

## BOOKS

The secret to mountain biking is pretty simple. The slower you go the more likely it is you'll crash.' —Julie Furtado

# The Greatest Show on Dirt

## Fat Tire Flyer

By Charlie Kelly  
VeloPress, 258 pages, \$29.95

BY ROBERT PENN

**THE INVENTION** of the mountain bike might be the most intriguing story in the history of the bicycle. It is certainly the most unlikely. Around 1973, young hippie bike bums in California began riding pre-World War II, single-speed "cruiser bikes" downhill, at full tilt, on dirt trails—for fun. The aged bikes, nicknamed "clunkers," were cheap and dispensable. Riders hammered them until they broke and then bought another one.

Slowly, the bikes changed. Nonessential parts were stripped off. New parts, cannibalized from every kind of two-wheeled vehicle, were added. Tires got fatter, frames were strengthened, brakes were improved, cranks got longer; in time, derailleur gears and thumb shifters appeared. All these features and components had been previously invented. It's just that no one had put them all together, on one frame, with the specific aim of blitzing trails.

The greatest concentration of riders actively modifying clunkers was in Marin County, north of San Francisco. There fortune threw together a critical mass of athletic, inquisitive, competitive cyclists. None of them had gone to college. Few had proper jobs. They included Joe Breeze, a racing cyclist who also built frames, and Gary Fisher, an ex-Category 1 road racer and excellent mechanic. Later Tom Ritchey, a junior road racer and accomplished frame builder, joined the scene. At the center of it all was Charlie Kelly, the charismatic organizer—a rock-band roadie, writer and general outlaw with a passion for two wheels.

In the hands of this small coterie, the clunker evolved incrementally into the mountain bike, the form of the bicycle that would go on to blaze a technological trail through the late 20th century. It was the most significant innovation in the design of the bicycle since John Kemp Starley's Rover Safety, which in 1885 introduced the diamond-shaped frame, and the beginning of a gold rush that revitalized the global bicycle industry. In 1996, mountain biking became an Olympic sport.

Several histories of the invention of the mountain bike have been published, but Charlie Kelly is indisputably the man to tell the story. In "Fat Tire Flyer," he relates it with attention to detail and storytelling flair. Mr. Kelly



TINKERER'S TOY Charlie Kelly on the 'Repack' course, ca. 1977.

was there: He organized the first downhill races; he was a partner in the first business selling mountain bikes and the editor of *Fat Tire Flyer*, the first mountain-bike magazine; and he attended the meeting that created the first sanctioning body for mountain-bike races. His friends and associates

Early mountain bikes had brakes that heated up so much during use that the grease inside boiled away.

constitute a who's who of the early mountain-bike industry.

Beautifully produced with over 140 color photographs, maps, flyers, posters, adverts and magazine covers, Mr. Kelly's book is equal to his involvement in the movement: It is the definitive account of events that have been mythologized over the decades. There is a foreword by Joe Breeze and a coda by U.K. author and publisher Richard Grant. The appendix comprises several pieces of journalism, all but one written by Mr. Kelly, that bring his story more up to date. There is a good index.

At the heart of the story was Repack—a dusty, often precipitous, off-road trail that drops 1,300 feet in just under 2 miles down the side of Pine Mountain,

a foothill of Mount Tamalpais in Marin County. By 1976, Mr. Kelly and his "Clunker Set" had been riding the Marin backcountry for a couple of years, during which time one question wouldn't go away: Who was the fastest? There had to be a race. The gang met at the top of Repack on Oct. 21 for a time trial. Alan Bonds, Kelly's housemate and builder of beautiful clunkers, won. He was the only rider who didn't crash.

There were only ever 24 Repack races. Most of them were held from 1976 to '79 and organized by Mr. Kelly. There was never a schedule. No more than 250 people ever raced the course, yet Repack was crucial. On the dirt and gravel, over bare rock and gullies, ruts, roots and boulders, at average speeds of over 25 miles per hour, down slopes of up to 20% gradient and round reverse-camber corners, blind turns and switchbacks, the mountain bike evolved, broken bike by broken bike.

When the bikes failed, riders went home and started repairing and modifying their machines. The name "Repack" even came from the act of fixing a bike. The original clunkers had coaster brakes with grease-filled hubs that heated up so much during the race that it boiled away. Riders then had to repack their hubs with grease.

The cross-pollination of ideas among the riders, and the hammering that the course inflicted on each bike, led Joe Breeze to make the Breezer #1, the first

purpose-built mountain bike, in 1977. Today, there's one in the Smithsonian.

Repack gave the mountain bike publicity, creating a market. Messrs. Kelly and Fisher went into business, albeit in a haphazard way, selling complete bikes. What began as a cottage industry in the garages of Marin County slipped into mass production in 1982: The California company Specialized manufactured 500 Stumpjumpers in Japan. They sold out in three weeks. Mr. Kelly notes in the book that these Stumpjumpers were "nearly identical" to the Ritchey MountainBikes he was then producing with Messrs. Fisher and Ritchey.

There are further swipes at others who piggybacked on the endeavors of the Clunker Set, but Mr. Kelly is also quick to admit the part played by those whom history has overlooked. As he writes: "The 'invention of the mountain bike' happened multiple times in multiple places... but the sport that changed the direction of bicycle manufacturing only had to arise once."

Five years ago, I had the privilege of riding Repack with Mr. Kelly. Reflecting on hurtling down a mountain on a bicycle that was likely to break, he said: "It was always scary but that was why you did it, right? If it was safe, it wouldn't be fun."

Mr. Penn is the author of "It's All About the Bike: The Pursuit of Happiness on Two Wheels."