

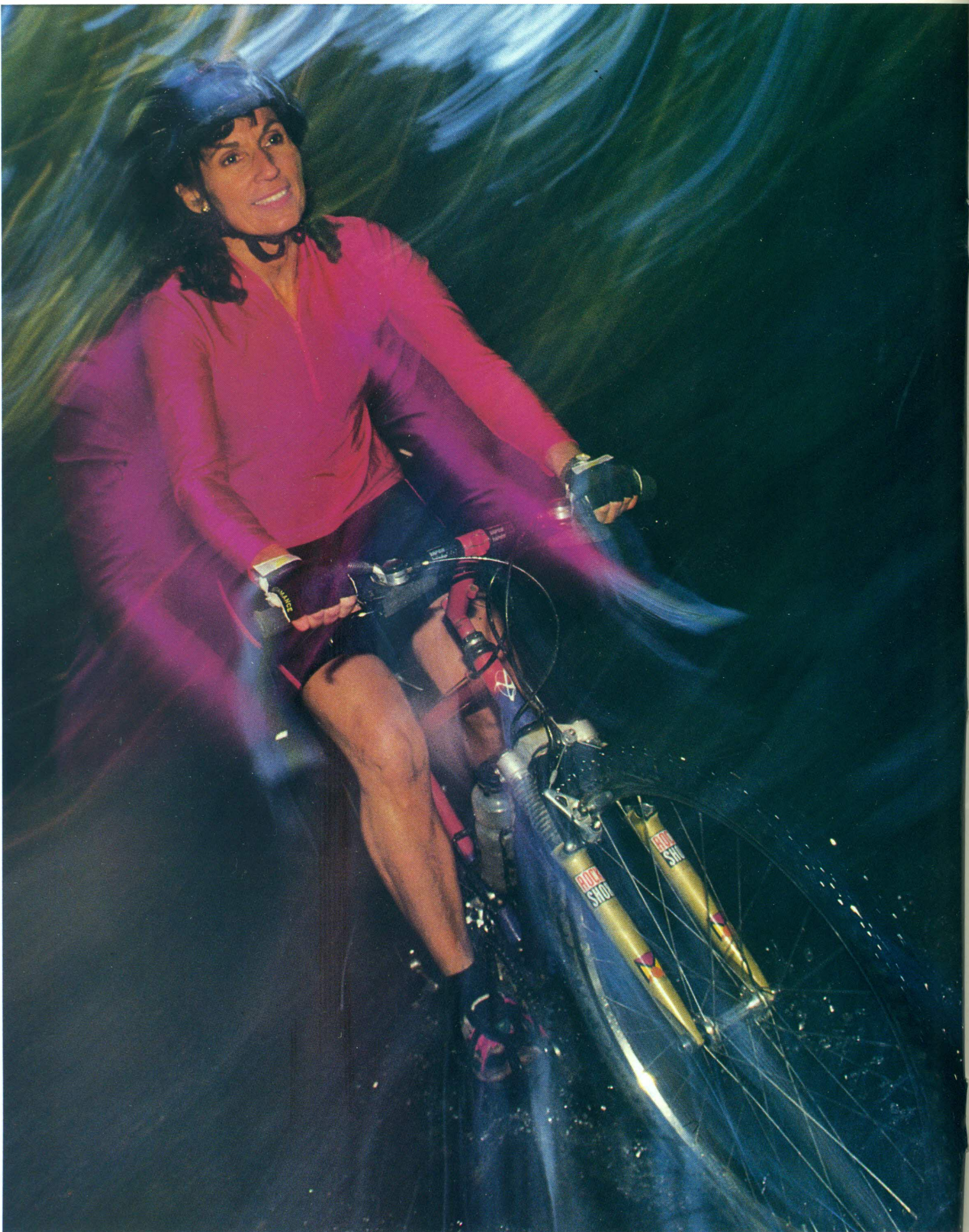
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MOUNTAIN BIKES

Cruising the crest
of the craze (p. 74)



By David M. Schwartz

Over hill, over dale, on a bicycle built for . . . goo

On your trusty all-terrain two-wheeler, you can mush through mud or climb a peak—but there's trouble afoot in the land of the mountain bike

After a night of gentle rain, the sun poked through the fog and the Marin Headlands sparkled. The cool winter air had a palpable smell of freshness, and Linda Enis was gulping plenty of it as she pedaled the Coyote Ridge Trail of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area on her mountain bike. Cresting the ridge and descending to a fire road above the bluffs, she spotted two hikers ahead. A fit and agile 49, Enis could have hunkered into a good coasting position, but she braked to a discreet speed and called out a greeting. "Hi! What a beautiful day!" If you've ever spoken with Linda Enis, even for a minute, you would hear the goodwill and enthusiasm ringing in her voice.

They were not returned.

"Get off your bike and smell the flowers," snarled one of the hikers, her face twisted with anger. Those were fightin' words, and they practically knocked the remaining wind out of Enis, who was too astonished to respond.

Fightin' words all right, but just a small skirmish in the Marin County mountain bike war. In these Elysian hills and the surrounding countryside north of San Francisco, tensions between bikers and hikers have been mounting since the early 1980s, when the all-terrain bicycle—or mountain bike, as it came to be called—began to steal the heart of the cycling public.

The beauty of a mountain bike is its go-anywhere grace: Marin County's Linda Enis splashes across a stream.



Many state and national parks bar bikers from narrow paths. Riders protest, but hikers strongly support ban.

Whether hopping a log in the woods or a pothole in the city, the new generation of lightweight bikes with wide, resilient tires absorbed the insults of uneven ground and conveyed their riders in upright comfort, offering them a forgiving seat and gears that clicked smartly into place with the flick of a thumb. Suddenly, thousands of people who hadn't pushed a pedal since the bike boom of the '70s were buying user-friendly mountain bicycles that could go anywhere.

Which was precisely the problem. Many of the places they went were already occupied by people who preferred their outdoor experience unpolluted by the flash of metal or the fear of collision. To traditional trail users, the new breed of bicycle was alien and dangerous, esthetically offensive and physically menacing. "What cars are to road bikes, mountain bikes are to hikers and equestrians," asserts Connie Berto, a Marin County equestrian who has had several close encounters of the bicycle kind in the backcountry. Even worse, claimed the conservation-minded, the bikes' knobby tires damage trails and cause erosion.

And so, as fleets of the versatile two-wheelers began rolling out of bike shops and onto trails, the boot-and-bridle crowd cried "Invasion!" In California's Marin County, whose vast preserves make it a mecca for the Bay Area's large population of outdoor enthusiasts, intense hostilities broke out and quickly heated to a rolling boil that has refused to cool. Anti-bike forces flexed organizational muscles toned during two decades of fighting land developers, this time aiming their

Photographs by Gerry Gropp

Mountain bikes on a roll



Gary Fisher made this prototype from scavenged parts in 1974; today he heads mountain-bike-producing firm.

political fists at off-road cyclists and their right to ride. They lobbied land management agencies for regulations banning bikes from narrow trails, or “single-tracks,” as the paths are lovingly called by bikers. At rancorous public meetings where invective flew faster than an out-of-control cyclist on a hairpin turn, both sides fought for their recreational lives. Every week, the op-ed pages of newspapers screamed out headlines like “Cyclists Are Out of Control,” “Environmental Rape” and “Hikers, Bikers On a Collision Course.” In one Sunday edition, the *Marin Independent Journal* ran a lead editorial appealing for a truce and offering one of the newspaper’s meeting rooms for “peace talks.”

But peace was not given a chance. Foes of the bicycle onslaught, older and better-connected, won most of the battles, and signs picturing a bicycle crossed by a red slash began to appear at trailheads all over the county. With rare exceptions, mountain bikes were confined to fire roads—unpaved freeways, in the minds of those who covet rugged single-tracks for their isolation and challenge. Even on the fire roads, the cyclists suddenly became subject to speed limits of 15 miles per hour and \$200 fines enforced by rangers recruited to quash the two-wheeled menace.

Although few places have seen such intense firepower brought to bear, public lands around the country have become contested turf. Many state park systems have banned bicycles from narrow trails. National parks prohibit them, in most cases, from leaving the pavement. In New York’s Central Park, authorities invoked a long-ignored rule that predates the mountain bike era to crack down on cyclists riding dirt paths. Barely a decade old, the mountain bike is being kicked off the mountain.

“Now I’m a raging activist!”

A few months after Linda Enis’ unpleasant encounter, the Golden Gate National Recreation Area declared most of its narrow trails and some fire roads off-limits to bikes. A nurse who often commutes off-road by bicycle to her job at Marin General Hospital, Enis was so outraged that she signed on with mountain bike advocates working to keep their young sport from being legislated out of existence. “I am nonconfrontational by nature,” she says, “but this issue has turned me into a raging activist!” She is now on the board of directors of the Bike Trails Council of Marin, one of 200 clubs affiliated with the International Mountain Bicycling Association, an advocacy organization dedicated to making peace on dirt. IMBA believes a small number of reckless cyclists have given their sport a bad name. IMBA wants to change the attitude of both the young gonzo rider bombing downhill on knobby tires, and the mature outdoorsman bristling at the thought of tire tracks where Vibram soles alone did tread.



In 1970s, Charlie Kelly (above) bounced over trails on a homemade forebear of mountain bikes; now his daughter, Dana, is a passenger.



The irony in these latter-day range wars is that the site of the bloodiest clashes is also the birthplace of the vehicle that has caused all the trouble. If the “mountain” in “mountain bike” refers to any place in particular, it would be Mount Tamalpais, or “Mount Tam,” the 2,600-foot peak that presides over Marin County’s sculpted landscape of majestic bluffs and undulating hills. In the mid-’70s, Mount Tam’s dirt roads and trails beckoned to a local contingent of self-described “bike bums.” Once they saw how much fun it was to leave pavement and traffic behind, they began tinkering in their garages until they had reinvented the bicycle.

“I wanted a bike I could ride off the road, both uphill and down, and it had to be strong so I didn’t come back home with the parts in my hand,” recalls Gary Fisher who, with his roommate Charlie Kelly, began renovating old Schwinns they scrounged out of junk heaps and the back rooms of bike shops. The low-pressure balloon tires devised by Ignaz Schwinn in the 1930s cushioned the blows of rough terrain, while the old-style flat handlebars allowed a comfortable riding position, and the high bottom brackets (the lowest part of the frame) gave needed clearance. “They weren’t fast, but they were comfortable and class,” Fisher remembers. “In the mid-’70s we had a kind of cult riding everywhere on these clunkers.” Now president of the Fisher Bicycle Corporation, a \$20 million company that makes more than 60,000 bicycles a year, he looks up from a comput-

One of author David Schwartz’s most recent books for children, Supergrandpa, honors an elderly cyclist who won Sweden’s national bike race in 1951.

er screen in his office and reminisces. “It was the golden age of the mountain bike.”

Inevitably the idea of a race occurred to Kelly, and in September 1976 he and a few friends organized a competition down Pine Mountain, a few miles north of Mount Tam. The record book of times and finishers at that first race has long been lost, but the race earned a strange appellation that will not be forgotten in the annals of mountain bike lore: “Repack.”

“We were still using coaster brakes—the kind you operate by pushing backwards on the pedal,” explains Kelly, who now writes for mountain bike magazines in six countries. “After a 1,200-foot descent in 1.8 miles, our hubs overheated so much that the grease sizzled right out of them. Before we could ride again, we had to repack the bearings with grease. I don’t know who said it first, but soon everyone called the hill ‘Repack,’ and from that the race took its name.”

Resourceful and experimental, the Repackers cannibalized parts from practically every kind of two-wheeled vehicle they could find: gears and derailleurs from ten-speed bikes, thumb shifters from inexpensive five-speeds, hefty brake levers and handlebars from motorcycles, rear hubs from tandems, even drum brakes from industrial tricycles. Onto the resuscitated Schwinns went all of those parts and more, and if they didn’t fit, the improvisers grabbed a hacksaw or a drill and made them fit. Joe Breeze, an accomplished bicycle-frame builder (see cover), shaved eight pounds off the leaden Schwinns when he built the first successful bike frame designed for off-road use, aptly named the “Breezer.” Now riders could go clunking uphill as well as down.



At the annual Fat Tire Bike Week held in Crested Butte, Colorado, "bicycle limbo" is now the most popular event.



Two mountain bike enthusiasts created hybrid sport of bicycle polo—much like the original, minus ponies.

Another builder, Charlie Cunningham, beat that with an even lighter aluminum frame. Then, when Japanese and American manufacturers introduced featherweight alloy rims, with light, knobby tires to match, the clunker crowd did wheelies with joy. The bikes dropped another six pounds.

In time, Repack became too popular for its own good. Racers were already arriving in droves by 1984 when a television feature made matters worse. With hiker-biker tensions already on simmer, authorities closed down the race. But in July and August 1996, fans of Repack will get their due reward: 20 years after the first organized mountain bike race, the sport will make its Olympic debut in Atlanta. "For a sport to go from zero to warp speed so quickly is unprecedented," says Brian Stickel, director of competition for the National Off-Road Bicycle Association, which governs mountain bike racing in the United States.

Although Fisher, Kelly, Breeze et al. are generally credited with inventing the mountain bicycle in Marin County, similar innovations were being tried in Crested Butte, Colorado, where downtown streets were unpaved into the 1980s. Even in earlier eras, people had cobbled together bikes for off-road use—in fact, before the advent of pavement in the 1890s, all roads were "off-road." Historical photographs show bicycle excursions on Mount Tamalpais in the 1890s, and in the same decade miners in Alaska used bikes to cross 1,000 miles of hard-packed snow en route to the Nome goldfields.

"You can't say that mountain biking was invented at any one time or in any one place," asserts Charlie Kelly, who has chronicled the sport since 1980, when he co-founded the *Fat Tire Flyer*, mountain biking's first publication. "The only thing we had in Marin that no one else had was critical mass."

At a trade show, a star is born

It was a critical mass that led to an international chain reaction. Convinced that people would pay good money for clunkers, Fisher, Kelly and frame-builder Tom Ritchey went commercial. Naming their product "MountainBike" (they later lost the right to the moniker when the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office deemed the name overly descriptive), the threesome introduced their creation to the bicycling world in 1981 at a trade show in Long Beach, California. Industry moguls reacted predictably: they laughed. But the owner of a small company called Specialized Bicycle Components bought four of the ugly bikelings, made some modifications, had cheap frames manufactured in Japan and introduced the world's first mass-produced mountain bike in 1981. Called the Stumpjumper, 500 of them sold out in 20 days. (One now resides in the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History.) The big boys



It's not all mud and muscles, says Women's Mountain Bike & Tea Society founder Jacquie Phelan (left).



At Crested Butte in 1991, then professional mountain biker Nancy Walker-Aubry whizzes down a racecourse.

of the bike business got the message, and the next year they came out with all-terrain bikes of their own. By the end of 1983, there were 200,000 of them on and off the roads of America.

Thirteen years and 30 million mountain bikes later, the wonder bike has transformed an industry. Of 8.7 million adult bicycles sold in the United States in 1993, almost 8.4 million had flat handlebars and fat tires—direct descendants of the Marin County clunkers. The svelte, drop-handlebar racing bike, rolled out before the American public 30 years ago as *the* bicycle for adults, is becoming an endangered species.

The ultimate user-friendly bike

The racing bikes of the '60s and '70s, with hard seats and harder tires, required well-toned riders with perfect balance, a penchant for calluses and the ability to fix flats. To everyone else, ten-speed racers were about as user friendly as computers of the same vintage, and many of them took an early retirement in the garage. "But the mountain bike," says Bill Wilkinson, executive director of the Bicycle Federation of America, "puts a big smile on your face the first time you hop on. The mountain bike is the Macintosh of transportation."

Borrowing from aerospace technology, the latest mountain bikes are built of titanium, aluminum, carbon composite, resin-impregnated cloths and other up-to-the-millisecond materials. A composite frame can weigh less than the two quarts of water a rider might pack on a sultry day. True to the origins of the sport, small-timers continue to tinker, inventing components and accessories both practical and frivolous—an easy-in, easy-out toe clip, a spring-loaded gizmo that allows you to adjust your seat's height while you ride, earmuffs that attach to a bicycle helmet. Working with the inventors of aluminum baseball bats, a small firm in Southern California called Answer Products redesigned the handlebars to be stronger, lighter and more shock absorbent. A cyclist named Paul Turner miniaturized hydraulic shock absorbers, called his product Rock Shox and started a rage for bicycle suspension systems.

To economists who care more about where products are made than how, mountain bikes provide a bright spot on a cloudy balance-of-trade ledger. "In an industry that competes in innovations, the trick is to put your product on the market as quickly as possible," says Dick Resch, a vice president at Cannondale, a major manufacturer of all-terrain bicycles. "The best way to do that is to have complete control of the process and keep it close to home." All of his company's bicycle frames are produced in Bedford, Pennsylvania; the Trek Bicycle Corporation, a chief competitor, makes most of its bikes in Waterloo, Wisconsin. No matter where a mountain bike is made, chances are it was designed in the USA.

The bicycle of the future may do away with the diamond-shaped frame that has formed the skeleton of bicycles since the 19th century. A radical creation by Alex and Skooks Pong, a father-and-son team from Whidbey Island, Washington, is about to be produced by Cannondale (p. 86). The bike, looking almost extraterrestrial, is built around a flat, hollow frame of aluminum plates bolted together in an oblique cross and attached to each wheel with articulated struts that pivot like human knees. In place of spokes, each wheel has five wide flanges in a starfish assembly bolted to the rims and central hub. Alex Pong doesn't even refer to his bicycle's central component as a frame. "I call it a fuselage, not because I want you to think it's an airplane, but because I want to change 'bike think,' which has been stagnant for about a hundred years."

As mountain biking entered adolescence in the 1980s, enthusiasts sought new places, and new ways, to ride. Ski resorts saw the potential for off-season business, and many opened their trails to bicycles—chair lifts outfitted with bike racks are a boon to riders who prefer to do their rolling in a predominantly downhill direction. The more adventuresome traversed Africa and the Hindu Kush, or headed to Alaska in midwinter for the Iditabike, a 200-mile race along part of the course used by the Iditarod, Alaska's famous dogsled race. Outside Moab, Utah, mountain bikers discovered the Slickrock Trail, a 13-mile loop on a field of sandstone dunes. It offers roller-coaster thrills for those with technical skill and saddlebags of nerve. Despite its name, the sandstone surface has so much friction that riders can at-

tempt unthinkably steep inclines. With 100,000 visitors a year, Slickrock and other mountain bike routes in the red-rock canyon country have transformed sleepy Moab into southeast Utah's major tourist center.

The area around Crested Butte, Colorado, gained notoriety among mountain bikers in 1976 when a party of 15 locals decided to ride en masse to Aspen via 12,700-foot Pearl Pass, a boulder-strewn mule trail. Only two of the hardest (or foolhardest) actually finished the trek, but that didn't discourage most of the others from trying again two years later, joined by Marin County's Charlie Kelly and some friends. The ride became an annual event, and organizers added tamer tours for those who preferred less gnarly terrain. Now, for a week every July, the alpine passes and wildflower-specked meadows above Crested Butte are the backdrop for Fat Tire Bike Week, a family event that includes a mountain bike rodeo—complete with barrel race, log pull and "bicycle limbo" (an event that rewards the shortest participants).

In 1987 Trice Hufnagel, playing croquet with friends in Crested Butte, impulsively hopped on her bicycle, charged the ball and whacked it down the field. "Look!" she cried. "Bike polo!" A sport was born. Hufnagel and her husband, Lou Gonzalez, adapted the rules and equipment of polo to the mountain bike, which they see as a proletarian sort of polo pony. The high point of the year is their annual Polo to the People Tour—they hold polo clinics and tournaments around the United States. There are now about 65 amateur leagues across the country and the annual Official Bicycle Polo World Championships in Moab on Halloween weekend.



In Oakland, California, at Chabot Regional Park, volunteers Jim Tolley (left), Michael Kelley of the Bicycle Trails Council of East Bay, carry their "take it easy" message to a pair of fellow bike riders.



In police departments across the nation, introduction of mountain bikes has meant a bold new weapon for

apprehending criminals. In Seattle, officers James Stephens (left), Phil Wall, patrol Pike Place Market.

Mountain biking has never been strictly a boys' club: three of the original Repack riders were women. One of them, Jacquie Phelan, now a professional mountain bike racer, founded the Women's Mountain Bike & Tea Society for "women who love mud too much, and those who would like to love it more." With more than a thousand members in nine chapters around the country, WOM-BATS emphasizes the health and self-sufficiency side of mountain biking, rather than the thrills and spills.

Most mountain bikes never dig their tire treads into dirt—only a small percentage of riders regularly venture off-pavement—but the sturdy machines have proved their mettle on the heaves and holes of mean city streets. A bike with so many advantages would be perfect for police, reasoned two Seattle policemen in 1987, and their bosses agreed. Seattle's two-man bike patrol has grown to 70 full-time officers, the nation's flagship mountain bike squad. Hundreds of other police departments—even Scotland Yard—have contacted the Seattle Police Department for advice in setting up bike squads.

"It's a superb law enforcement tool," says Sgt. Jack Hanson, former supervisor of the force's West Precinct Bicycle Patrol. "We have the edge on everyone. We're

quiet, we're quick, we can go down alleys, we can jump curbs, we can ride down stairs and cruise along the waterfront. We can even get our bikes in the elevator at Pike Place Market! We come out of nowhere, slide the rear wheel around to block the guy from behind, and grab him by the wrist before he can reach for his weapon. His jaw drops, and all he can say is, 'Where did you come from?' The bike is our secret weapon!" In Seattle, bicycle patrol officers make almost seven times as many arrests as foot patrolmen.

With so many users and uses, there's little question that mountain bikes are on a roll, but just where they will be allowed to roll remains an open question. In many areas, cyclists have regained lost ground as icy relations between outdoor user groups have thawed.

After reconsidering the issue, land managers around the country have reopened thousands of miles of trails to bikes, but Tim Blumenthal of the IMBA thinks it's too soon to celebrate. Those trails represent only a small percentage of the trail-closure total. Although IMBA wants to raise the percentage, the organization agrees with those who want to keep bicycles out of many areas designated as wilderness. Elsewhere, where foot traffic



Mountain bike of the future, available this autumn from Cannondale, can be yours for a mere \$7,000.

is very high, the organization suggests that some narrow paths be declared bike-free.

Buoyed by studies showing that bicycle tires cause no more erosion or trail damage than the boots of hikers—and far less than horses' hooves—mountain bike advocates are starting to find receptive ears among environmental organizations. The Wilderness Society, for example, has articulated a bike-tolerant position. Even the Sierra Club, one of the first groups to denounce mountain bikes, has softened its attitude. The club now supports the opening of public lands to bicycles where studies show that there would be no significant damage to the land or interference with other users.

In April, representatives of the Sierra Club and the IMBA met for mediated discussions of the issue. "I know," says George Barnes, a member of the Sierra Club's delegation, "17 different ways to manage land for bicycle use other than totally open or totally closed. By talking together, we can try to identify alternatives that could open more trails to bikes and leave environmentalists and other trail users happy, too."

In pursuit of happy trails, bicycling organizations around the country are bending backward over their chainstays to dispel the hell-on-wheels view of them. Just north of Los Angeles, mountain biking thrives in the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area, where last year members of the Concerned Off-Road Bicyclists Association logged more than 11,000 hours in mounted bicycle safety patrols. Equipped with radios and trained in first aid, CORBA volunteers work closely with the National Park Service and the California Parks and Recreation Department. They constantly remind other bikers that trail etiquette is in their own best in-

terest. At the north end of Philadelphia's Fairmount Park, a 1,700-acre sylvan refuge called the Wissahickon remains open to bicyclists, largely because of the goodwill that results when 40 to 50 members of a local cycling group invest sweat equity in maintaining park trails one Sunday each month.

Across San Francisco Bay, the Bicycle Trails Council of the East Bay has followed CORBA's lead and organized a bicycle patrol to assist park rangers with public safety and education. On a warm August evening, I join Michael Kelley and Jim Tolley as they make their rounds of Anthony Chabot Regional Park, a 5,000-acre preserve of grasslands and eucalyptus groves in Oakland. The trails teem with users of all ages. It is clearly not a place for hotdogging on two wheels.

"Easin' by, on your left," Kelley softly warns a trio of joggers as he overtakes them. They nod and raise arms in acknowledgment. Approaching two horseback riders, he slows and gently chimes his bell, painted with the slogan "Peace On Dirt." The horses seem just a bit edgy. "It's OK," Kelley assures them in a voice that would soothe a bucking bronco; "my bike is afraid of horses." Everyone laughs. He's clearly winning PR points—no wonder park authorities say the bike patrol has reduced complaints by more than 50 percent.

We have just turned into the Towhee Trail when a biker, spotting Kelley and Tolley's bright green bibs marked "Bike Trail Patrol," stops to ask about joining. "There are still some people going too fast," he says, "and they're ruining it for everyone." Kelley, a lawyer from Berkeley, hands him a couple of business cards printed with the Bicycle Trails Council's address on one side and the "Responsible Off-Road Cyclist's Code" on the other. "Take two," he quips, "and call me in the morning."

Later, more cards and an avuncular lecture go to two Lycra-clad cyclists who come smoking down the trail. "John Muir said the parks belong to the people who use them," Kelley tells the speeders. "We're very big users so we must be responsible owners. Please remember that every rider is an emissary for the sport." The transgressors seem more interested in riding than in philosophizing, but they take the cards and depart on friendly terms. Of the 50 or 60 mountain bikers we encounter, they are the only ones in need of attitude adjustment.

"There are basically two kinds of riders," explains Jim Tolley as we climb toward a sweeping view of Lake Chabot. "We call them 'hammerheads' and 'flower sniffers.' The truth is, most of us are flower sniffers. Those fellows may be hammerheads now, but after they've heard our message enough times, they'll convert."

Greeting Arctic spring, Anchorage-based mountain bike club pedals a 20-mile circuit in sight of Knik Glacier.

