

By Charles Kelly

As he crested the summit of Farewell Gap in the southern Sierra Nevada mountains, the startled hiker stared at the two men and a woman sitting there, 10,700 feet above sea level, next to three big-wheeled bicycles. No one spoke for half a minute as the hiker paused to catch his breath. Finally, he broke the silence. "I don't know how the hell you got those things up here, but I'm impressed."

In the past five years, so-called clunker bikes have evolved from the familiar fat-tired, one-speed, paper carrier's cycle into something else entirely. Through tinkering, trial and error, and calculated modifications, clunker aficionados have developed a machine that they believe will go anywhere. The

clunker rider is no longer limited to the confines of the paved world. Tussling with street traffic is no longer necessary; short cuts through creeks, over logs, and down mountain paths have become preferable.

Some clunker bikes are sophisticated, handmade machines that incorporate the state of the art in bicycling technology and cost up to \$1,000. Though only about two dozen of these *crème de la clunkers* are in use, hundreds of other cyclists are pedaling old Schwinn's or similar rugged species that have been modified for the back roads by the addition of drum brakes and multiple gears. Sturdy, but not quite the performers the custom-made models are, they can be bought or built for between \$150 and \$400.

Built To Take It

Cyclists are taking to the hills on a new breed of backcountry bicycle—the clunker



Larry Cregg

Ballooners, cruisers, bombers, beach bikes—whatever the local nomenclature—unmodified old bicycles have ridden alongside ten-speeds for years; but until recently no one thought to merge the ballooners' ruggedness with the convenience of multiple gears.

It was in the San Francisco area that several elements combined to produce the modified ballooners, or clunker: a good supply of old bikes, availability of new parts, proximity to mountainous terrain laced with fire roads, and the presence of a well-organized and fiercely competitive cycling cult.

The "canyon gang," a group of young men living at the base of a good-sized mountain, became the first masters of the downhill ballooners ride. About ten years ago, they started taking truckloads of whatever bikes were available to the top of the mountain and riding home in the most direct fashion—on a steep dirt road that

earned the name "Roller Coaster" from a series of dips and peaks.

As they learned the road and their descents became faster and more destructive to the equipment, the riders were forced to upgrade their bikes. Certain frame styles—especially those made of chrome-molybdenum alloy—became popular. So did Morrow coaster brakes, which, unfortunately, have not been manufactured for decades.

In order to preserve their rare old Morrows, the canyon gang started tinkering in a way that brought about a breakthrough; they began using front drum brakes, similar to lightweight motorcycle brakes, and suddenly they were in control. Soon, the canyon gangsters were doing such stunts as riding at 40 miles an hour under a single-pipe gate (with two inches of clearance above the handlebars) to maintain enough speed to launch the bike off a sharp crest for a 40-foot jump. To this day, no one rides clunkers like the canyon gang.

Because they had a truck, however, the gangsters saw no need to improve the uphill capabilities of their machines. Further progress was made by others.

In Marin County a number of racing cyclists began riding ballooners on local errands in order to preserve their more delicate racing machines. Though these street bikes could be ridden over any surface, there was considerable room to improve their performance. There was no conscious direction to this group's tinkering, but the innovators solved in logical order all the major problems inherent in the old bicycle. The evolution from one-speed to a true cross-country machine took less than two years. But it was not without mishaps.

For every successful innovation, there were several ideas that didn't work—and some rider paid for the failures with skin, blood, and bone, or with broken frames, hubs, handlebars, gears, or other minor, but no less



Gary Fisher

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*Below: The end of a rugged ride—Crystal Basin
in the Sierra Nevada Mountains.*

*Below Left: Bikers must become hikers too,
during this leg of a race in the hills near
San Francisco.*

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essential, parts. First aid became necessary.

An innovative Bay Area rider always traveled with a pair of Vice-Grips casually clamped to his frame. He claimed that he could fix anything with the grips and his Swiss-Army knife; if he couldn't fix it, he could clamp it together long enough to get it home.

Once, when a front wheel collapsed, two riders bolted the front forks of the damaged machine onto the

rear wheel of a healthy one and rode back in three-wheel tandem fashion. They swore that it worked, except that the rear rider had to lean the opposite direction on the turns.

After the canyon gang had solved the most serious braking problems, riders turned their efforts toward improved gearing. As long as coaster brakes were in use (caliper brakes work inefficiently on clunker wheels), three speeds seemed the most promis-▶

ing. The problem was solved when one rider discovered that tandem bicycles had drum rear brakes as well as a five-speed gear cluster, like the lightweight road machines. A little tinkering, bending, and filing, and a derailleur was mounted on an old balloon. Clunker freaks immediately descended on every bike shop in the Bay Area looking for tandem hubs, and the basic clunker was born.

In early 1976 two Bay Area riders found what had to be the steepest dirt road in the area. It loses 1,300 feet of elevation in two miles of ruts, rocks, off-camber corners, and cliffs. As the two rode their brakes, skidding downhill, they agreed that this would be an ideal place for a race. When they reached the bottom, they noticed that their coaster brakes had become so hot that all the grease had evaporated, requiring that they be repacked with grease. Thus, the famous "Repack" race course was discovered and named.

The Repack is similar to a ski race, with riders making timed solo runs. Only a dozen riders in the event's history have ridden the course in less than five minutes, although the record stands at 4:22. These experts have the course memorized, and in stretches where the natural tendency is to jam on the brakes, they are standing up in their highest gears, striving for more speed.

Another popular attraction is the annual Crested Butte-to-Aspen Ride in Colorado. This two-day event is climaxed by the ascent and subsequent tooth-loosening descent of 12,700-foot Pearl Pass on a road best described as an unmaintained mule path.

Clunkers aren't found only in competition. This bike gives the non-motorized explorer immense range—several times that of a hiker—at speeds slow enough so that the rider won't miss anything. The swift, silent approach of the clunker offers many opportunities to observe animal life that might shy away from hikers. Up to 18 gears make it possible to climb steep hills, and, of course, the downhill is all free. For general exploration, clunkers can be ridden anywhere with approximately the same ecological impact as a hiker, and they can be carried, if necessary, over nearly any obstacle. Who knows, in the mid-eighties we may see a movie entitled *The Man Who Clunked Down Everest*.



Charles Kelly lives in California and considers himself "the world's foremost authority on the world's smallest field."