weather? I didn't know, but I assumed that all-terrain probably also meant all-weather. I donned my rain gear and headed for the San Marcos Pass.

I arrived at the race site about 8 a.m. — totally unprepared for the spectacle. There were short hairs, long hairs, punkers, spit-and-polished team racers and they were wearing everything from traditional riding apparel — including the ubiquitous

skin suit — to jeans, sweat pants, baggy T-shirts, hiking and motorcycle boots. One woman had attached mistletoe to her helmet and another strapped a pink bunny to her handlebars. It was an incredible sight. But, make no mistake, these were all outstanding cyclists. The registration list numbered 70 and included such greats as Steve Cook, Roy Knickman, Eric Heiden, Steve Tilford, and Dale Stetina. Rain or shine, this was going to be a great cycling event.

The race began with a mass start and Steve Tilford of Team Raleigh took the lead immediately. Following the pack were two relative unknowns, locals dubbed "Team Cowboy." Dressed in jeans, chaps, boots, and spurs and riding a Schwinn tandem with 20 inch wheels, they hammered away and gave it their best. But, they apparently decided that their best was not enough; the next time I saw them they had traded their bike for a couple of horses. Somehow, they looked much more at home.

Steve Tilford was the first to surface from the back country about an hour later. It was raining heavily by then and the course was muddy and slippery. Riders were looking a little worse for the wear as they completed the first lap and many were becoming unrecognizable as the mud and crud built up on bike and rider. Still, they were enjoying themselves. I heard shouts of glee as they slipped and slid through what some called "icky, sticky peanut butter," "hog wallow," and "this (expletive deleted) mud!"

Roy Knickman and Steve Cook

followed close on Tilford's heels for the first lap and Knickman apparently took the lead sometime during the second. A flat tire and a lack of spare tubes, however, put him out of contention. Tilford completed the second lap still in the lead.

As the weather worsened and the course became more dangerous, Glenn Odell, NORBA president and race coordinator, shortened the race from five to three laps. Many racers, including Eric Heiden and Tom Ritchey, dropped out. Others simply hosed down their bikes and themselves, gritted their teeth, and started lap three.

Tilford crossed the finish line first followed very closely by Steve Cook and John Loomis. Incredibly, Knickman finished tenth, after riding a lap-and-a-half on a flat rear tire. True to the spirit of these off-road pioneers, he crossed the finish line doing a wheelie — much to the delight of the crowd.

Jacquie Phelan, one of the three women contenders and winner in the women's division, accepted the "Queen of the Mountain" award by saying, "Okay, all you women out there, I expect to see you out here next year!" Well, maybe. But it will probably be behind a camera again. I was as wet, cold and muddy as I wanted to be just spectating. Still, it does look like fun. So, who knows?

As a friend of mine — also a spectator — put it, "This was a first-class event and I had a great time even if I was wet and miserable the whole time." I'm sure the participants would agree.



The slippery mud created conditions that allowed cyclists to ride only part of the course.



Jacquie Phelan, the undefeated women's champion, continues to search for competitors, even to the point of trying to convince female bystanders to join in the race.