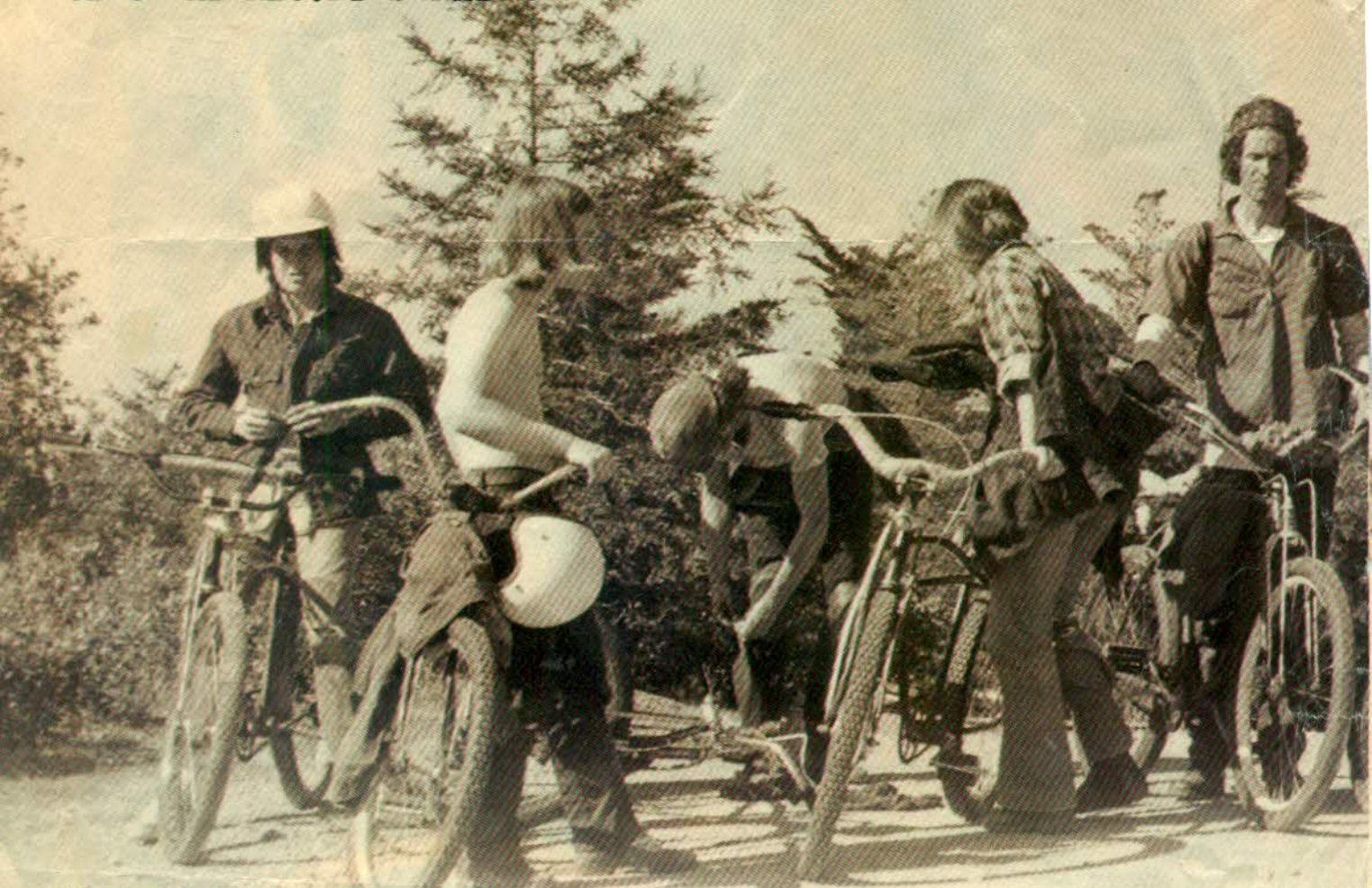


who really invented the

WAS IT THE ACCLAIMED HALL-OF-FAMERS, OR THE ANONYMOUS '70S FUNHOGS YOU SEE HERE? OFF-ROAD PIONEER JOE BREEZE SETS THE RECORD STRAIGHT.



Who invented mountain biking? Of course, people have been riding off road since the bicycle was invented. But it wasn't until the '70s that a group of cyclists in Northern California's Marin County had the tenacity and connections to develop their hobby into what would become a national (and eventually worldwide) craze. I was part of that group and—along with Gary Fisher, Charlie Kelly, Tom Ritchey, and others—we generally receive credit for “inventing” the mountain bike.

But there have always been missing links in the evolutionary tale. Now, after more than 20 years, the cyclists responsible for one of these missing links have surfaced. Take a look: That's them in the blurry snapshot above.

You don't recognize them? I'm not surprised. Read on to find out more about their contribution to the sport, and the unsung contributions of others—and why we're lobbying to have the riders

in the photos inducted into the Mountain Bike Hall of Fame.

How it began

In the early '70s, cycling made a resurgence in America. The popular bikes then were road bikes, and the San Francisco Bay Area (including Marin County where I lived) was a hotbed of road riding.

Some of us discovered off-road cycling in the form of cyclocross, a European version of off-road racing that uses skinny-tire bikes. We began to train for cyclocross on our local mountain, Mt. Tamalpais. On Mt. Tam and environs we used to see riders on old balloon-tire bikes. From Larkspur, they were known as the “Canyon Gang.” They even held races on Mt. Tam as early as '71, untimed and often impromptu.

An ex-Canyonite named Marc Vendetti joined our road club, Velo Club Tamalpais, in '73. By '74, I and other members of Velo

mountain bike?



Inset: Russ Mahon (yellow jersey) first put a derailleur on a clunker, inspiring Gary Fisher (looking over his left shoulder at Mahon and friend Carter Cox) and others to create the first true mountain bikes. **Group photo:** Mahon and his crew even wore helmets in '73. They were way ahead of their time.

Club Tam began showing up at meetings aboard one-speed ballooners. These old bikes let us explore dirt roads and trails—but maybe more important was their downhill-worthiness. While road racing emphasized our muscular strength, ballooners gave us an outlet for displaying our bike-handling skills. The frame of choice was the Schwinn Excelsior, which we found to have the best downhill handling traits and to be one of the most durable.

At first, our rides began at the base of 2,600-foot Mt. Tam with an outstretched thumb, and we gained elevation via pavement and automobiles. Over time we began riding farther up the mountain, until finally we were just pedaling the whole way to the top—after all, we were top-category road racers and this was great power training. But pushing that 52x20-tooth gear began to get old.

something better showed up at the West Coast Open cyclocross race in Marin on December 1, 1974. Three racers we'd never seen before arrived at the start line on old balloon-tire bikes outfitted with thumbshift-operated derailleurs and drum brakes operated by motorcycle brake levers.

I don't remember who won that race, or much else about it, but I do remember that Gary Fisher, Charlie Kelly and I looked at these bikes, then looked at each other. We didn't learn much about those riders—aside from hearing them say they had some connection with Saratoga, about 75 miles from Marin—but their bikes stuck in our minds.

We'd seen the prototype for what would evolve into the mountain bike you ride today.

The next summer, Fisher cobbled together a 5-speed Schwinn balloonner. His immediate hill-climbing prowess convinced others that multiple gearing was the way to go. New riding possibilities

Russ Mahon

The evolution revolution

Many Marinites kept an eye out for something better. That

opened—ballooner fun didn't have to be restricted to downhill any longer! Soon after, Fisher added a front derailleur with multiple chainrings, and front and rear drum brakes to improve braking. The mysterious "Saratoga" bike we'd seen at the cyclocross race was reborn in Marin.

Was it a mirage?

But strangely, the 3 riders who'd inspired us had vanished as mysteriously as they'd appeared. For years we heard nothing more about them. I related the tale to magazine reporters, but without names and people to call, the story never made it into print.

"Who were those guys?" I kept wondering. Over the years I made

several attempts to track them down, but had no luck. They had slipped away into the past.

Then in '94, a guy building a house foundation for Tom Ritchey mentioned to Ritchey that he knew the person who put the first derailleur and drum brakes on a balloon-tire bike. Ritchey expected to hear Gary Fisher's name.

But the guy told Ritchey about a friend named Russ Mahon, who was from Cupertino (near Saratoga). In '73, said the contractor, Mahon and 6 or so friends had grafted derailleurs and thumb-shifters onto old ballooners.

"Charlie Kelly and Joe would always say, 'We weren't the first, you know. It was those Cupertino guys,'" says Ritchey. But even so, he

Tuesday, October 26, 1976

Rider Name	Start	Finish time	Time
Fred	9:25	9:58:19	5:19
Allan	9:27	9:52:14	5:19
Bob	9:29	9:55:50	4:50
Arnie	9:27	9:54:30	7:30
Wendy	9:28	9:52:43	5:43
Bob Peterson	9:33	9:59:24	6:24
Steve	9:27	9:46:49	13:49
Steve	9:40	9:47:53	7:53
Steve	9:	9:59:30	



Wendy Cragg

As ballooner riding increased it was evident there was a bit of rivalry among the sub-groups situated in towns around the base of Mt. Tam. Because many of the riders were road racers, it seemed natural to stage a race to prove who was the fastest off road. The first formal, timed race was October 21, 1976, on the east face of Pine Mountain, just north of Mt. Tam. Because competitors needed to repack their coaster brakes with grease after each 2.1 mile, steeply pitched, 1,300-foot run, the course was dubbed "Repack."

Charlie Kelly and Fred Wolf chose the course and timed the runs with Navy-issue chronometers, sending riders off at 2-minute intervals. In all, 24 Repack races were held from '76-'84. The fastest time of 4 minutes, 22 seconds was set by Gary Fisher. I had the most wins with 10, and the second fastest time of 4:24. The fastest woman was Wendie Cragg (5:27). Cragg's fearless downhill and streak of riding off road 75 days straight made her the undisputed "Queen of Klunking." She also shot many of the photos you see here.



Charlie Kelly



Wendie Cragg

By '77, many Marin ballooners sported the finest and toughest road bike components from around the world. Even a few motorcycle components were included. But all these parts were attached to old Schwinn frames, which were strong only by virtue of their mass. Built of thick-wall, mostly curved, mild-steel tubing, the frames weighed about 12 pounds. They'd been built to take the abuse of the toughest paperboy, but downhill runs on Repack by gonzo adults certainly weren't what Ignaz Schwinn had in mind. Here is Otis Guy swooping down Repack on a '42 Schwinn. The frames kept breaking. It was time for something new.

didn't think much of the claim until last year, when photographs documenting the derailleur-clad ballooners arrived in the mail—the ones reproduced on pages 60 and 61, and in the background on these pages. There was even a photo of Russ Mahon, Carter Cox, and Bernie Mahon at the starting line of the fateful Marin cyclocross race—with Fisher looking over his shoulder at them!

Mahon remembers that, "The night of the race we were on the local news. Basically they were saying, 'Look how nuts these guys are.' That was our one and only appearance. I never raced the bike again, though I continued riding—and I still do."

Mahon says that although he's thrilled at the possibility of his contribution being acknowledged in the Mountain Bike Hall of

Fame, he didn't feel cheated when the sport rolled on without him. "We were just putting the man on the mountain," he says. "In '72 I came to grips with the fact that the streets were too dangerous. I wanted to workout in the hills. So it was obvious—you take the big bike and you put a transmission on it. I didn't see the potential for a \$2,000 bike. I didn't have that vision."

Indeed, it's hard to say that mountain biking wouldn't have grown if we hadn't seen Mahon that day. The sport already had enough inertia that it probably would have kept rolling along until someone got the bright idea to add multiple gearing. I do know one thing, though: The photographer who had the sense to snap that significant moment must have been visiting from the future.

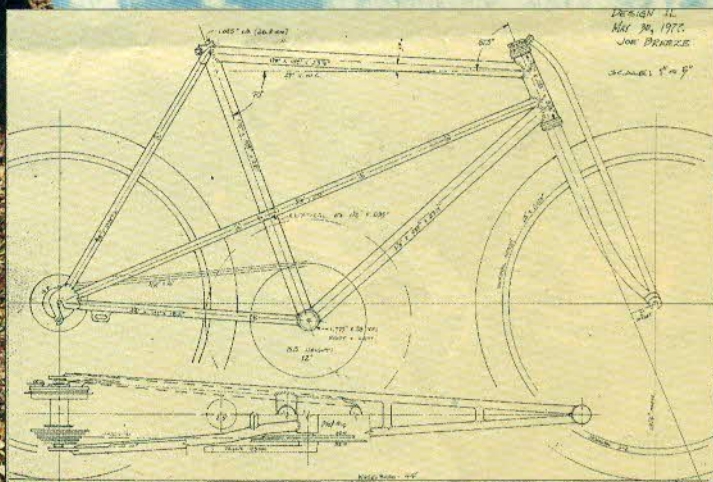
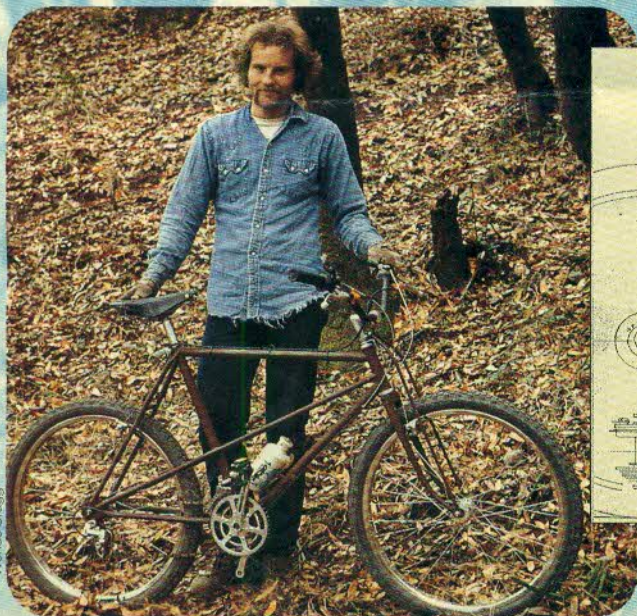
The biggest riders had the greatest need for new frames. At more than 6 feet tall and weighing almost 200 pounds, Charlie Kelly had broken many frames. I'd been building road frames since '74, so Kelly asked me to build a balloon frame for him. But because of my busy road racing schedule, I declined. Kelly asked another local framebuilder, Craig Mitchell, who complied. It was the first mountain bike frame built with chrome-moly tubing, but Kelly reverted to his old Schwinn after 2 weeks because the Mitchell frame didn't handle well.

Later in '77, Kelly again asked me to build a frame for him. This time I agreed and built 10 frames using straight gauge chrome-moly

airplane-frame tubing, borrowing the basic geometry from my Schwinn Excelsior. (My schematic of that clunker appears in the background on pages 66–67.) I completed the first one in October '77, and raced it to victory at Repack. I finished the other 9 bikes by June '78. Called Breezers, they sold for \$750 each, complete with pump, water bottle, spare inner tube, and repair kit. Here I am with the first Breezer and my plan for the bike.

Most Breezer buyers had long inseams, so in the balloon tradition of "one size fits all," the seat tubes of the first 10 Breezers all measured 22 inches (center of the bottom bracket to the top of the seat tube). I chose this size because the longest

seatposts available were only 180-mm long. I made the head tube 5¼ inches long so that if the specially built fork were damaged, a Schwinn fork could easily be substituted. For these reasons, the top tube sloped down from the seat tube to the head tube. Up to that point, fat-tire "ballooners" had also been known as clunkers, bombers or beaters, owing to their ragged appearance. They'd all seen a lot of years, many of them in junkyards. The shiny new, 18-speed, 38-pound Breezers created a stir in the Marin bicycle community, even among confirmed road cyclists who'd been looking askance at balloon riding. Suddenly it became difficult to call fat-tire bikes clunkers, and more cyclists became converts to this new way of riding.



Background photo: Russ Mahon
Wende Gregg



RED WOLF (FAIRFAX)
Jerry Filiboi

WENDE CRAGG (FA.)

MARK LINDLOW (FA.)

ROB STUART (LARK.)

CHRIS LANG (FA.)

JIM PROTON

IAN STUART (LARK.) CH

By the late '70s, the Marin mountain bike movement reached critical mass and word spread to the rest of the U.S. and eventually around the world. The first story in a non-cycling, national magazine ran in the spring '78 edition of *Co-Evolution Quarterly*. *Outside/Mariah* magazine published a story by Charlie Kelly in '79. Here I'm being interviewed by San Francisco's KPIX. Otis Guy and Tom Ritchey are watching. With national coverage, Marin bike shops started getting

inquiries for bikes and parts. In mid '78, Erik Koski of the Cove Bike Shop in Mill Valley began a mail-order business called TrailMaster to sell parts for fat-tire bikes. Later that year, Erik's brother Don welded a crude fat-tire frame, using the remnants of an old Schwinn Varsity and some electrical conduit. (This frame was used by Mert Lawwill as the pattern for his Pro-Cruisers.) The geometry was lacking, but the TIG-welded frame's price was right. Hundreds were sold.

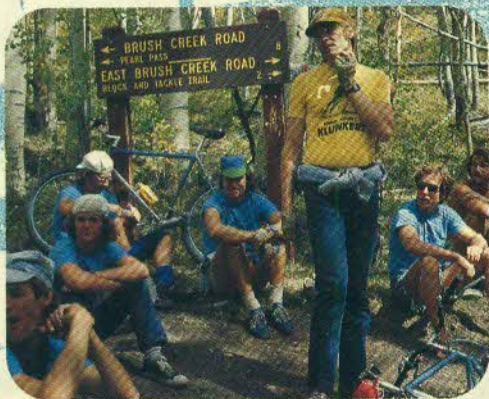


Wende Cragg





ARLEY KELLY (S.A.) GARY FISHER (FA) JOE BREEZE (M.V.) ERIC FLETCHER (INVER.) CRAIG MITCHELL (FA) JOHN DRUMM (LARKSPOR) ROY RIVERS (M.V.)



Wende Cragg

In late '77, a writer for *Co-Evolution Quarterly* told us Marin riders that the year before some locals in Crested Butte, Colorado, had held a "First Annual" ride from Crested Butte to Aspen—over 12,700-foot Pearl Pass. We were floored that people 1,000 miles away were doing the same type of riding we were, so in September '78, 6 of us headed out to Crested Butte. We rolled into town to find that the "Pearl Pass Tour" organizers were ambivalent about holding the event, and that '77's "Second Annual" had never even happened! Crested Butte almost became another isolated incident in off-road history. But when the Buttians, regulars at the Grubstake Saloon and seasonal firefighters, saw that our group included a woman (Wende Cragg), their machismo kicked in. Later that week, at the crack of a shotgun, 6 Marinites and 7 Buttians pedaled off to Aspen on a 2-day tour. Within a couple of years all but one of the 7 original Buttians had moved to new endeavors, but the Pearl Pass Tour has continued, and contributed important momentum to the sport.



Wende Cragg

In January '79, my road-tandem partner (and balloon buddy) Otis Guy and I visited road racer and framebuilder Tom Ritchey, who lived south of San Francisco in Redwood City. Ritchey had a successful business making single and tandem road frames, and was also an accomplished road racer who had once been on the junior national team. He was building a tandem for Otis and me for a transcontinental record attempt. I wanted to show Ritchey how the tandem's twin-lateral tubes should be attached, so I brought along my Breezer as an example.

When I wheeled the Breezer out of Otis's truck, Ritchey's eyes lit up. He'd been riding off road for

years with a cyclist named Jobst Brandt. "Jobst Rides," as they came to be called, included negotiating singletrack on road racing bikes with nothing larger than silk, 300-gram, tubular racing tires. Ritchey decided he should build a fat-tire frame.

Gary Fisher, who'd chosen not to get one of the first Breezers, was looking for someone to build an off-road frame for him. When Fisher heard that Ritchey was interested in making them, he asked Ritchey to build one. Ritchey built 3—one for Fisher, one for himself, and one for Fisher to sell for him. (Fisher, of course, later designed and built his own bikes.)

In March of '79, Ritchey delivered his finished frames to Fisher (shown here at the base of Repack in '77, celebrating a victory) and began building 9 more to sell on speculation. In September, Fisher ran into his buddy Charlie Kelly in downtown Fairfax, showed him the gleaming frames crammed into his car, and asked him if he'd like to go into business selling Ritchey frames. Fisher and Kelly immediately pooled their cash (\$200), opened a bank account, and came up with a name. Earlier in the year, James McClean, an enthusiast from Santa Barbara, suggested to Gary that the bike be called a "mountain bike," so Fisher and Kelly named their venture MountainBikes. It was the first business established to sell nothing but fat-tire bikes.

Fisher and Kelly tried to dissuade other companies from using "mountain bike" generically, but failed in a bid to trademark the name. Once people realized that "mountain bike" could be used freely, the short-lived usage of "ATB" (all-terrain bike) fell by the wayside.



Near the turn of the decade, a few parts manufacturers geared up to offer specialty mountain bike parts. Most notable were 2 Japanese companies, Ukai (aluminum rims in '79), and National Tire (CyclePro Snakebelly tires in '80). Wheels built with these parts reduced the weight of a mountain bike by 6 pounds, without any loss in strength.

The next step was increased bike production. By '81 a few large bicycle companies were eyeing the rapidly developing mountain bike market. Mike Sinyard—founder of a bicycle parts distributing company in San Jose called Specialized Bicycle Imports, which had expanded into developing complete road bikes—bought a couple of \$1,400 Ritchey MountainBikes for himself and his friends to ride. His

designer, Tim Neenan, suggested they do a Specialized mountain bike. Sinyard took his Ritchey bike to the factory he worked with in Japan, and it became the model for the first Specialized Stumpjumper, which debuted in September '81 at Colorado's sixth annual Crested Butte Fat Tire Festival. In '82, its first "model year," the Stumpjumper sold for \$750, making the new sport accessible to more people. Thousands were sold within a couple of years.

From then on, every name in the bike business—and some from outside—jumped into the fray. Sales of fat-tire mountain bikes steadily increased, eventually surpassing road bike sales sometime between '85 and '86. And you know the rest of the story. ■



Wendy Orszag

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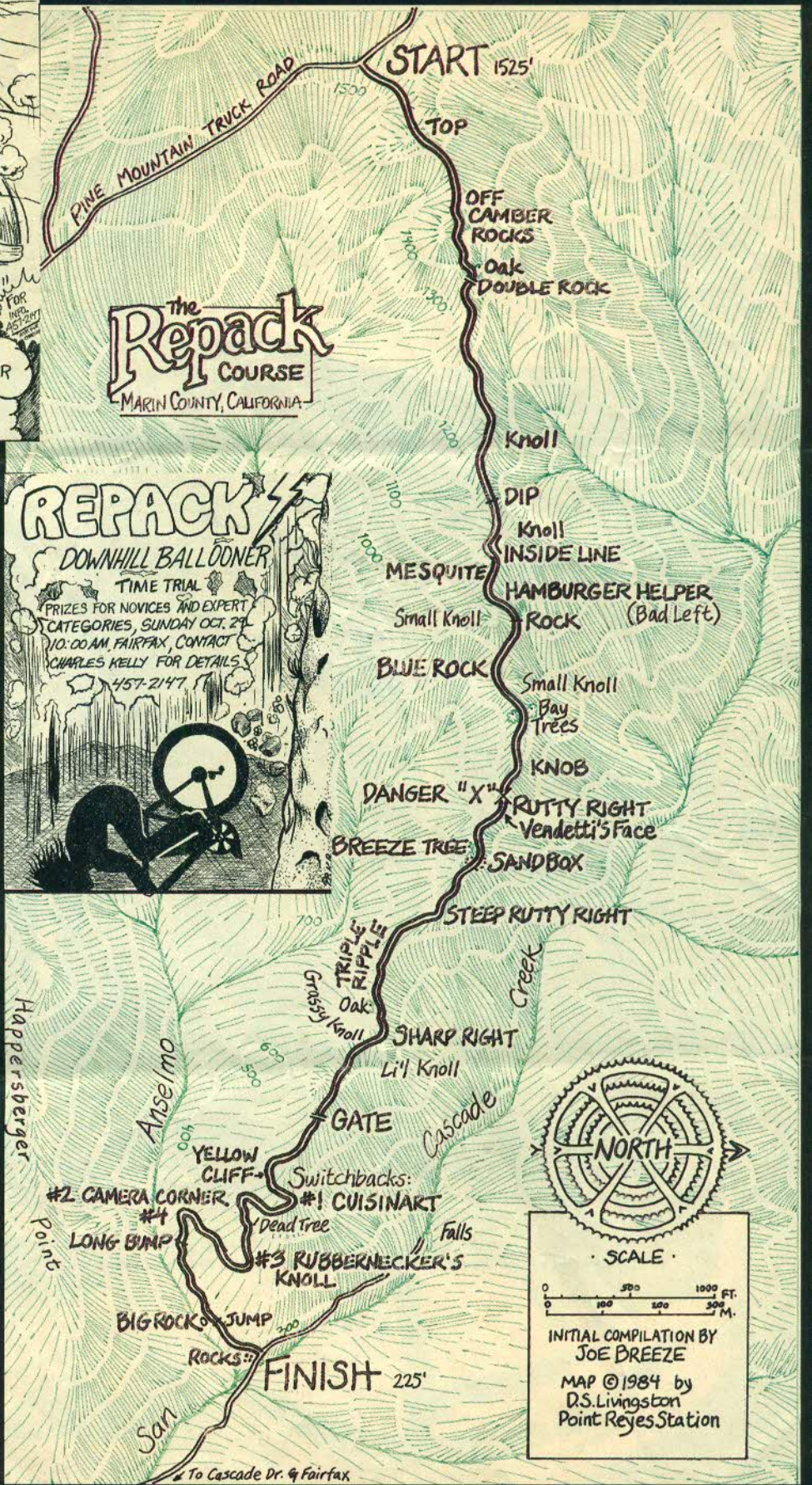
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