



Mudslingers

Down-scale and dirty, mountain biking ain't pretty, but it's the latest all-American thrill on two wheels

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An uncouth horde is taking over the Jerome bar, located downtown in the exceedingly hip center of Aspen. Flaunting badass attitudes, they track mud across the floor and trail behind them a stench of campfire smoke. Then one of them rips off an unholy belch. The sound is loud and impertinent. The Aspenites who were in the Jerome before the newcomers' arrival try to keep a grip on their cool. Guys with sandy mustaches slowly put down their blue margaritas. Girls with long blond hair stare frigidly over the tops of Vuarnets.

When the stares are retracted, the belcher, a guy named Howie Hammerman, smiles for his pals. The Jerome bar, he says, is where the gorgeous and athletic residents of Aspen sometimes gather to be discovered by a movie director. It is a kind of Hard Rock Cafe in the mountains, a place to see and be seen in a ski town that's become a playpen for Hollywood. There are snooty discotheques, studio jets flying into the airport, and even the chairlifts are a subsidiary of Twentieth Century Fox. The ski bums have wised up. They no longer aspire to be

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honest ski bums. They want Aspen to be an escalator to fast times.

Howie knows these things because he too is in the movies. But not in a way that would rate with Aspen gold diggers. He belches again, a phlegmy, alliterative outburst. The sound echoes through the room as if the bar were a cave, the lair of some hideous creature. Heads swivel, eyes bore into him.

Howie erupts with another: "Br-aappp."

The Aspenites flee. It's as though they recognized the dreadful truth. The belch of Howie Hammerman, an audio engineer from California, is actually the belch of Jabba the Hutt. Howie's boss George Lucas used a recording of the fearsome belch on the soundtrack of *Return of the Jedi*.

Howie's lips curl up in a twisted smile. All around him rises a crescendo of mirth produced by the dozens of off-road bicyclists with whom he has ridden into town. Parked outside are rows of their motorless hogs called mountain bikes. Once again, the Jerome bar has become the destination of the most notorious event in mountain biking, the forty-mile Pearl Pass Tour through the Rockies. Each September for nearly a decade, cyclists dropping from the pass at 12,700 feet on a muddy mule trail ride through Aspen to show how mountain biking differs from other sports. It allows you to get pig filthy and to act rude.

IT IS POSSIBLE TODAY NOT ONLY TO SKI, HIKE AND CLIMB into the wilderness but to ride a bicycle there, too. Mountain bikes are designed to be ridden on railroad ties, hiking trails, cattle tracks, beaches, logging roads, dry washes and avalanche chutes. With fat tires and straight handlebars, they resemble the clunky one-speeds piloted by generations of paper boys. But the new bikes aren't clunkers. Mountain bikes have twelve to eighteen speeds and are geared so low you can pedal one up a staircase. The frames are built so tough you can even thrash one down a staircase.

Downhill riding is the sport in its ya-hoo essence, helping to explain why a surprising number of mountain bikers are converted off-road motorcyclists. "It's the same thrill as motocross," says one. "On a severe technical downhill, you can't go much quicker on a motorcycle than on a mountain bike." A technical descent is one such as the Pearl Pass Tour, which traverses slopes of talus like crushed bone, then takes a line down a stream bed strewn with bowling-ball-sized rocks. What is it like to descend the stuff for mile after precipitous mile, both hands locked in a death clutch on the brakes? "It's like bolting your handlebars to a paint shaker," says one rider.

Mountain biking is more than a thrill sport, however. The bikes have caught on out West, where they can get you into the back country faster than on horseback; and in crumbling Eastern cities, where they offer safe passage through potholed combat zones. In five years the bike has grown from "an unknown product category" into a standard produced by more than forty bike manufacturers, including Ross, Raleigh, Schwinn and Peugeot. High-tech and ecologically sane, mountain biking is a whole new sport for the high-performance Eighties. The industry expects to sell some half a million bikes this year, more than double 1984's figure. *Bicycling* magazine predicts that among America's 100 million cyclists, the mountain bike will eventually outsell the ten-speed.

"The ten-speed has been a scam on the American public," says Neal Murdoch, an organizer of the Pearl

Pass Tour. "It became popular here because Americans in the Fifties began seeing TV shows of European road races and demanded those kinds of bikes."

In their ill will toward the ten-speed, mountain bikers are rabid revisionists of cycling, the John Birch Society of sport. Hard-line America-firsters, they say the European racer's dropped handlebars and narrow tires make it a high-strung, overbred machine. The fat-tire bike is inherently more stable and more comfortable to ride, particularly on questionable terrain. To pedal to your neighborhood convenience store for a Schlitz is insane on a Motobecane.

Mountain bikers ride upright to take in the American scenery. They like to ease on down the road, which in this country is likely to be a rural dirt lane or a cratered urban street. Neal Murdoch boasts, "What we finally have in the fat-tire bike is an American piece of transportation for American conditions."

The patron saint of this movement is Ignaz Schwinn, eponymous founder of the bicycle company that in 1934 introduced Americans to their first fat-tire bike. Ignaz hoped it would win customers because of its resemblance to the automobile, which had destroyed the bicycle market back around the turn of the century. Mountain bikers reverently recall Schwinn's fat-tire behemoths, ever in thrall to the automobile, which rolled off assembly lines through the Fifties, all scooped tail fins, chopped fenders and push-button horns.

"Those bikes had great auras to them," says Joe Breeze, a member of a gang in Marin County, California, that is credited with developing the modern fat-tire bike. Breeze and his pals were in their twenties about a decade ago, all grown up except somehow they'd never outgrown the paper-boy bikes of their youth. They'd ride hulking, decrepit Schwinn's on dirt fire roads built along Marin ridge tops. They made mad-dog descents through the manzanita and scrub oak of Mount Tamalpais. A race held clandestinely on public land evolved into a classic of the sport, the Repack, so named because after each banzai descent riders had to repack the grease in their coaster brakes.

The sport was almost exclusively downhill, because the clunkers were all one-speeds. Uphill, the bikes were slugs, totally useless. But all that changed, and modern mountain biking began when a bike-shop mechanic named Gary Fisher spliced a five-speed derailleur to his Schwinn in 1974. The derailleur permitted him to shift gears. "Gary's bike weighed a ton, but on a ride he ate us up because he had gears," remembers Fisher's friend Charlie Kelly. "All of a sudden, demand for derailleurs went up 10,000 percent. We had a unique Marin County look. We went for drum brakes front and rear, five-speed derailleurs and wide motorcycle handlebars. When ten or twelve of us were riding around on these very similar converted Schwinn's, I just knew it was going to get big."

What the boys discovered was the soul of a new machine. To ride downhill forever — mile after mile of effortless coasting — must be a fantasy of every kid in the suburbs who ever had a paper route. To breeze down a mountain on an updated paper-boy bike is a fantasy realized. The high-performance fat-tire bike taps into the primitive, preadolescent brain. Mountain bikes are Peter Pan bikes, the closest thing to flying out the bedroom window to whisk about the neighborhood. Old Ignaz had it backward. Children on bicycles don't want to imitate grown-ups driving cars. Just the opposite. On a high-tech fat-tire bike, you do not have to leave the hermetically

sealed terrarium of kiddom. You can remain eleven years old forever.

MOUNTAIN-BIKE RALLIES TEND TO BRING OUT DREAMERS, anarchists and rugged individualists. At the kickoff of the Pearl Pass Tour, or the Whiskeytown Downhill in Redding, California, or the Race around the Base at Mount Bachelor, Oregon, the riders resemble a guerrilla front on wheels, a ragged army of irregulars. They wear helicopter beanies and camouflage jackets and motorcycle leathers cut off like Bermuda shorts. Jungle Jon, an ex-New York City bicycle messenger, is likely to be there. Tony Herich from Taos, a cowboy who herds cattle with his mountain bike, could show. Or there might be the former Michael Hiltner, a veteran of two Olympic bicycling teams in the 1960s, who dropped out of ten-speed biking, grew a Moslem freedom fighter's beard and changed his name to Victor Vincente of America.

Mountain biking also attracts people with faith in the bike as *the* all-around, all-terrain vehicle. A cyclist pedaled across Africa meeting government ministers to beg them not to repeat America's sin of embracing the automobile. Another bicycle zealot named Charlie Cunningham of Marin County feels so cooped up in cars it has taken him eight days to drive from California to Colorado. Cunningham builds mountain bikes that do not compromise a jot for the sake of appearance or expense. His handmade, all-aluminum bikes sell for up to \$3600, yet he leaves them unpainted to show off the beautiful welds.

One of these rare bikes is owned by Cunningham's girlfriend, Jacquie Phelan, a lanky, powerful rider who is the national women's mountain-bike champion. On the seven-month mountain-bike-race circuit in New England, California and Colorado, Phelan has been indomitable for the past four seasons. She will cross finish lines so far in front of the other women in the pack she is often unnoticed by fans, who tend to track only the top men. This inequity of gender was on Phelan's mind in Santa Rosa, California, last year when she peeled off her shirt to finish a race topless.

Phelan is like that — a hatpin in the gizzard of anyone who would dress up mountain biking into a high-toned sport. She is known simultaneously as the queen and the court jester of the pro circuit, a reigning competitor and a sometimes wigged-out observer. "Mountain bikes are as appealing as tugboats," she says. "Tugboats have always been appealing to kids and, you know, people like me. They're both kind of stubby and fun-looking. You'll drive along with the bikes on your roof and kids' heads turn every time." Phelan sometimes pedals with a pet rat in her pocket. She registers for races under the *nom de cours* of Alice B. Toeclips. Lately she has been known to call herself Alice B. Showtits.

Jacquie Phelan says she tried to find happiness in nice, respectable ten-speed road racing. But the button-down conventionality of the male-dominated sport repelled her. She took up bicycle racing late, following college, but within months she finished fourth at national ten-speed time trials. "The men were all curious about this chick who couldn't be dropped, but my generally big mouth rubbed them the wrong way," she says. "I just wasn't like somebody's girlfriend who sat in the back and said, 'Oh, you boys go have a nice ride.'" In San Francisco, where she lived, Phelan got off watching a guy in a fancy wool racing jersey sweat buckshot while she passed him commuting to work.

Today her opinion of the Italian-racing-jersey set is not kind. She says she was burned by [Cont. on 70]

TRIP GABRIEL's report on rock climbing in Yosemite National Park, "Valley Boys," appeared in RS 394.

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[Cont. from 42] the sanctimoniousness in the road-biking community. "Roadies are a bunch of narrow-minded groupies in thrall to the European racers, the whole allure of the sport," maintains Phelan, "and they're bitter as hell that America ignores biking. So the thing they do is build a wall this thick and an ego this huge, and defend themselves against a world that doesn't give a shit about their existence."

One Thanksgiving Day a few years ago, Phelan headed north across the Golden Gate Bridge on a Raleigh five-speed to enter what may be the oldest of all mountain-bike events. It is a non-competitive, half-day cruise around Marin County, begun in 1975 and titled the Appetite Seminar. The goal is not to build defenses around the ego but to work up a hunger for Thanksgiving dinner.

"I had anomic dysentery before I discovered mountain biking," she says. "I made up that name. It's where you have anomie, lack of direction. And the dysentery part — that was the inability to tolerate questions like 'What are you going to do with your life?'"

Last year Phelan won every mountain-bike race she entered, including the

national off-road championships around a vicious eighteen-mile track outside Boulder, Colorado. She is strong and wiry, with quadriceps as well defined as a bullfrog's. If Phelan had started ten-speed younger, she believes, she could have been a world champion. It would have been a respectable and potentially well-paid career, lived mostly abroad in the European limelight. As mountain biking's top woman, she has settled for much less. She seems well aware as she stares into her fourth decade that she still works for very little money, with only a lifestyle as a payoff. But sometimes that is payoff enough. "Now that I'm Number One in this scene, people put up with my shit just fine," she says.

THE MECCA OF MOUNTAIN BIKING IS probably Crested Butte, Colorado, a semirevived mining town and ski resort where the pavement literally ends. Beyond are hundreds of miles of unimproved roads lacing a cirque of mountains as picturesque as a beer commercial. Until the town could afford paving a few years ago, fat-tire bikes were a necessity on the gravel streets, which locals lovingly called the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Crested Butte is renowned as a laboratory of innovation in mountain sports. Local skiers revived the telemark turn in the early 1970s and created a

national fad for extreme downhill, cross-country skiing. Mountain bikes are ubiquitous in town. "Those of us who live here have been hiking for years and years," says one resident. "We've done it, hiked every inch. And now we ride it."

Crested Butte is where the Pearl Pass Tour originates, following a rugged track built in 1882 to haul gold and silver ore over the mountains from Aspen. The two towns are only thirty-five miles apart by dead reckoning, but the psychic divide seems as high as the 14,000-foot Elk Mountains. Aspen is a pleasure dome tucked in a valley of \$250,000 condominiums stretching as far as the eye can see. In Crested Butte you see a lot of Polytarp insulating the windows of tin-roofed shacks. Aspen, where the international rich and famous mix with locals whose bodies are toned by Nautilus, is known in Crested Butte as Fat City. "Every town has its status symbols," says Myles Rademan of Crested Butte. "In Crested Butte status is hard to show through physical possessions. To stay ahead here, you have to adopt more and more radical means of recreation."

A group of Aspen motorcyclists once crossed Pearl Pass into Crested Butte, roaring up Elk Avenue. Their bikes belched blue exhaust and disturbed the peace like a chain saw in the

night. They were observed by a handful of forest-fire fighters drinking in the Grubstake Saloon. These Crested Butte residents were not impressed with the Aspenites' show of macho. They decided to return the gesture, despite the fact none owned motorcycles. In the fall of 1976 they crossed Pearl Pass on fat-tire bikes. "They partied till two the night before, and when they showed up at eight to begin the ride, they were walking in circles," says Charlie Kelly, editor of the *Fat Tire Flyer*. "There were guys throwing up within miles of the start. It was cold on Pearl Pass, but they all wore shorts and T-shirts. You'd have thought they'd die before they got up there, but they did it somehow. They were not about to let those Aspen faggots go up on motorcycles and not get themselves up, too."

That epic ride has been re-created every year since 1978 as the Pearl Pass Tour. What began as a grudge match has grown into a mountain-biking jamboree, the sport's signal event, which attracts 300 to 500 riders from coast to coast. They rain down out of the mountains on Aspen like a tribe of Vandals. Invariably, their destination is the Jerome bar, the soft underbelly of a candy-ass town.

As Charlie Kelly says, "The whole point is to shake our lifestyles in the face of Aspen." ●