

Repack Revisited

The Boss of Off-Road Races Returns for an Encore

Frank Berto

The world's original off-road race began very casually about ten years ago. On a Sunday morning, a dozen or so crazies would load their balloon-tired Schwinn klunkers into the back of a pickup truck and drive up the north slope of Marin County's Mount Tamalpais until the truck would go no farther. From there they pedaled up to the top of what was then called the Cascades fire road, and is now officially called Repack Road.

Repack Road drops 1,300 feet in 1.8 miles, averaging about a 14 percent grade. Various sections present dirt, gravel, football-size boulders, 20 percent slopes, and rutted gnarly stretches of bare rock. It made for an exciting, if brief, downhill race.

The early crazies weren't completely mad, so after some preliminary runs, they decided that the course was better suited for individual time trials than for a massed-start race. An official would pedal down the course, stopwatch in pocket, and time the riders as they crossed the finish line.

In the early days, everyone used coaster brakes. By the bottom of the course, the coaster brake would be sizzling hot, and it would need to be repacked. That's how the road got its name.

Repack Road also has a good claim to the title of "Birthplace of the All-Terrain Bike." One crash after another, broken bike by broken bike,

the current designs of all-terrain bikes evolved on the Repack test laboratory.

The race was run fairly regularly through 1979. By then a good Sunday would see as many as 50 bikes, including a few custom-made prototype ATBs. Fifteen-speed gear trains were added so riders could pedal back for a second run. In 1979, Gary Fisher set the record time of 4 minutes, 22 seconds, and Joe Breeze was one second slower.

With the 1979 rainy season, the Repack races ceased. Part of the reason was the increased policing from the Marin Municipal Water District rangers. Outlaw ATBers were making nuisances of themselves on the hiking and horse trails. But, the main reason was that many of the original organizers had become ATB entrepreneurs. Gary Fisher, Charlie Kelly, Joe Breeze, and Eric Koski were spending their weekends designing, building, and selling the prototype MountainBikes, Breezers, and Trailmasters.

I must admit that I watched the development of custom-built klunkers with complete disbelief. I expected ATBs to go the way of hula hoops and pet rocks. Clearly, anybody crazy enough to kamikaze down Repack wouldn't have a thousand dollars for a custom-built ATB. I didn't believe the movement would survive, until I noticed that every tenth bike in Marin County was an ATB.

Repack is Back

Late last summer, I saw a flier in a bike shop: "Repack is Back. Competition will be staged on October 8 for a new Repack record; sanctioned by NORBA (National Off-Road Bicycle Association)." I decided to enter. What better way to get on the bandwagon, and besides, someone had to come in last.

I borrowed a loaner Ritchey MountainBike from Gary Fisher the day before the race. It was an early model, but the gear train was pure Berto. It had 28/38/48 Shimano Biopace chainwheels on 180-mm Sugino Aero Tour cranks. This was combined with a 14-16-18-21-28-38 SunTour New Winner, a DID chain, and SunTour derailleurs. I switched the brakes from right-hand-front to the conventional pattern. Everything else was stock.

The Rover Boys on Repack

On Saturday morning, I put on my racing uniform: Bell Tourlite, Levi pants and jacket, high boots, and a pair of leather gloves.

I had never pedaled Repack, so I decided to inspect the course before the race. I pedaled the five miles from my home to the finish line in Fairfax and alternately pedaled and walked up Repack. The bike was geared low enough to climb the 20 percent slopes, but I couldn't convert oatmeal to glycogen fast enough to pedal all the way.

I found that it takes a nice bit of balance to climb steep dirt trails. Lean too far forward and the rear wheel spins; too far back, and the front wheel does a wheelie. I had to climb sitting in the saddle. If I stood up, the front and rear wheels would alternately lose traction. It took me 45 minutes to make it to the top.

The starting line was a typical Mellow Marin mob scene. There were TV crews from two stations, and numerous people with expensive cameras and notebooks. There were also a formidable 60 entrants, with team members from Ross, Specialized Bicycle Imports, and the S.E. motocross racing team from Los Angeles. Many of the early Repack riders, including Joe Breeze, Otis Guy, Gary Fisher, and Bob Burrows, were there to defend their records. Finally, there were these strange bearded characters in jeans, T-shirts, beer bellies, and coaster brake Goodwill specials. On a 1 to 10 scale, I was 10 for equipment, 5 for appearance, and 1 for experience.



An unidentified rider displays good form, but not the best line for this turn.

The race started an hour late. Charlie Kelly, the starter, gave the race invocation: "If you crash and break a few bones, wait for the first aid crew. Unless you're blocking the good line; if so, then try to drag yourself off to one side. If you see somebody down on the course and bleeding, stop and give help—unless you're on a real good run. Then, shout at the next first aid man."

The timer ticked down to zero and the first racer blasted off. I took my camera and walked down to the first "wipe-out" corner. The next rider, Glen Brown (Zipper Fairings), approached at terminal velocity and slid off the road end over end. He got up, inspected himself and his bike for loose pieces, and carried on. I noted that first aiders and radio hams were stationed about every quarter mile.

The radio at the starting line was alternately reporting crashes and top times. The TV crews headed down the course to where the turkey vultures were circling.

The waiting racers were going through a tire-pinching exercise. The object is to have soft tires for best traction, but not too soft. Pinch-ssst. Pinch-ssst.

A few riders wore shorts, cycling shoes, toe clips, and straps. Think positive.

As the minutes and the riders ticked away, I thought, "Berto, aren't you a bit too old for this?" "But, you've already had your TV interview, so you can't gracefully chicken out."

Five minutes to go. Lower the saddle. Cinch up the helmet. On with the gloves. Set up in middle gear.

"Number 56."

I push up to the starting line.

"Fifteen seconds."

"Five seconds."

"Go!"

Musings During a Tour Down Repack Road

Push off.

Pedal like crazy down the first 200 yards of level road. Over the edge. First turn approaching. Let's not wipe out on the first corner like Glen Brown.

Get over the rear wheel. Brake! Boy, the front brake really stops, but the rear just skids the back wheel.

Hold your line. Don't hit that gully. Too late! Wham! Crunch! Gosh, nothing broke. Amazing. If this were a skinny-tire bike, it would be in three pieces.

I'm going too slow. Pedal faster.

Gulp! I'll never make this turn. Brake hard! Hold the rear brake on! Slide! What a pounding.

I know the last part is worst. It has those steep tight corners that slope the wrong way. Here comes the worst curve.

Look at that mob of spectators—and they all have cameras. I'm going way too fast. If I'm going to wipe out, let's go down in style.

Lock the rear brake. Right foot down. Slide!

"Go for it, Frank!" shouts a friend. Bump! Bump! Thump! Hang on!

Unreal. I didn't fall. I haven't slid like that since I was 15.

Pedal! Pedal! There's the finish line!

Finish Line

The timer says "56: 6 minutes, 18 seconds." There are several hundred people at the finish. Slowly, my adrenaline winds down.

The last two riders are the course record holders: Joe Breeze and Gary Fisher. Joe crosses the line in 4 minutes, 44 seconds. Everyone waits for Gary. He crosses the line in 5 minutes, 29 seconds with grease on his white gloves.

The chain came off when he skidded into a bush.

The winning times are announced. Two young riders from Roseville, Jim Denton (4:41) and Mike Jordan (4:45), come in first and third. A and B Cycle, their sponsor, will be celebrating. Joe Breeze is second. Ten riders are under 5 minutes. Marcus Gannister of the SBI team is the top novice at 4:58. Denise Carmagna, the editor of *Fat Tyre Flyer*, is the top woman at 7:10.

So, the old Repack record still stands. Maybe it's waiting for you. Or, perhaps the new Over 50—Novice record of 6:18 is more your style. I'll see you there.○

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