

Meet Charlie Kelly

'World's Foremost Authority' On Fat-Tire Bikes

by John W. Ross

Five minutes of prime time Charlie Kelly—alone or in any of the various crowds he stands out in—and you will understand how it was bound to happen. His specialty has outgrown his reach. A pity, really, considering how long and how hard Charlie's worked to cultivate and maintain the image behind his self-proclaimed world title: "World's foremost authority," it reads, "on the world's smallest field—clunking."

But when you're as busily banging the off-road bicycle drums as Charlie is, some things are bound to slide through the cracks, more from inattention than intent. For, while Charlie Kelly maintains his standing as the unchallenged "World's Foremost Authority," the subject is fast losing its grip on obscurity. Off-road cycles are taking over.

Hard data on the share of these all-terrain muscle bicycles in the cycling marketplace is hard to come by, the soft data is plenty convincing. "Every trade magazine now devotes one issue a year to it," Kelly says. "This year, Shimano and Suntour have, for the first time, begun putting out equipment for these kinds of bikes. The demand for the new stuff coming out far outstrips the suppliers ability to deliver."

"When I started going to bicycle dealer showcases three years ago, there were one or two people showing the bikes," Kelly remembers, "and now, everybody is showing one." The 'stamp-outs' he likes to call them, are rolling off production lines with descriptive names like Mt. Fuji, Ridgerunner, Stumpjumper, Skyline, Explorer, Rough Terrain, High Sierra and Summit. There are nearly as many custom frame makers jockeying for leadership in the "spare-no-expense-for-quality" approach to manufacturing.

The challenge and opportunities in the clunker field are enthusiastically stated in columns and articles reviewing various models and announcing the concept.

"I predict clunkers will overtake dropped-handlebar ten speeds as America's favorite bicycles," predicts John Schubert, senior editor of *Bicycling* magazine. "You won't believe how good it feels." The all-terrain models are described as "the best answer to the transportation blues...a pedal powered hybrid with the best qualities of a Jeep and a Ferrari." Another reviewer writes: "Fat tires are here to stay." They are described, in turn, as functional, bullet-proof, fantasia on wheels, lithe, versatile, indestructible and no less than "the best engineered all-terrain vehicle for under \$35,000."

"Seven years ago, I was saying this is gonna' be big. So where's all the

money?" Charlie laughs. "I'm still saying it." But if the first of the Seven Laws of Money means anything, Charlie will soon be lunching with the Payne Webbers and Merrill Lynchs. "Do what you want to do and the money comes."

And clunking is what Charlie R. "Bicycle Jones" Kelly does best, most and always. While he may not have made mountain bikes all that they are today, he's notched a few large caliber guns in getting the bikes in front of the consumer. For the past several years, Charlie has been telling anyone with sense enough to listen or read that the most efficient form of human transportation—the bicycle—just got better. To his knowledge, the first mass media pronouncement that all-terrain cycling had "arrived" appeared under his byline in *Outside* magazine. The slick, four-color outdoor activity magazine announced, through Kelly to a quarter million readers, that "quick and tough clunker bikes...are built to take it."

But as a noted philosopher once said, "everyone who got where he is had to begin where he was." Beginning where he was for Charlie Kelly was in the solitude of a motel room on the road with the Sons of Champlin rock band. "They were supposed to make me rich," Charlie playfully laments of the defunct Marin-based band that rocked the fringes of music industry greatness in the '60s.

"I got into writing kinda' through a fluke," Kelly says. "I was on the road with this rock band and I sat down and wrote out an article and sent it in and sold it. I sold the first thing I ever wrote," he comments, poorly disguising degrees of self-amazement.

If he makes it sound easy, Charlie admits that some tooth pulling was involved. "I badgered those people for months," he laughs. The article chronicled the evolution of the "clunker" through its publication in the September, 1979 issue. It also featured a picture of C.K., looking very much in character except that he's pushing instead of riding. His mouth is opened like a surprised goldfish's but more for respiration than conversation. The air can be thin in the hills of Marin!

Directly or indirectly, Charlie doesn't say, the *Outside* article spawned at least two projects that threaten to put Charlie out of a part-time piano-moving business: The infamous *Fat Tire Flyer* magazine and the Charles R. Kelly Memorial Mountain Bike Library—dedication pending.

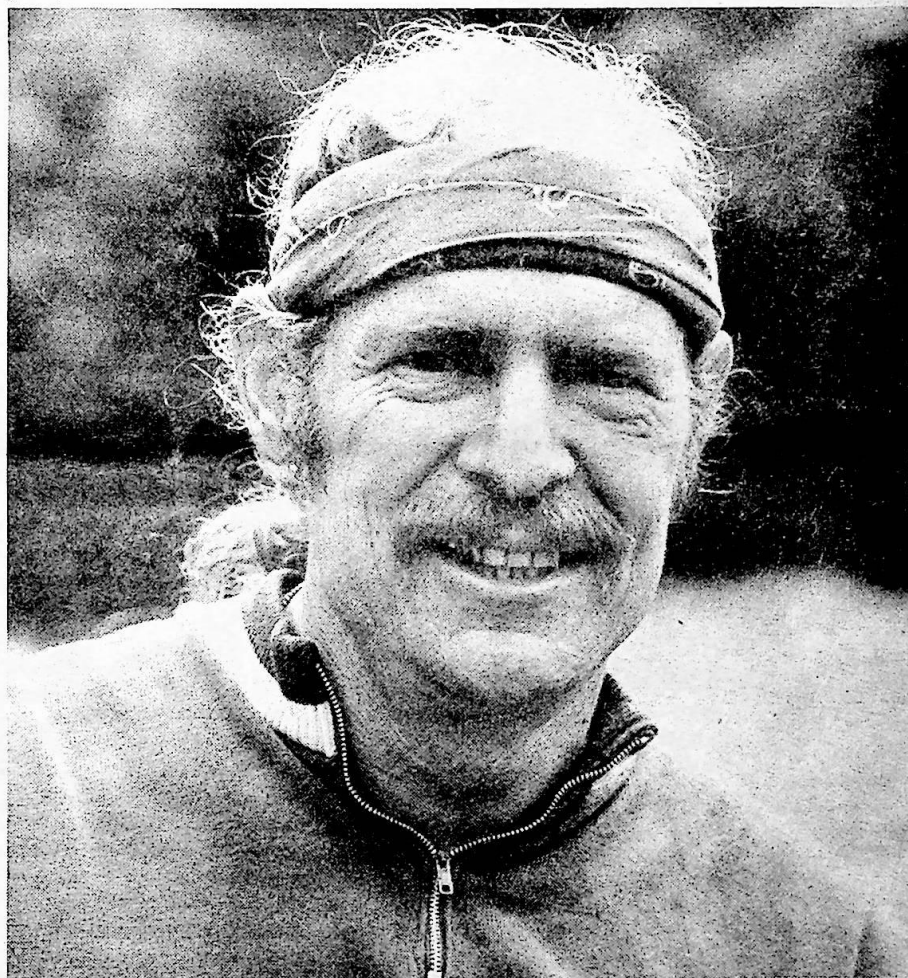
The four-volume, loose-leaf bound Library is a complete collection of everything-you-always-wanted-to-read-but-didn't-dream-was-printed articles on off-road cycles and cycling. Charlie keeps the collection of mostly his own articles not less than one arm's length away. "It started out as my own stuff in print. Finally, I decided to get it all—even if they were so short-sighted as not to write about me. Hey, everybody's got to be an expert on something. Besides, it's fun. I also want to remain the world's foremost authority. I'm the editor of the only magazine on the subject—I'd better be an expert."

He works daily on coding titles, subjects, authors and volume numbers into

At about the same time, Charlie's second major media affair—*The Fat Tire Flyer*—flowered into contention for his affection. The *Flyer*, published bi-monthly by Denise Caramagno, showcases articles crafted largely out of the fertile folds in the brain of Charlie Kelly under assorted *noms-de-guerre*. C.K., See Kay, Bicycle Jones or some other take off was generally insufficient to disguise Kelly's characteristic, gonzo-style musings on "the things you need to know to keep you on top of off-road riding, racing, touring, commuting; all aspects of Fat Tires and all applications." (The code to zip in Fairfax is 94930. Box 757 will get there.)

Charlie is also writing a book on off-road biking with Gary Fisher—former roommate and business partner in "The Leader, Period" among a gaggle of cottage-industry, custom off-road frame-building specialists.

Still, C.K. doesn't consider himself a writer. "I'm not a writer," he concedes in a rare display of modesty. "I consider a writer to be somebody who makes a living at it. But, I guess I do make a little money at it."



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his second favorite technological geegaw: the computer. "I've been sitting here cataloging (the articles) on my computer," Charlie says, diddling with the keyboard to project a variety of formats onto the screen. "I have 53 articles already on file and I am not even up to 1983 yet."

And 1983 is the year the rest of the mass medians recognized what C.K. has shown all along. Like a squirrel pawing for stored pine nuts, Charlie digs through file drawers, withdrawing issues from various periodicals dating back to 1978 edition of the *Crested Butte Chronicle* bannered: "Pearl Pass Klunker Tour." Charlie, "Original" Joe Breeze and MountainBikes' Gary Fisher, all sporting enough facial hair to disguise one of these bicycling outlaws from another, were reported to be in the California enclave that hipped Rocky Mountain riders to the concept of sticking gears on their favorite balloon-tired cruisers.

For the past three years, Charlie also sold Tom Ritchey MountainBikes to "everybody" between the ages of 20 and 60 who wandered near the San Anselmo shop where the cycles are made. His two most memorable customers are the kind of outrageous characters suited for a Saturday Night Live skit, including a plain-speaking judge from Florida.

"Anybody doesn't own two Ritchies is a damn fool," the Circuit Court judge wrote to C.K. "Anybody doesn't own one is a varmint." Beyond the colorful sentencing handed down regularly to the unbelievers by the judge, he also delivers a network of his friends and associates to the sales staff at MountainBikes. Charlie remembers the judge as being a closed case of just one look—that's all it took. "He saw my bike in Crested Butte," Kelly remembers, "and he came right up to me and said: 'Wow, tell me about that bike. Where can I get one?'"



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And, then there's Charlie's "little old Italian lady" friend from San Francisco who's about four feet tall and in her 60s. "She hadn't ridden a bicycle since she was a little girl," he recalls. "She came in with her husband from San Francisco. Hey, I laid the price on her and she didn't flinch. You could tell she and her husband were very much into quality. I told them they should look at some other bikes before deciding and they left and definitely shopped around. They came back that afternoon with the money."

Car troubles and living with a "hard-core," competition road racer—Fisher again—channeled Kelly's talent and enthusiasm into bicycling.

"I quit driving a car around 1969. I was going to get another one, but I just never

got around to it. The complications of owning a car looked a lot more than the complications involved in owning a bike," Kelly says. "I like to live simply. Anyway, I got into bikes because I didn't have a car and didn't want the complications of owning one."

Charlie began with raids on a collection of "basic cruisers, like you would see in Laguna" which Fisher was stockpiling around the house for riding errands around town. Gary and a friend who had a house backed up to Marin open space talked Charlie into his first off-road experience, which was very nearly his last. Kelly remembers a disintegrating frame, a decomposing seat post, a lot of walking, sweating and swearing before pleading, "I wanna go home now."

But the "Canyon gang" gradually revived his interest through a series of beefings up and boltings on to the old Schwinn Excelsior frames that survived longest and handled best. "We took the old Excelsior frame about as far as it would go." Neither an engineer nor an outstanding mechanic, Charlie's contribution centered around bringing people together in some early off-road jam sessions.

"I organized, promoted and staged the first races ever, as far as I know," Kelly says. "The first time we did it, we took up a couple of alarm clocks to time the results. I had no trouble getting prizes together. I went around to the bike shops in the area and just told them what I wanted to do and I had all the parts I could handle."

"The competition really goosed things along," Charlie figures. "The races brought all the people together that were doing it. The important thing was that the races introduced people and their ideas."

Kelly pulled out a plain, wirebound class notebook and opened it to the handwritten results of the first off-road race down a bone-battering hill known as "Repack," named after what you did with your coaster brakes at the end of two miles of screaming down a 1,200 foot drop. Beginning, ending and elapsed times were scratched beside entries for Fred, Allan, Bob and Jr. under a simple heading of First Race Results, Tuesday, October 26, 1976.

By contrast, the second annual Rock Hopper in Santa Rosa's Annadel State Park drew 375 riders to an abusive seven-mile layout which ended in free beer from Coors and bike and component giveaways from Specialized. Charlie finished first in the "over 35" category though he doesn't find much time for regular training anymore.

Kelly owns the 12th fastest descent time down Repack and is one of only 20 riders who have completed the course in under five minutes. But his favorite race is the Marin Century.

"I like riding centuries on my balloon-tire bike because I like to show skinny-tired riders I don't have any trouble keeping up. They just don't believe it when I whizz by them after 70 miles or so. It

turns them inside out. People are not going to believe one of these bikes is fast as it is until you shake it in their face."

"The thing you give up is acceleration," Kelly concedes. "These bikes roll just fine, once you get going. I've been telling guys for years that rolling resistance was not the problem."

"Racing bikes could be made a lot faster," Kelly continues, but international rules discourage tampering with a strict formula for their construction. "The people who came up with the international rules developed this idea that they wanted to stress the rider over the machine. So they came up with a set of narrow, restrictive, rigid guidelines for making the bikes."

"But, with off-road bikes, we're saying: 'We'll do whatever it takes to make the fastest, best machine.' Hey, we're out to build the best there is—to take it as far as it goes. This is a knife fight and there are no rules in a knife fight. Just whatever it takes."

All in all, C.K. looks good in this knife fight. Without a Buck, a Gerber or a Kershaw, he holds his own armed only with his magazine and his computer...and his razor-sharp wit. □

The Wind Weapon

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