



All Sport/Steve Powell

How I Survived My First Downhill Race

by Harald Johnson

See the photo above? That's me, sitting in the gondola with my bike on our way up to the top of Mammoth Mountain. In 20 minutes I was going to start my downhill run at the Raleigh Technium Mountain Bike World Championships. No big deal, right? Except that this was my first race—a beginner at the world champs. Sort of like your mother deciding she's going to guard Larry Bird in the NBA finals.

Look closely at the photo. See the nervous look on my face? Maybe it has something to do with the fact that I had just spent over an hour at the bottom of the mountain watching racer after racer—pros, experts, vets, you name it—flying over a bump and across the finish line, blurring by the announcer's stand and skidding to within inches of a wall of hay bales. Many plowed right into the hay with the VIPs standing behind holding up fingers to score the more spectacular crashes for the crowd.

And these were the good guys (and girls). What about beginners like me who don't know endos from condos? How was I going to negotiate a radical and potentially dangerous 3.5-mile descent (2,000 vertical feet) of loose pumice and survive to tell—or write—about it? We'll see.

At the top, after putting my front wheel back on, I rode over to the staging area to wait my turn. I was #487, and it was getting close to my 1:30 p.m. start time. Here I was, on the top of this windblown, bleak mountain peak at 11,053 feet, joining the long line of cyclists inching their ways up to a steep wooden ramp where guys with radios and headphones counted off five seconds every 30 to start another rider downhill.

It looked like one of those Olympic ski movies except we sure didn't look like skiers. No barber-pole, skin-tight body suits here. I mean one guy near me was a fatso on center-ridge tires, and he had about a hundred reflectors all over his bike. Next to him was a BMXer with a tiny little bike and armor of full-body safety pads over his clothes that made him look like an insect—exoskeleton and all. Number 488, who would start 30 seconds after me, turned out to be a bike messenger from San Francisco who was riding the actual bike he worked with everyday, and #491 was a tall, thin woman who lasted about a minute in the 48-degree wind chill before she retreated into the gondola building for more protection.

It was quite an eclectic group; behind me was Gary Fisher. Yep, that's right, *the* Gary Fisher. You know, the guy who helped start the whole sport a few years ago when he co-invented the mountain bike. Fisher, #489, was starting two places behind THE BEGINNER—me. Here was someone who's probably executed a controlled skid on a bike more times than I've blown eraser dust off my writing paper.

I was making small talk with Gary trying to pretend like I knew what I was doing up there, although he kept eyeing me and my skinny 1.5 tires (I was the *only* rider in the downhill without monster tires) as we shuffled toward the starting platform. A few more yokels with low race numbers who I guess had fallen

asleep in the port-o-johns joined the back of the line. Nine riders would start after me.

The BMXer took off, and I was next, on top of the ramp, facing downhill and remembering what race director Bill Cockcroft had said in the pre-race meeting that morning. "This could be dangerous, and if any of you have second thoughts, it's not too late to drop out." I'm thinking about it, Bill, honest! I positioned the front wheel over the edge of the ramp and checked my brakes repeatedly. If I change my mind, will they give me a refund? "5 . . . 4 . . . 3 . . . 2 . . . 1"—oh, what the hell—"GO!"

I was off, although I almost lost my balance where the ramp hits the dirt, but I recovered and started pedaling furiously. I had seen the pros do this earlier. I wanted to make it look like I was in a hurry to race to the bottom. In fact, nothing was further from the truth, so as soon as I went far enough to be out of sight of the crowd, I jammed on the brakes and started coasting like the scaredy cat I was; I wouldn't take another pedal stroke until I almost reached the bottom.

What about beginners like me who don't know endos from condos?

The steepest part of the entire downhill was just in front of me, and I needed all my concentration. It was about a 400-yard section of extremely loose and thick pumice (the whole mountain is made of volcanic pumice) that curved to the left. In the practice run earlier, I had skidded my way through this stuff but went off course at least four times—it seemed impossible to steer. I had overheard someone mention that they made it through by sticking their left leg out and using it like an outrigger as they leaned left and did a controlled skid through the entire section. I figured I had nothing to lose, so I tried it, and it worked!

Just as I was congratulating myself for staying on my bike, Mr. Quicksilver Bike Messenger roared by me with a friendly "Good Luck." I had just dropped back to ninth from last, and in that instant I realized what my goal for this race should be (besides staying alive, of course): I wanted to *not* be the very last person to cross the finish line. There were now only eight riders behind me—**ZOOM**—make that seven.

Now I was traveling the switchbacks on the top third of race, and it was beautiful. The service road that comprised the course was cut like a ledge into the mountain here, with giant rock outcroppings on the uphill side and the distant and jagged Minaret peaks, deep valleys and the emerald-green Rods Lake on the other. I was screaming to myself as I rounded each bend; the view was breathtaking. Then the thin

woman passed me (six more to go), and I snapped back to the matter at hand.

The whole thing had become a mind game. If I wanted to go faster or relax my throbbing hands which were aching from squeezing the brakes so hard, I just let off the brakes a little. But as soon as I did, the bike would instantly pick up speed until I felt out of control. Then I'd have to start pressing the brakes again. But it wasn't that simple.

By now—the halfway point—the road surface had become a combination of soft sand in spots, washboard in the middle, rocks and loose dirt on the edges. And I was constantly choosing between the evils: If I wanted to stay out the way of the kamikazes passing me on the left, I needed to stay to the right, but that's where all the loose—and pointed—rocks were. In the middle would appear sections of hard washboard that would jar my eyes out of focus and make holding the handlebars almost impossible. Then I'd hit the soft stuff and start skidding in every direction at once. By the time I passed under chairlifts #14 and #13, I was holding on for my life. It was still steep, and somewhere along here Gary Fisher blew by me. He was going so fast that I didn't even see him; someone told me where he had passed, and I had to believe them.

Five riders were still behind me, and I was getting worried. Being a beginner is one thing, but coming in *dead last* was something I was not prepared to take. Luckily, just as I started letting go of the brakes and the fear, and trusting the same instincts that help me balance on a surfboard or pick the fastest lane to work on the freeway, the course started flattening out and becoming smoother. Now I was flying through the trees with the wind drying out my nervous sweat, and I actually felt like a racer focusing on the finish line. I was only using a light touch on the brakes and even pedaling for short stretches to pick up a little more speed. I was sitting up a little straighter and feeling more confident, maybe even a little blasé. "Yeah, I rode the downhill, so what?"

I was trying to read the ski trail signs when the course abruptly made a hairpin right turn, and I was facing *uphill!* I forgot all about this part. I looked behind me, and there were two more riders. I egged myself on: "Step on it, idiot. Show these clowns what all those triathlon workouts have done for you. Show them what you're made of." Cookies obviously, because as soon as I started pedaling, I crumbled. I couldn't breathe. I was aching. I was dying on that uphill. All I could think about was lying down and taking a little snooze. I wanted water. I wanted to quit. I wanted to get that damn piano off my back. So this is altitude, huh? I was definitely going into anaerobic shock when riders number four and three effortlessly passed with what I thought was a sneer. At the crest of the uphill section I took a break, gurgled down some water and brought my breathing rate back down to that of a human's instead of a parakeet's. I think I was counting my pulse and wishing I had a calculator to do the complex math when the third-from-last rider zipped by me. I hadn't even seen him coming, and now I was mad. "You think I'm going to wimp out now, buster?" I shouted out to no one in particular. "No way, spoke neck. I'm going for it now: no brakes, no stopping. I am *not* going to be last off this mountain."

Determined, I started down the last stretch. I could see the crowd, the snow fencing, the banners. I could hear the announcer. And I could see the bump. The same bump all the top guys had flown over earlier. If they could do it, I could do it. This was a race, after all, and I wasn't about to lose.

I was picking up speed, and I aimed right for that bump. I got into a position that I remembered the others taking. At least I hoped this was the position, because the jump was approaching fast. My mouth opened wide by a terror reflex as I hit it. I leaned back from the handlebars and . . .

Nothing happened. I didn't shoot up in the air. In fact, I didn't even get off the ground one inch. But I crossed the finish line and was heading straight for the hay bales. Now for the fireworks.

I could see right into the big eyes of the VIPs as I leaned to the right, put my foot down and hit both brakes as hard as I could to start what I thought would be one of those dramatic, skidding finishes. I flashed back to visualize all the skid stops I had made as a kid playing hockey on ice skates. Only this wasn't ice, and halfway through the skid with all eyes on me . . . I fell flat on my face.

But I stood up, waved to the crowd and brushed off the dirt. No broken bones. Just then I looked up to see the *very* last racer cross the finish line. Winner Joe Sloup was clocked in 5:38. Gary Fisher was 7:19. The bike messenger, 8:27. The thin woman, 9:24.

My final time was 12:21. But at least I wasn't the last to cross the finish line. So where's the next race?