

# MAN v HORSE v BIKE



## (The woman won)

**Jacque Phelan, a.k.a. Alice B. Toeclips. NORBA (US) women's mountainbike champion, prankster, off-road pioneer and adventurer. When she heard they were adding mountainbikes to a strange Welsh event known as the Man v. Horse race, she had to join in. This is her report.**

Postmaster,  
Llanwrtyd Wells,  
Wales,

15th December, 1984.

England (sic..this is a mistake any American could make)

To whom it may concern,

While reading a back issue of *National Geographic*, I chanced upon a tiny photograph of a runner being overtaken by a horse on a steep, rocky hillside. The caption referred to 'the famed Man vs Horse marathon'. Since its fame hasn't blown our way yet, I would like some more information on the race: dates, distances etc.

Is participation limited to men and horses? I'm afraid I am neither, falling somewhere in between the two when paired with my mountain bicycle.

If you haven't seen one of these bikes, you soon will. Their

usefulness becomes more apparent every year here in the States. But since they are new and shiny and redolent of technology there is considerable resistance to them by traditional wilderness users: horsemen and hikers.

I feel that this unusual event, with the addition of one or more mountainbikes could help point the way towards harmony with these two other groups of nature-lovers.

I await your reply with great impatience.

Jacque Phelan,

Dear Miss Phelan,

5th Jan. '85

Thank-you for your interest in the annual Man vs Horse race.

Coincidentally, we are working with the newly formed Mountainbike Centre to introduce a new category in this year's event.

Of course we would love to have the lady American

champion here too. You will be my guest if you can come.  
Please find enclosed the schedule for this year's race.

Sincerely,  
Gordon Green  
Neuadd Arms,  
Llanwrtyd Wells,  
Wales

**Y**OU MIGHT as well know that I love to write letters, just to see who will respond. I'm a sort of mailbox junkie: I go through withdrawal without my daily (or if things are really bad, weekly) fix. A foreign letter accompanied by a luscious, colourful stamp will make my entire day.

Despite my sadly typical American geographical naivete, Mr. Green deigned to answer my pie-in-the-sky enquiry last December. The reply had a huge full-colour stamp with a stag beetle on it. When I'd settled back to earth, I set to writing a few more letters, in search of a company which could be convinced that it was worth shipping me to England and Wales. Muddy Fox, bless their hearts, came up with the goods.

By mid-March, I'd cleared aside an entire month to train and race in Britain. All April, I stared into the gaping white maw of the month of May with only one date circled: 'Man v Horse v Me, May 18'. A new set of gut-butterflies beset me when the implications of my decision to take off the first month of the US racing season: what if I bash my head open in a foreign country?; what if I can't stomach the local cuisine - I mean what IS Bubble and Squeak, not to mention Toad in the Hole!; what if I get hooked on real ale and abandon my mission? What if the horse wins?

So I had to come. I had to see. And I'd bloody well better conquer while I'm at it.

But don't get me wrong. There's nothing remotely warlike in my thirst for competition. Then again, maybe there is - except that the pain involved is exquisite and the domination merely temporary. And you only die a little in a race, returning time and again. Next week. Next month. Next year. Rather than do the same old May races at home, I decided to launch myself across the Atlantic and stir up some trouble over your way.

It didn't take long.

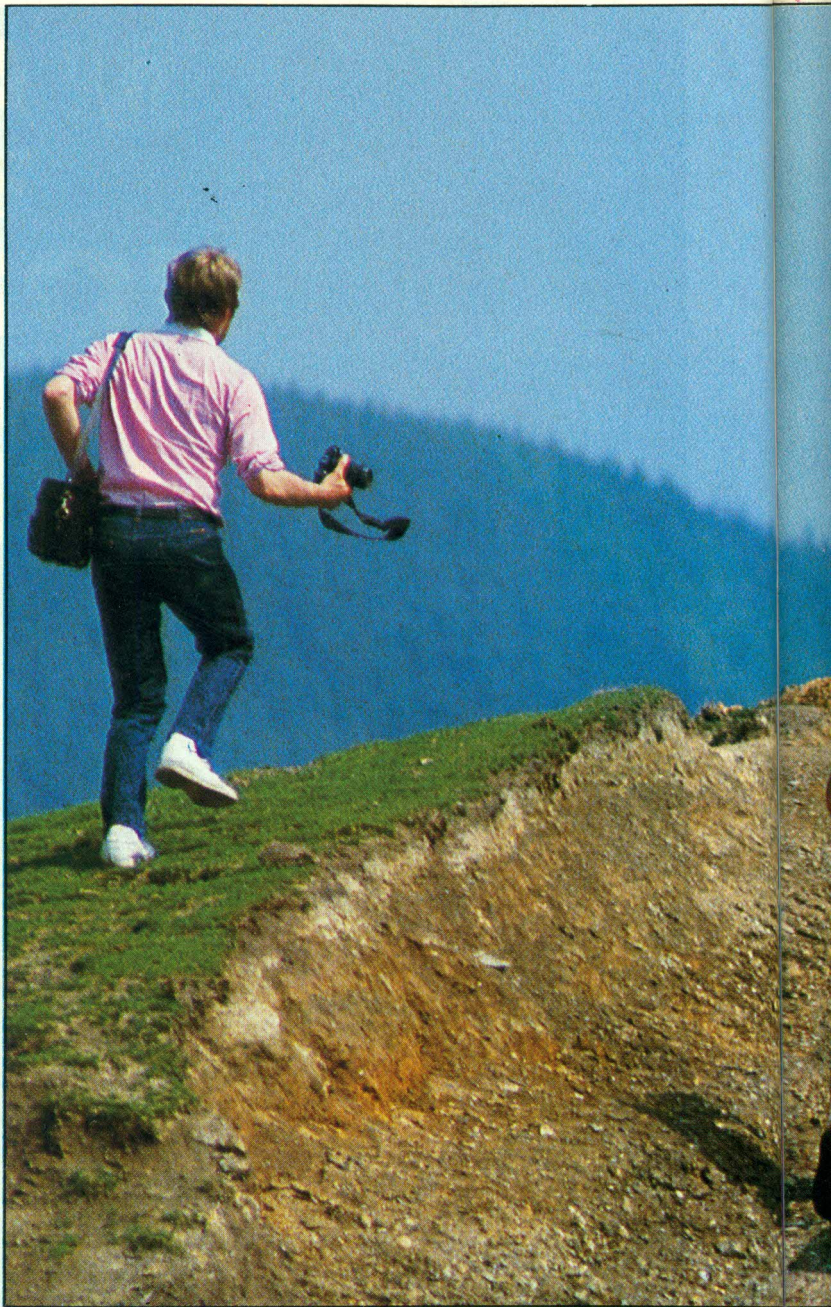
First there was the problem of language: I had studiously prepared for the trip by reading Dylan Thomas; Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier* and a book on Motte & Bailey castles. I was coached on the British Tea Ritual. But no one told me that you can't call a zippered belt bag a 'Fanny Pack' like we do stateside. And I only recently found out that 'over the top' was not a directional indication. Well, the British are nothing if not polite, and my serious gaffes were met with amused silence rather than uprorious laughter.

By the end of my first week in London, I would be fluent in Watneys, capable of sitting through half an evening in a noisy, smoke-filled pub and cognizant of the rule of the Well Dressed Socialist: 'Look right, stay left'.

My first race was a BMX affair in Birmingham. Judging by the number of broken bones and chipped teeth, it was partially backed by the Ace Bandage Company. This little romp in the Brummy rubble ended up looking more and more like Gallipoli, as row upon row of over-enthusiastic, under-skilled riders catapulted off the line only to tumble - one in ten - off the bike at the first obstacle.

I begged my female companions, 'Off Rhoda', Cindra and an unknown woman I'll call 'Jane Air', to take it easy; there was a worthwhile event coming up in Wales. Remaining intact would be crucial. Unfortunately, a couple of them did bite the dust and required not only aid, but several weeks recovery off the bike. Imagine the effect this would have on an endorphin addicted athlete and you'll see why I didn't think it was worth hurting myself en route to impressing my friends. This event wasn't what mountainbike racing is all about.

The following week began more auspiciously. The sun poured through a hazy filter of blue Welsh sky, and the birds sang their lovely keep-off-my-turf songs. In the attic of the Neuadd Arms Hotel, ten groggy competitors who'd spent hours the previous night trying to go to sleep, roused



themselves from dreams of horses, broken Sedisport chains and waist-deep bogs.

I couldn't resist demonstrating the 'California Wake-Up Routine' which I'd invented years ago for my German friends, back when I was a cultural ambassador for impoverished students. The aforementioned exercise involves pouncing, preferably naked, on your guest (or host, or room-mate, depending) while they're still waking up, before they've rubbed the sleep from their eyes. This has an oddly endearing effect, or so my victims tell me, as they cheerfully blacken my eyes.

Morning of the race. Absolute still in the town 'square'. No hint of the pandemonium about to erupt. Perhaps it really won't happen? Then, across the way, a giant inflatable rubber dragon trampoline begins to rear its 30-foot head. A little something to amuse the kiddies.

Then 20 cyclists and 80 runners materialize in front of the hotel. All but four of the riders were men. Only one of the twelve horseback riders was male. We are briefed on the hazards of the course. My mind wanders to the subject of Sheep as Road Hazards. Mighty strange, these animals on which the Welsh so heavily depend. On one hand, they seemed to hide behind blind turns and rocky outcrops waiting to dive into the unsuspecting rider's front wheel. On the other, whenever we would slosh through the fields on foot in our



'wellies', they fled in every direction. It seemed as though the knee-high footwear struck an especial terror into their little sheepy hearts.

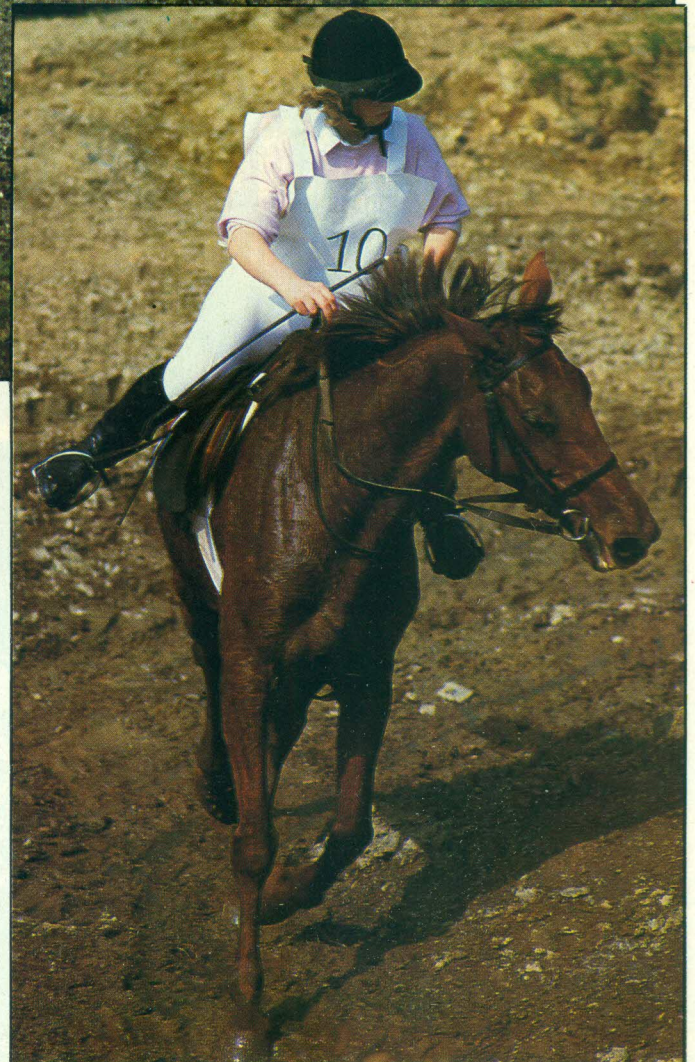
But I digress.

Back at the starting line, a quick survey of the faces that had become familiar over the past three weeks. Matt (Meals on Wheels) Mills, with his Eraserhead do, David ('D. Pend') Whittam, the ever-reliable Team Muddy Fox mechanic and Off-Rhoda the Downhill Shredder.

The start was at least as exciting as the finish, with a Land Rover ambling slowly in front of the pack just as the gun went off for the cyclists. I expect a few of the chaps will lop off an inch or two of handlebar after that close call.

Within two minutes, the lead group was established: Matt, his friend Chris Tatton and myself. For the first third of the race, we tried dropping one another, ducking around corners and forcing the next rider to decipher the course markings for himself. The middle third we worked resignedly together - there was plenty of walking to be done, why do it alone.

But the last third was the best speed wise, thanks to the broad, sweeping slopes of the Irfon forestry roads. It was at this point that I realized that I would have to stop being polite, and dump Matt (we'd shaken Tatton halfway through). Up until now there was time to gab about the scenery ('Isn't this fab?!', I would shriek over the wind's roar) and instruct Matt on the



subtleties of bike racing ('keep your mouth shut when you blow a shift or you'll telegraph your misfortune, and your opponent...i.e. me..will take full advantage.) We even managed a joke or two.

But if I didn't win this thing I might have to pay my way home. It was time to run. Now, I jog a bit every morning, just to remind my legs of their former use. Before bicycles, that's how primitive man got about. It so happens that on soft, squishy turf, it's still the fastest way to go. I have no compunction about shouldering the machine and running if it means shaving off some time.

When I did this for the first time, Matt threw me a look befitting a crucified Christian. He was shagged, all right, and this gregarious American bitch was going to try to run him into the ground. There went our previous plans to ride in together. I just didn't have the nerve to say, 'see you later'. It might have made him pissed off enough to stay with me. One has to remember this sort of thing.

I never looked back, but coming into town with a nice tailwind, I knew I'd bagged one victory: Alice uber alles. By 5.00 we knew that the horse named Jenny had soundly drubbed me by 27 minutes. But I had managed to return the favour to 110 other competitors on foot, horseback and bike.

Next year, I know Meals-on-Wheels won't be caught unawares, Rob Lally will have a better day than this year, and Vincent (Van Gogh?) will be able to take time off work. Who knows, perhaps Princess Anne, will respond to my letter, requesting her presence at the greatest 3-way match in the world?

If you know what's good for you, you'll race it too: where else can you get 22 miles of kids swinging on farm gates cheering you on, paparazzi bristling with pen, paper and camera and all the chainring talk you can possibly stand in a 24 hour period? It's all there at 'Laundry' (as one tongue-tied foreigner so charmingly put it) Wells.

