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of

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How Three Men Changed the World of Biking Forever!



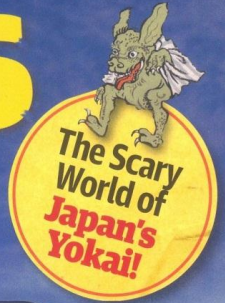
Charlie Kelly



Gary Fisher



Joe Breeze



plus!

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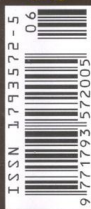
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June / July 2009

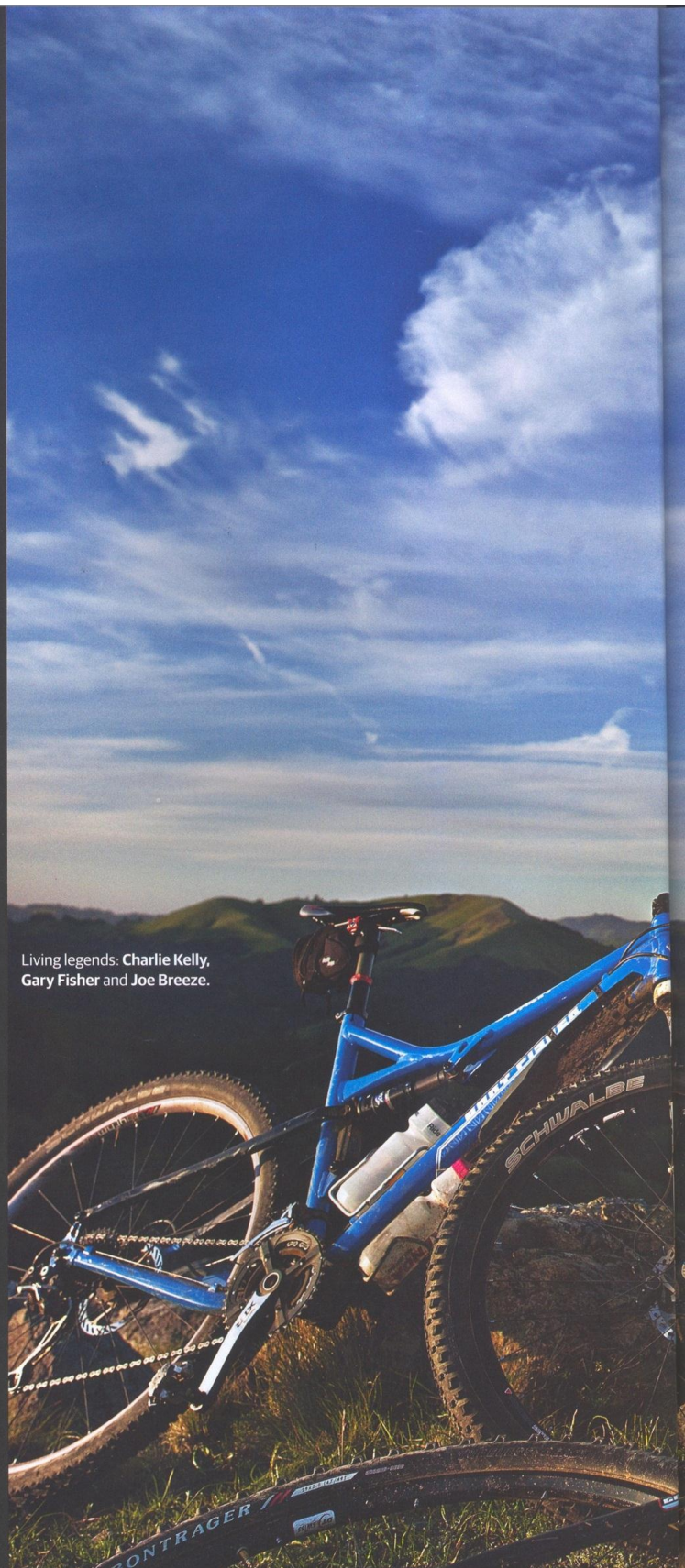


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MythBusters • Raising the HMS Victory • A Forger's Tale

Charlie Kelly
and friends
stood astride
their clunky
old Schwinn
bikes in 1974,
looking
over San
Francisco
Bay
from Pine
Mountain,
ready to ride.
They had
no idea they
were about
to **change**
the sporting
world
forever.

By TYM MANLEY



Living legends: Charlie Kelly,
Gary Fisher and Joe Breeze.

the
GODFATHERS
of
MOUNTAIN BIKING



PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDER



If you go into any bicycle shop today, the majority of bikes on show will have fat tyres, 27-speed gearing, disc brakes, flat bars, suspension and street-smart looks.

It's hard to believe that only a couple of decades or so ago, bikes like this never existed - anywhere. The majority of the bikes you could buy were skinny wheel, ten-gear, drop handlebar, steel-frame lightweights in monochromatic colours only fit for road riding. Nobody even thought about a bicycle that could be ridden off road.

In 1979, two keen cyclists called Gary Fisher and Charlie Kelly became partners in a company dedicated to commercial production of a new kind of bike. The name they gave their company? Mountain-Bikes. The world of cycling was about to change.

Fat Tyre Terror

Back in the mid-70s Kelly, Fisher and their friend Joe Breeze hung around on the edge of the California bicycle racing scene, but had never been fully absorbed into it - even though Fisher had done some racing. Kelly and Breeze preferred to hang around their place at 32 Humboldt Street in Fairfax, California, building bikes up from bits.

Nonetheless, they were both committed cyclists in a land that, back then, didn't hold cycling in much regard. "I was a solitary guy with a nice ten-speed bike," says Kelly. "In those days you didn't have riding friends. It was so rare, that when you saw someone cycling you'd say: 'Yo! How's it going?'"

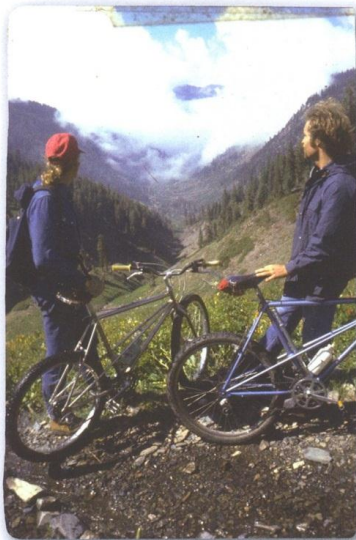
Luckily for today's riders, Breeze and Kelly were children of the 60s, free thinkers, hedonists. Kelly was a long-haired roadie for the psychedelic rockers Sons of Champlin. He and Breeze weren't blinkered by traditional approaches.

"We just woke up thinking how we were going to have fun on our bikes," says Kelly.

One of the places they liked to ride was on the Repack, a 400-metre stretch of fast fire trail down the sage-scented Pine Mountain in Marin County. The problem was that road bike frames weren't strong enough for the task, and the wheels would just buckle.

So Kelly and Breeze hit on the idea of using old Klunkers (sometimes known as paper-boy or post-boy bikes) to do the job. These Schwinn Excelsior X bikes were big 1940s' beasts; built like tanks with long wheelbases, slack angles and big fat tyres. They were originally aimed at kidding young boys into thinking they were riding a motor-

While the Repack in northern California was the site of many of the first mountain bike races (bottom, right), Kelly and Breeze took their Klunkers to remote slopes all over the state, including to Mineral King Valley in the Sequoia National Park (below).





bike, but the fat tyres and easy steering suited the bumpy Repack road surface perfectly (even though the brakes were terrible).

“The only thing going through your mind when you rode the Repack was sheer terror,” says Breeze. “The only way you could do well was to scare the hell out of yourself. It’s called exhilaration.”

Spurred on by the gang at 32 Humboldt, Breeze modified the Klunker design to build his own lighter and better downhill frames, but the running gear was always a mixture of heavy-duty tandem and motorcycle stuff “persuaded” to fit together. None of the bicycle manufacturers made suitable gear, so the pioneers made do with whatever they could. And the bikes sold.

Unknown to Breeze and co, other people were also doing the same sort of thing; modifying Klunkers and careering down hills elsewhere in Marin County.

But, for the record, Breeze, Kelly, Fisher and their friends were the first to modify the bicycle for timed downhill runs - and their races spawned the first ever custom-built downhill frames.



A motley crew of trailblazers pose at the 3,782-metre Pearl Pass during the third annual Crested Butte to Aspen Pearl Pass Klunker Tour in September 1978 (top). Earlier that year, man and machine packed in tight to get to Azalea Hill, one of the local rides for the Fairfax crew of riders (bottom).

Requiem for the Repack

Off-road biking’s time had come, and if ever there was a decade for a grass-roots movement to challenge a backwards-looking authoritarian system (as road cycling was then), the 1970s was it. Between 1975 and 1980, Kelly was still touring with rock bands, Jimmy Carter was US president and as he puts it: “We could get away with the Repack. After 1979, we couldn’t.”

The full fervour of the civil rights movement and Vietnam War protests might have been ten years gone, but the hippy thing was still strong in San Francisco and spreading its attitudes. “We were away in our own mountain bike world,” says Breeze. The attitude was pure can do - and they did. The revolution had started, but although building the bikes was still a cottage industry, the word had begun to spread. The rest of the world followed, inspired by the first production exports like the Specialized Stumpjumper which made its debut in 1981.

In England, uniquely British bikes became available from the likes of Cleland, English Cycles and Overburys. The UK Mountain Bike Club

"We just woke up thinking
how we were going to have fun on our bikes"

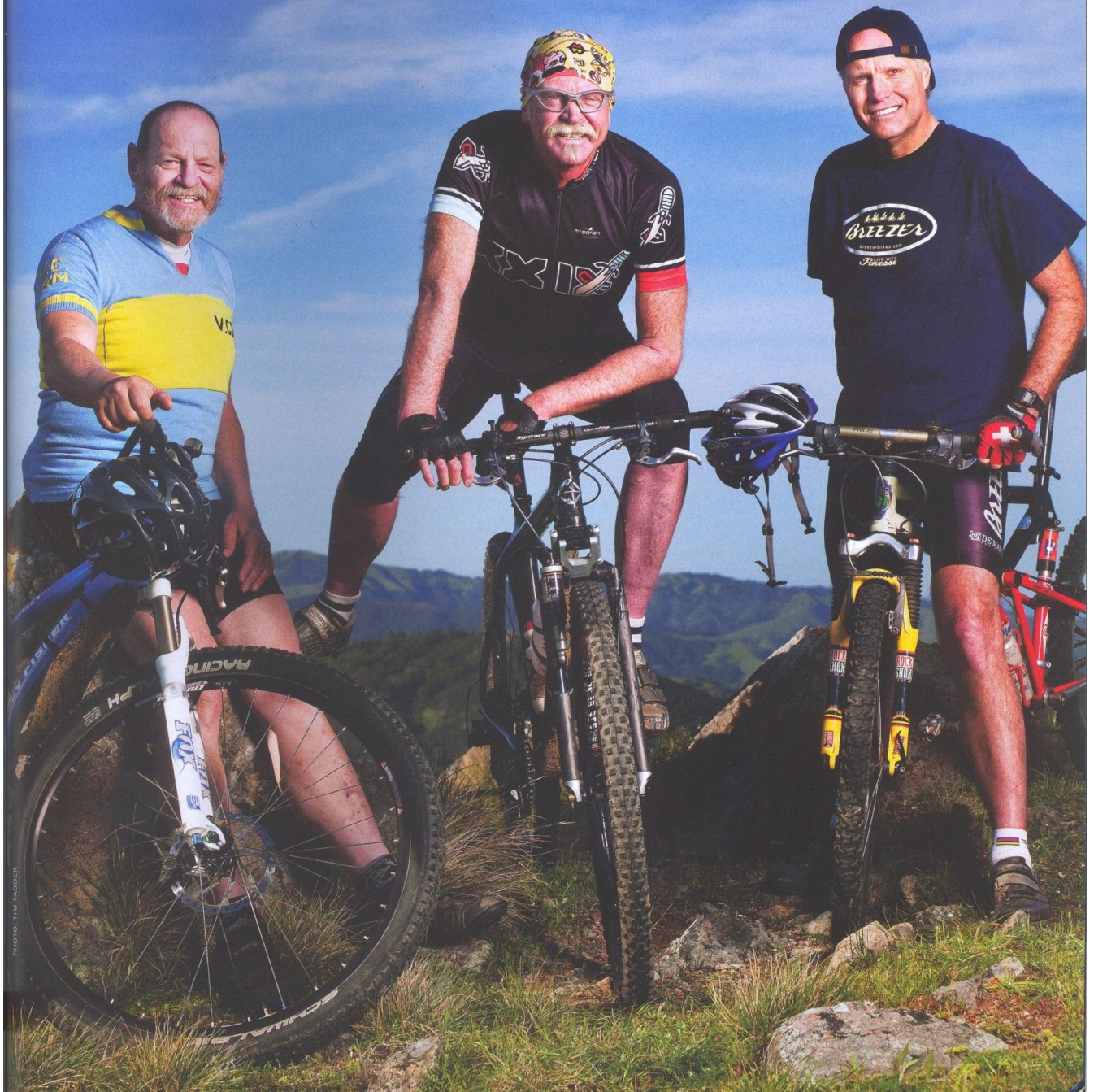


PHOTO: TIM FADDER



began running events in the very early 1980s. Co-founder Max Glaskin remembers the distinctly hippy style. “The fringe dwellers with the mad ideas and bikes are what made mountain biking happen,” he reminisces. “People would turn up; smoke dope and then just jump off hills.” Glaskin says he thought at the time they were all mad. “And they were,” he laughs.

Primitive instructional schools were set up to teach log jumping, downhill technique and bunny hopping in mud - all on rigid bikes; not a suspension component in sight.

Taming the Revolutionaries

Meanwhile, back in California, the days of Kelly standing on a rock handing out “smokables” as prizes at the Repack were over, but mountain-bike events remained unique. Where road cyclists had formal races to win, mountain bikers had the cycling equivalent of rock festivals, the primary goal being to hang out in the open air and have fun.

That ended in 1980, when for insurance reasons Breeze, Kelly and others formed the National Off-Road Bicycle Association, underground



From being a way for 1970s' thrillseekers to get their kicks, mountain biking has grown into an international sport, where races around the world draw thousands of competitors and spectators alike.

became official and the secret was out. But even then, while the world's cycling organisations wanted all those potential members, mountain bikers remained largely resistant to joining formal clubs.

Many of the racers, particularly the fashionable downhill stars, already had commercial sponsors by the time the Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI) got involved in making rules and regulations (the first UCI-recognised mountain biking World Championship took place in 1990). The commercial appeal of the sport had already been widened by Grundig, the German electronics giant, which sponsored early world-class races and supplied free-to-air TV footage around the world. And the image was not that of the traditional bicycle racer.

Out went useless “bunch-of-banana” head protectors; in came stylish helmets. Flamboyant Oakley eyewear and shiny motocross clothing replaced the “very hungry ballet dancer” image of the classic road cyclist. Socially, downhill's bright style gave the sport a cool look. A new breed of bicycle couriers spread the “rough-rider” look through the

PHOTOS: CORBIS; ALAMY

WINNERS

● 18: World Cup Cross Country victories; Thomas Frischknecht

● 9: World Championship Downhill titles; Anne-Caroline Chausson

● 7: World Championship Downhill titles; Nico Vouilloz



city streets, spawning such global brands as Crumpler in the process. And city-based non-racers introduced their own Day-Glo clothing palette owing as much to surfing and skateboarding as cycling. Mountain biking let people look cool and stylish on a bike.

Technically, too, the mountain bike had found its time. The engineering giants of Asia were on the rise and looking for business, fully tooled up to compete with established European competition. New ideas flooded in and bikes improved by leaps and bounds. Mass-produced Specialized bikes from the United States signalled game on to the emerging Japanese bicycle component makers. SunTour in 1983 and Shimano in 1984 introduced quality sets of running gear (known as “group sets” or “gruppos”) specifically for mountain bikes. Cantilever



Steep descents with stunning vistas, such as found at **Howe Sound** in Canada's British Columbia province, or **twisting forest trails full of roots and rocky obstacles** provide a variety of challenges for mountain bikers.

brakes revolutionised what riders expected of braking power. High-quality, light tyres and wheels, tough bars and specially designed saddles followed.

The Giants Ride in

Soon, contract frame builders in Taiwan (led by Giant and Merida) that previously only made frames for big-name brands jumped onto the downhill ride. This was probably the most significant event in making the mountain bike the world's most popular form of bicycle; sales numbers rocketed, prices dropped and even supermarkets started selling mountain bikes.

Surprisingly, many big name cycling corporations held back. Many had previously invested heavily in the BMX bubble but that had remained a niche market. Mountain biking, they felt, might be just

PHOTOS: STERLING LORENCE

Evolution or Revolution?

How does one of the first Klunkers, a 1941 BFGoodrich (by Schwinn), compare to the latest Gary Fisher HiFi Pro Carbon (2009)?



BFGOODRICH VS GARY FISHER HIFI PRO CARBON

Heavy steel frame and forks	Light carbon frame and forks, with front and back suspension
Sprung saddle, solid steel shell and rails	Carbon framed shell on hollow titanium rails
Single speed	27-speed gearset
Hub brakes, designed for smooth roads, effectiveness limited off-road	Disc brakes, work in wet, muddy conditions; will function even if wheel hub damaged
Smooth, balloon tyres, provide basic form of suspension	Fat, heavy-treaded tyres, boost traction on trails
Roadster style handlebars, stemless	Wide handlebars, give better control over obstacles
Cost: Joe Breeze paid US\$5 in 1973	Cost: Over US\$7,149.99
Weight: 20 kilograms	Weight: 10.6 kilograms

another fad. Britain's iconic manufacturer, Raleigh, and Schwinn in the US were notably cautious on mountain bikes. So the companies that made their names in mountain bikes were often smaller specialist outfits that cared as much about the sport as about the business.

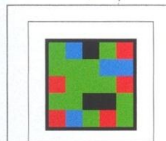
Today, the mountain bike dominates bike sales. Entry-level machines boast strong, light alloy frames, light wheels and tyres, reliable and accurate gearing, hydraulic disc brakes, and as often as not, come with suspension both front and back. Decent bikes have never been such good value and the technical quality at the US\$2,500 level is awesome. It's not surprising the mountain bike remains the world's favourite all-round ride.

Now mainstream and continuing to catch the imagination of new enthusiasts around the world, the

influence of its origins is still very much a part of mountain biking. Its charm is that, while you can take it very seriously if you want, there remains something joyful and light-hearted about riding bikes in the mud and dirt. It's a pastime that thrives where hippies and racers meet, where cyclists and posers rub shoulders, where small businesses and corporations co-exist.

But what gets to the inventors most is the way mountain biking has changed the face of outdoor activity from tweed-trousered rambling and Safari Club zealots, to cool kids having fun in the sun.

Joe Breeze is still building bikes today; still getting out that amazing secret of cycling. "To us the mountain bike was more of a lark but, by golly, it has got more people onto bicycles than any machine since the 1890s," he grins. ■



Zap! this code with your mobile phone, answer a simple question and stand to win a pair of Gary Fisher signature gloves!

PHOTOS: JOE BREEZE: FISHER BIKES

● Lance McDermott: Cool young stunt rider

● Hans Rey: Extreme rider, once jumped a bike off a train

● Steve Peat: Off-trail adventurer and multiple World Cup winner