

Pacific Sun

THIS WHEEL'S ON FIRE

Following critical raves—and distribution woes—Billy Savage's *Klunkerz* careens ahead [P.11]

SAN RAFAEL // Official Race Guide
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QUOTE OF THE WEEK:



It was too good a story to let someone else screw up.

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FAT TIRES KEEP ON TURNIN'

Klunkerz filmmaker Billy Savage ran into more twists and turns than a brake-free plunge down Repack...

Mountain biking—an adaptation of bicycles to rough terrain—was never “invented.” It was what people did as soon as the bicycle sprang into existence in the late 19th century. But the phenomenon that we know today took root in Marin County in the mid-1970s.

It was fated. Kids in those days had the enviable trifecta of time (extravagantly undirected), tools (and bikes, whether pilfered or purchased, always modified in dad’s garage) and trails.

Other than a few dozen riders in Mill Valley, Larkspur and Fairfax, nobody really noticed. In those days, there was no such thing as a play date or carefully structured summer activity. The teens who weren’t complaining of boredom were unwittingly making some history for themselves.

And they just thought they were having fun.

But in a single swoop, the fun “new” mountain bike:

- Resuscitated a flagging bicycle industry

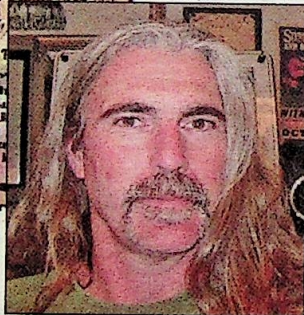
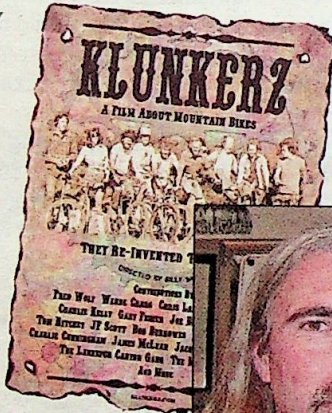
and launched an entirely new era of cycling technology.

- Delivered grownups back to the freedom of childhood.

- And put Marin on the world map—this time, for good.

Thirty years later, fate brought forth Billy Savage, a former Marinite who, as a boy living in Novato, blazed the trails of Mt. Burdell on his trusty BMX. In 2006, Savage captured the fat-tire phenomenon on film in his award-winning documentary *Klunkerz*.

That’s with a “K” and a goofy terminal “Z.”



Klunkerz director, Billy Savage.

Savage’s film chronicles the rise of the junkyard bikes that blazed a trail from the dirt roads of 1970s Mt. Tam to a multibillion-dollar international industry that’s now an Olympic event. The film combines archival foot-

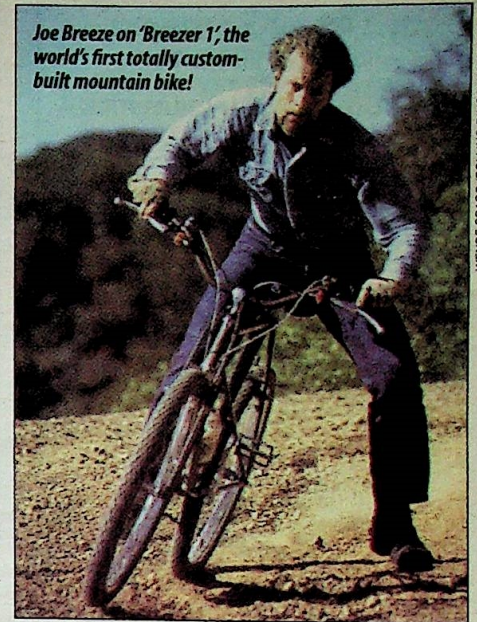
age with current interviews of such fat-tire pioneers as racer (and pioneering frame developer) Joe Breeze and early mountain bike rider/entrepreneurs Gary Fisher, Charlie

Kelly and Tom Ritchey to circumnavigate the wheels of mountain biking’s place in sports-and-leisure history.

The film has been called “a classic” by the *Miami Herald* and *Spokes* magazine; it was named “the most compelling bike film made in quite some time” by *Bike* magazine; and it’s even received positive reviews in *USA Today* and the *New York Times*. *Klunkerz* screened to cheering audiences at both the Mill Valley Film Festival and the Fairfax Documentary Film Festival. And it can be seen this summer on KQED (go to www.kqed.org for dates and times)—and definitely check out www.klunkerz.com to order the DVD and learn more about the making of the film.

But with all of the film’s unprecedented bike-documentary success, *Klunkerz* is at something of an impasse. The DVD’s distributor had originally said it couldn’t find an overseas market for the film, but when Savage learned the documentary had been screened in over a dozen countries—and he hadn’t seen a dime from those broadcasts—he realized something was amiss.

“Basically, I was getting ripped off here and overseas, so I killed my deal with them,” Savage says. “I’m now on the hunt for a new distributor...[and] it’s a tough marketplace right now, but luckily the reviews have been



Joe Breeze on ‘Breezer 1,’ the world’s first totally custom-built mountain bike!

WENDE CRAIG/ROLLING DINOSAUR ARCHIVES

really good.”

The *Pacific Sun* sat down with Billy Savage and quizzed him about his own bicycling past. His responses came as fast and as breathless as a controlled hurtle down a summertime fire road with no radar gun in sight...



How did you first get pumped up about fat-tire bikes?

I love off-road bikes and I always have. I grew up riding BMX bikes in the early 1970s in Orange County...On the weekends we’d bring shovels out to the edge of the ‘burbs to make tracks, jumps. On these construction sites there was usually one security guard

to keep an eye on things, so we’d have to be stealth about the whole thing. We’d

make a little circuit, dial it in and we’d ride until we were exhausted and could ride no more, someone got hurt or the security guard chased us out. A circuit would only last one weekend, because the construction crews were constantly moving, building and paving.

Sounds like a scene from *Soylent Green*, only without the mass consumption of human flesh.

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by Jacquie Phelan



It’s hard to believe that this motley crew—whose goal was having fun racing down Mt. Tam—revolutionized cycling worldwide.

JERRY RIBOLI

Joe Breeze, Gary Fisher, Charlie Kelly and friends enjoy a Marin sunrise, klunker style, in 1977.



WENDE CRAGO/ROLLING DINOSAUR ARCHIVES

< 11 Fat tires keep on turnin'

[They] paved our playground into whole new neighborhoods. Ones with cheesy names like "Castlegate Estates Phase III."

Makes Castlegate Estates Phase II sound downright sophisticated.

The crew I rode with were constantly pushing the envelope of what we thought was possible. Like everyone else, we were trying to go bigger. We weren't really that rad, we were just kids being kids. I still carry scars from those days. By the time I moved to Novato in Marin County in 1977, I was in love with the BMX bicycle almost as much as my trusty surfboard and skateboard...

Wasn't it a skateboard documentary that inspired you to make *Klunkerz*?

A business associate of mine...in Hollywood asked me to come to a screening of a film at the Director's Guild Theater. He and his team had just returned from Sundance where the film won two awards. He knew I'd love it because I'm an old skater. The film was *Dogtown and Z-Boys*.

Stacy Peralta's 2001 doc about the 1970s Zephyr skateboard team from Santa Monica.

Some of the original Z-Boys were there, which was cool because I had met and skated with a few of them back in the 1970s. At the time of the screening I had been working in the development of feature scripts and I was writing one about Marin in the 1970s and it had bicycles in it. Watching *Dogtown*, it all clicked, and I would say that was the inspiration to do a documentary on the Marin guys. I had lived there and had some connections, so I thought I might be the guy to make it happen. It was too good a story to let someone else screw up.

After *Dogtown* won best documentary at the Independent Spirit Awards, you'd think a film about the Marin mountain bike culture would've had some wheels turning in the film world.

It seemed no one had done a film like that yet, though a few companies were talking about it. I had to beat them to the punch. I watched all the bike porn I could get my hands on and figured it was about time for some countercultural programming. I did about a year of research on and off before my

first shooting trip to Marin. The first time I pulled the trigger was in October of 2004.

What to you was the single most important factor in the rapid growth of klunking?

The sharing of information. As the bikes developed, it was a really great way for them to advance the state of the art, which is something radically different than today's mentality of proprietary *engineering*.

The age of free love had morphed into the age of free frame-design tips?

One guy field-testing parts and ideas is going to take 20 times as long as 20 guys doing the same thing. When they found a better frame, fork, crank or shifter, they told each other about it. This open-source mentality meant that improvements came quickly. Since it wasn't about business, the guys wanted a level playing field to see who the best riders really were. It was about bragging rights. Everybody wanted to win the races, but nobody wanted to win a Repack race because the other guys had mechanical failures.

It's a good thing Dick Dastardly wasn't living in Fairfax at the time...

I mean, the first Repack race [named for the Repack Fire Road in Fairfax, its 1976 debut is considered the first organized mountain bike race], only one guy [Alan Bonds] out of the entire field made it down that goat track with his body and bike in one piece.

Considering much of the equipment being used was salvaged from the Great Depression—it's amazing any of the bikers lived to see 1980.

It's really cool that these guys saved these frames from the scrap heap and gave them a new life, but it definitely presented some problems. Since the frames were from the 1930s and 1940s, catastrophic mechanical failures did happen frequently, like frames snapping in half. Not good. They rusted from the inside, so you never knew when something might "let go." Most of the bike frames and parts specs were VERY similar toward the end of the klunker period. By late 1977 and early '78 they had outfitted these old bike frames with all new parts. This exact-parts spec was transferred over to the first Ritchey frames that Tom welded up for Gary and Charlie's company. Ditto for the Specialized

Stumpjumper a couple years later. Those first setups came from the blood and sweat of the Marin pioneers...Mafac cantilever brakes, T/A cranks, Suntour thumb-shifters, motorcycle cables and levers...everything.

Did the Breezer frame come along then?

Interestingly, Joe Breeze was pretty much the last of the holdouts as far as technology goes. He was riding a two-speed Bendix coaster brake bike with an inch pitch chain right up until he built Breezer 1, which was the first custom mountain bike frame with all the new parts listed above. Joe also won more Repack races than anyone [50 percent of the races he entered] on that old, rusty Schwinn, so what does that really say about rider-ability vs. technology? I've seen Joe ride that very Schwinn down Repack, and it's a sight to behold!

Last year you'd mentioned to me in a phone conversation that you'd made a "tactical error" by not securing funding for the movie before shooting...

I was listening to my heart, and willingly took on the financial risks because it was a no-brainer—the mountain bike changed my life and that of so many others, and there was no way *Klunkerz* could fail, given the current interest in both action sports and active tourism. Marin is like Mecca to riders all around the world.

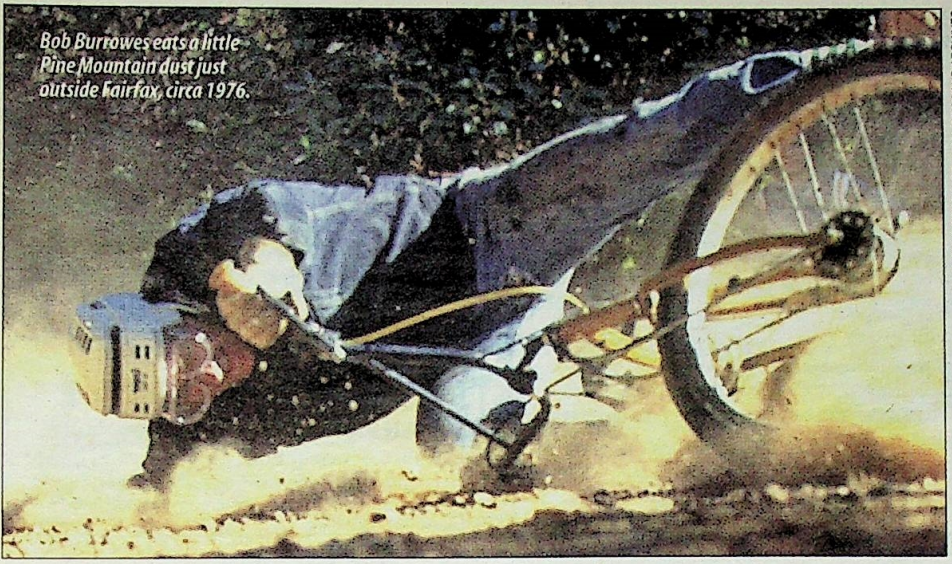
You'd think having a film-in-progress to show to possible sponsors would help get funding—like having a manuscript to present to a prospective book publisher.

Action-sports video producers can tell you that, normally, you get your sponsors for the film, then you get to work. I jumped the gun, and sort of did it the other way around. When I finally hooked up with a distributor, they did their best, but it turned out not to be the perfect fit for my material. *Klunkerz* was one part action and about five parts the story being told—who was who, where they did it, how it all unfurled...

The original fat-tire riders were basically just a bunch of kids with a lot of free time on their hands—how did you come up with so much archival footage?

I owe a lot to my old friend Glenn Evans, Jeff Corwin's director of photography. He's an amazing director of photography, and he intuitively a lot of how the shots should go. During this period, I was also gleaning stock footage, archival footage and photographs from a number of sources. There are more than 20 shooters credited in *Klunkerz*. The photographs from Wendie and Larry Cragg's Rolling Dinosaur Archives were a crucial component. [Fiber artist Wendie Cragg has a prominent role in the film and was one of very few women riding klunkers back in the day.] And one of the guys in the *Dogtown* film, Ray Flores, really came through for me; he had archival film from when he lived in Marin. He was the only person to shoot the early Repack races on Super-8. Not only did he shoot all the Z-Boys skating the empty pools of SoCal, but he also shot the mountain bike pioneers on Repack...Super-cool guy.

Bob Burrowes eats a little Pine Mountain dust just outside Fairfax, circa 1976.



WENDE CRAGG/ROLLING DINOSAUR ARCHIVES

Which brings us to that day at the foggy Fairfax Biketoberfest in 2005. You had a cameraman and a sound engineer. You were all over the place—talking to everybody, like a kid in a candy store. When you approached me I was trying to condense everything I knew about off-road history into a 300-syllable sound bite. You did a couple takes, then went after Charlie Kelly for an interview. After taping all weekend you drove home in that rain, and...

On the way back to L.A. from that first shoot, I was rear-ended on the I-5 freeway at midnight. My car was mangled—so was my back—but the \$100,000 worth of equipment and tapes survived the rainy rescue.

And during the making of the film both your parents fell ill.

Yes...In October of '05 I took a trip north to be with my dying father and I had my first bike ride since my back injury from the auto accident.

I couldn't sleep that first night, so I took off up the mountain on this old rusty Schwinn. It was amazing—full moon, fog and silence. I pushed up the mountain, lost in thought. As I blasted back down I knew what the pioneers must have felt on some of those early full moon rides. My coaster brake was gone and I could hear the pinging of bolts coming off of my fenders. I had no lights, and my eyes were watering and playing tricks on me. By the time I got to the streets of Ross both my tires were flat and the sun was coming up. I pushed the bike back to Fairfax.

My father passed away a few days later.

Was the film at that particular time a godsend or an albatross?

If I hadn't had the project to focus my energies, I would have gone nuts, because my mom fell ill not long thereafter, and became paralyzed. She needed care 24/7 and it took quite a toll on myself and my siblings. We did the best we could to take care of her, but now she was being cared for by the system, and it broke our hearts. I traveled up several times a month to be with her, but after a *while she didn't want me there at all. I kept going anyway. And I rode, worked on the film, buried myself...

And all this was happening as the

deadline for the Mill Valley Film Festival was looming?

The Mill Valley Film Festival officials wanted the final version of the film by mid-September [the festival takes place at the beginning of October]. I was working 16 hours a day trying to finish. I was running into post-production nightmares. In the middle of the night I got a phone call from my brother.

Oh no.

I got in my car and drove seven hours straight to the hospital to meet him [at my mother's bedside], but I was too late.

And then you had to debut your documentary at your hometown film festival.

The Mill Valley Film Festival had decided to give *Klunkerz* two screenings on two consecutive nights, which was fantastic. They both sold out weeks before the festival. It was a blast, but it was bittersweet. My whole family was there in Marin, but no one came to the screening. They were all there for Mom's funeral. A year after his death, my mother joined my father outside the Golden Gate the morning after the second screening.

What did you make of it all?

I dropped off my wife, child and extended family at the S.F. airport after the funeral and started to head north. I needed some time to digest all that had happened. I was going surfing and abalone diving with some friends up near the Sonoma/Mendocino border. As I was driving over the Golden Gate Bridge I could see the roses still swirling in the water outside Kirby Cove. I was sobbing uncontrollably when my phone rang. It was the Mill Valley Film Festival. They had decided, for the first time in 29 years, to give a documentary a third screening. In one week, *Klunkerz* was going to close the festival at the Rafael Film Center. The old Rafael Theater where my parents had taken me so many times as a child. It was too much. I drove over Mt. Tam and took the coast all the way up to Sea Ranch taking photos along the way.

Jacquie Phelan was inducted in the United States Bicycling Hall of Fame and Mountain Biking Hall of Fame and was the first American to race fat tires abroad, where she (and her aluminum Cunningham bicycle) beat Britain's best men at the famed Man v. Horse.



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