



A few years ago, bicycles with fat tires were for paper boys and old ladies. Today, attached to custom frames and made light for speed, they symbolize a new version of bike racing. And it's anybody's game.

GOING UPHILL FAST

SHOWDOWN AT CRESTED BUTTE

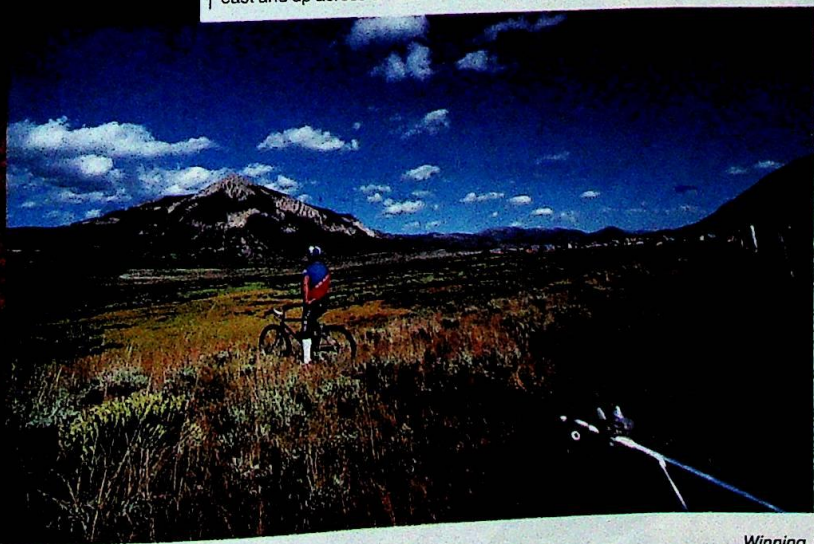
By John Scott

Mister Dale Stetina sits quietly in Le Bosquet eating dinner with a woman. Mr Tom Richie stands alone in the dark watching Main Street from the balcony of the Eldorado Cafe. The Indians, Ross Bicycles' mountain team — put the finishing touches on their machines in their rooms at Rozman's. The Cook brothers and their local boys huddle in a mountain cabin determining strategy. Steve Cook, their leader, has never lost this race. The miniature mountain town twinkles peacefully in the dark lap of rugged 14,000 foot mountain peaks all around. Everything is quiet now; the mountain trails to the top, the town, the riders. Tomorrow the war will begin. For all practical purposes, September 16th in Crested Butte, Colorado is the world championship of mountain bike racing. They're off!

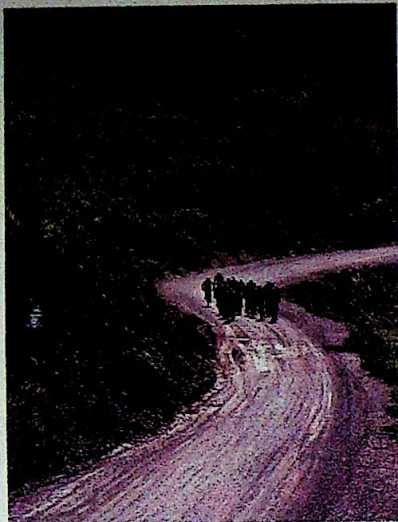
Boom. The gun goes off. A tight pack of 76 jetison down Main Street. Fat tire-motorcycle-handle-barred-quick-release-seat post-bikes — different, but very hi-tech.

The quick start hurts at 8,600 feet. The pack turns east and up across a meadow to Slate River Road.

Crested Butte, Colorado has become the mecca for Mountain Bike enthusiasts.



The main pack stays together starting up State River Road.



In the dirt and the distance the pack looks like a cloud of dust rolling off the rear flank. That pack will not last long. Mountain bike races inevitably turn into a long, strung-out line of riders battling terrain.

Suddenly all hell breaks loose. The middle of the pack crumbles. A crash. Bikes are everywhere. John McCormick of The Indians is down and out. Several good local riders tumble.

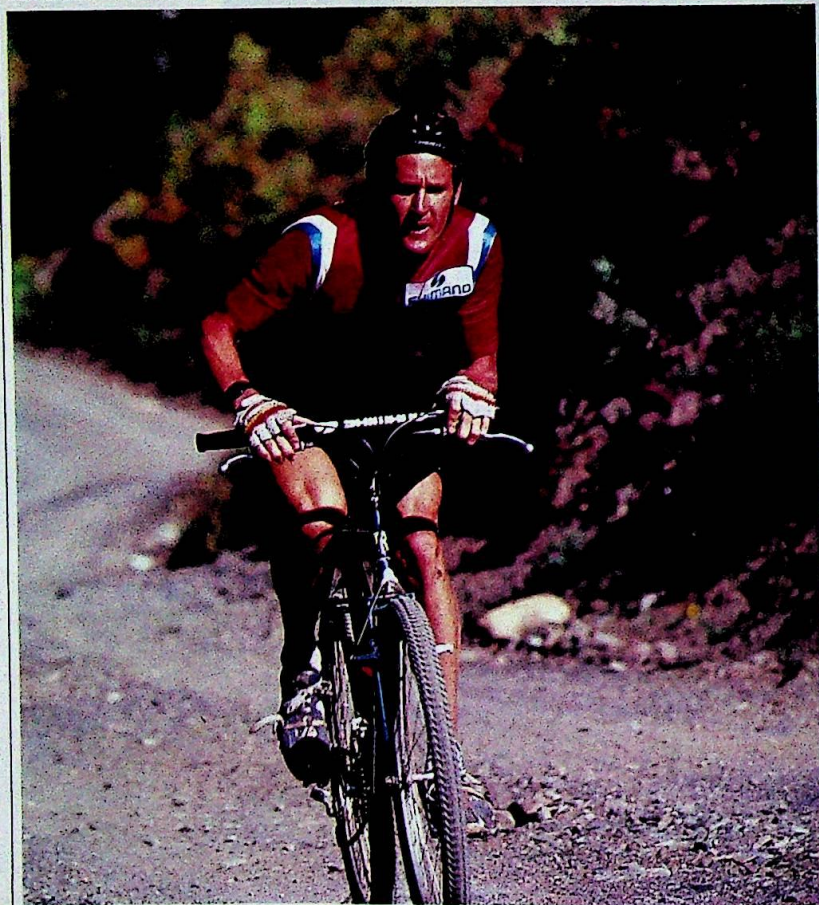
A peloton forms. The peloton splits. Twenty-seven riders are in the lead group. Eight riders lie in the dirt. The race is definitely on.

Four-time champion and local hero, Steve Cook, attacks with his down-turned handlebar aluminum Cunningham. Stetina on a Ritchie tracks Cook's break. The remaining peloton does not react.

Dust is everywhere and the Slate River Road has started to climb. Don Cook pulls out of the peloton. He is down on the side of the road getting sick. Crested Butte has just lost its number two man.

Clark Roberts of Ross and Mike Denecke of Moots Cycles break from the remaining 10 man peloton in an attempt to catch Cook and Stetina. At the start of the switchbacks, at the end of the Slate River Road, after 500 feet of climbing and eight miles out of Crested Butte, the key players and what is to come are fairly clear.

Dale Stetina, a professional who won the Coors Classic this year, climbed well in his first mountain bike race. Here he leads Steve Cook on the climb to the top of the switchbacks.



Steve Cook, winner of the mountain stage, is considered one of the toughest off-road racers in the country.



MOUNTAIN BIKE RENDEZVOUS



One hundred and fifty years ago, the annual rendezvous for trappers and mountain men brought together a collection of free-spirited, whoop-am-up fur traders and Indian fighters who were scattered all through the Rocky Mountains. The rendezvous was a time for games, shop talk and just plain old foot-stompin'.

In much the same fashion, Crested Butte has become the social gathering of the season for the hearty pioneers of the freewheeling mountain bike industry. Fat tire bike freaks began pilgrimages to Crested Butte in 1978. In that year, the tour from Crested Butte over Pearle Pass and down to Aspen was the sole event. In 1979 the first race was added. By 1982 the race had eclipsed the tour as the major event. And in '83 one thing was very clear to anyone following the mountain bike phenomenon — Crested Butte has become the annual focal point of all the sporting, social and commercial aspects of anything to do with off-road cycling.

This year the entire event was called Fat Tire Bike Week, running from September 12 to 18th. Racers began arriving early to acclimatize and by the Wednesday before the big week-end,

Mountain bikes could be found everywhere during Fat Tire Bike Week in Crested Butte. The event has become a focal point for the Mountain Bike movement.

sleepy Crested Butte was jammed with mountain machines.

All the top-notch custom mountain bike builders were there: Cunningham, Richie, Potts, Salza, Wiegler, Merz, Mools, Flis, Breeze and Mantis. The major mountain bike parts manufacturers were also there: Sunni Suntour, John Uhte of Shimano, Make Sinyard of Specialized, Ross Bicycles, with their fully outfitted, color-coordinated, «Indian, Ross Bicycle Hi-Tech Mountain Team» came to help set the trend in the newest branch of the sport.

Every afternoon in front of the Grubstake Bar, mountain bikes stacked up in front of the white picket fence. Inside the patio, the sport was discussed over large quantities of beer. During these historic gatherings, press photographers rolled off film at the Who's Who in Mountain Bikes. The fat tire rendezvous shifted into top gear. Crested Butte has arrived. ■

Chase in the mountains

The switchbacks are five miles of backbreaking climbing up a dirt trail to the 13,000 foot summit. From the top begins the Washington Gulch descent. Now the fun begins.

The Gulch is a waterless, steep, winding descent over five miles of boulders the size of bowling balls. The danger factor is 10 out of 10. The good descenders, riders like Jim Harlow of Ross, Tom Ritchie, Charlie Cunningham and Steve Cook, will spend most of their time airborne in this most curious dance with danger.

At the top of the switchbacks it's Stetina followed by Cook and Wes Williams, a local rider and brilliant descender. Clark Roberts, Mike Denecke, Charlie Cunningham and Don Davis of Ross follow. Close behind are Tom Ritchie and Jim Harlow, Robert Stewart, John Holcomb and Tracy Smith of Crested Butte and Steven Makintosh of Ross.

At the bottom of the gulch, Cook has taken 30 seconds out of Stetina. He adds another 30 on the steep four mile climb up Smith Hill.

The descent down Smith Hill is a harrowing drop across a ridge on a narrow mining road. Once again the danger factor is 10 and the pace flat out. At the bottom of Smith Hill, and back out onto Slate River Road for the final pull around the lower loop into Crested Butte. Steve Cook is two minutes and 45 seconds up on Stetina.

Wes Williams punctures at the bottom of Smith Hill. In mountain bike racing, no one can assist you. Williams sits dejected in the dirt. His brilliant descent has come to nothing but a flat-tired-fat-tired bike sprawled out in the dirt.

Back to town

Clark Roberts moves into third, Charlie Cunningham is the fourth to come down. Don Davis is next, followed by Richie, Harlow and Denecke. The remaining seven miles back into town is a fairly clean series of stream crossings and cattle trails. With the distances between each rider solid, the finishing positions are clear. Only Davis and Richie are left together to battle it out in a sprint down Main Street. Davis wins, taking fifth. Richie is sixth.

As Steve Cook rolls into town, arms held high, the town erupts in cheer. Thirty miles through the mountains. Four thousand feet of climbing. One hour and 49 minutes later. Stetina, on a Richie, is second. Clark Roberts of the Ross Indians, is third, followed by builder Charlie Cunningham and Don Davis of the Indians.

For the fifth year in a row, Steve Cook has demonstrated he is still the finest mountain bike racer in America.

Pro's revenge

But the story does not end here. The Criterium and Stage II begins in three hours. Dale Stetina is the obvious favorite. As a former Olympic cyclist and seasoned professional, he should be. His adventure with fat-tired mountain bikes has just begun but his experience in flat-out, tight criteriums spans nearly two decades. This one should be a piece of cake.

The Criterium is a 25 lap, mile-and-a-half course around gravel streets and down dirt alleys. Only half the field of 76 riders remains after the mountain stage. Crashes, one serious injury on the

Washington Gulch descent, sickness, fatigue — they had all taken their toll.

Stetina breaks away in the fourth lap on the windy stretch up Main Street. Steve Cook latches on, but not for long. A secondary peloton has formed with Clark Roberts, Don Davis, Tom Ritchie, Mike Denecke, Steve Makintosh of Ross and Gary Fisher of Richie. In the eighth lap, Makintosh punctures, exchanges wheels, and is disqualified.

In the 10th lap, Stetina drops Cook and by the 22nd, he has lapped the entire field, less Cook. The final results are as suspected: Stetina, Cook, Roberts, Denecke and Davis — all good road riders on mountain bikes.

Stetina's devastating victory created a good deal of tension and question about the validity of criteriums in the world of mountain bike racing. Certainly no one intends to take anything away from Mr. Stetina, he is a superb professional athlete. But mountain bike racing is an event centering around one's ability to climb the unclimbable and descend the undescendable without destroying body or bike. Bike handling becomes an art; danger, your constant companion. A flat criterium, even on gravel streets and through dirt alleys is still, essentially, an on-road event.

In overall standings, Steve Cook on a Cunningham and Dale Stetina riding for Richie Mountain Bikes tied for first, followed by Clark Roberts, third, of Ross. Don Davis of Ross and Mike Denecke of Moots Cycles tied for fourth.

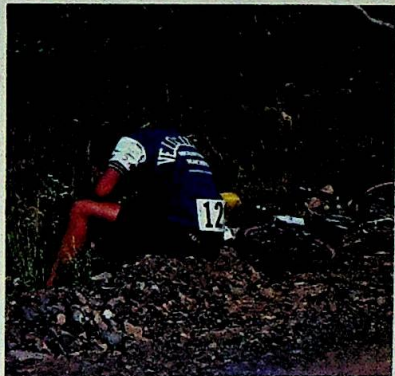
Change of pace

On Saturday and Sunday, the 300 mountain enthusiasts, gathered from all over the world for the race, began a two-day tour up and over Pearle Pass and down to Aspen. The peloton of 300 weaving their way up the steep pass through the turning Aspen trees was truly a magnificent sight.

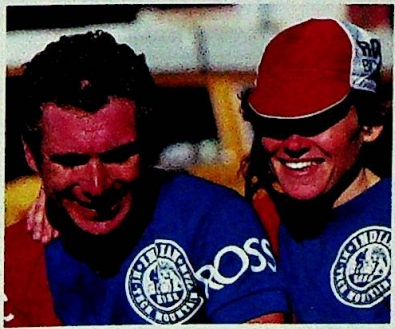
It was a brilliant mountain race and a lovely tour in a wonderful place — truly a unique two-wheeled experience. At the Jerome bar down in Aspen, the beer flowed. Mountain bikes were everywhere and everyone agreed on one thing — mountain bike riding has arrived. ■

Overall Results

- 1st: Steve Cook, Crested Butte Dale Stetina, Richie Mountain Bikes (tie)
- 3rd: Clark Roberts, Ross
- 4th: Don Davis, Ross Mike Denecke, Moots (tie)
- 6th: Tom Richie, Richie Mountain Bikes
- 7th: Tracy Smith, Crested Butte
- 8th: Jim Harlow, Ross



The mountains and the thin air took their toll on more than one rider.



Clark Roberts worked hard for third overall.



Steve Cook, a fearless descender, took time out of Stetina on the wild downhill runs.