

Fear and Loafing in Durango

Wherein the 1985 NORBA National Women's Champion slides into Durango for the '86 Nats to wrestle with the mud, rain and snow, and the realization that maybe—just maybe—this whole circus is headed for the big time. *By Jacquie Phelan*

Sunday, September 21: Durango at night is defined by the river: a huge, shimmering snake of lights whose incandescent skeleton outlines the "stream of souls"—the Animas River—and winds idly through the heart of downtown.

It is a small town of 12,000, despite vigorous turn-of-the-century boosterism whose goal was a mining metropolis of 100,000. The constant presence of Fort Lewis College students on the hill and "rich Texans" (any tourist from anywhere) on the flats assures a lively mix of restaurants, movie houses, and night spots. This month, a brilliant banner spans Main Avenue, with an aspen leaf motif proclaiming the opening of the autumn "Colorfest" wherein Colorado's golden aspens and purple mountains yield a hoped-for river of greenbacks.

But the first things we notice as we roll into Durango, Colorado, for the 1986 NORBA (National Off-Road Bicycle Association) national championships are the motel marquees. Right up there, in red letters on a glowing white background, is an alphabet soup of acronyms like AARP (American Association of Retired Persons), CRNA (something about nurses), and WELCOME NORBA BIKERS!

Off-road cycling has finally hit the border of the big time. Rather than merely suffering the invading hordes with an eye on the mud tracked in, the hostellers of this southwestern Colorado town are actually vying for our hitherto dubious patronage. Obviously, somebody's buying the line that the flourishing species known as *Yuppie Consumerans* can sometimes be found astride a mountain bike when not conducting business on a cellular car phone.

Then, just past the third motel (WELCOME NO BRA RACERS—oops!) came the

radio ad. Stylish frenetic music, the kind that invariably accompanies Coors Classic videos, urging us to make it out to the Edgemont Ranch, site of the race, "the biggest sporting event in Durango history!" We look at each other and burst into laughter.



**Rain and sleet fell
all week. But on
Saturday the sky
cleared, and you could
see the trials
guys floating
overhead.**

"That means us!"

"We'll trade autographs for ice cream cones!"

"We'll have to tear the groupies away!"

"Where's my agent?"

Tuesday: Rode the course. It's a diverse 3½-mile loop combining trails that zip through a Lucasfilm forest with a climb that, at one point, will force everyone to run (if they're in a hurry). The single-track, switchback descent is pure guts and gravity. The surface is ideally soft and damp. But something's happening in the southeast. The aspens are yellow as school buses, and trembling for their lives. It's a storm, I know it.

Thursday: Tuesday it rained, Wednesday it rained, today is rain, sleet, and hail. Chewed fingernails tell it all: I came to train and it ain't happening. Everybody's seen all the movies in town, and made the mistake—you only make it once—of going to the Chinese restaurant. What if the race is reduced to a wrestle in the mud?

Since our arrival, we've met up with Team Ross, in town now for almost a month to acclimatize, and the entire Durango-based Schwinn team. But I wonder where Ross's heavy hitter Cindy Whitehead is, and if she's pounding the sand in Palm Springs, her new digs. We're pounding the sopapillas, guacamole and chips.

There's really only one hangout for most of the racers: Ned's shop, the Outdoorsman. In fact, here he is, on a bagel run, riding a truly ugly three-speed—nothing ancient or charming about this sled—complete with a hideous green and white plastic handlebar basket.

Ned Overend, 31, is the heavily favored Durangoan who only a month ago hammered his way into a spot on the U.S. amateur world championship team, raced

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY SCOTT S. WARREN

in those cold and rainy worlds, and then drove 250 miles back home *the same night* so he could work the next day. Meanwhile, his friends and co-workers were so wasted from spectating that they missed work. He's a soft-spoken superman with a serious bagel addiction.

The first time you walk into the Outdoorsman, you try the front, under the sign of the life-sized elk, and past racks of camouflage clothes. But there's this matter of a hundred staring beasts—stuffed bear, deer and fish poking their heads through the wall above you—so you slink around the back. Everyone passes through there a minimum of once a day to find out who's in town and how to fix his (a) tweaked (b) broken (c) brand new bike.

By now, there's considerable worry about the state of the race course. It's slicker than deer guts on a doorknob, and only a few days to go. But the folks at Ned's shop have a back-up route drawn, never fear. After 15 years of putting on the Iron Horse Classic—where riders race the narrow-gauge train 50 miles to Silverton—they know how to accommodate the weather.

According to the local news, Hurricane Melissa has slammed into the Gulf Coast and sent waves of hail and snow up our way. At least the aspens are pretty.

Friday: The kitchen wall of the "Ross Ranch"—a condominium above town with a balcony packed with fat-tire bikes—is papered with front page stories from the *Denver Post* about the Tour de France and Coors. Virtually every image of LeMond has a black plastic spider glued to it and some comment in the margin about the "mysterious space spider" that attempted to interfere with the race. These Ross guys are going around the bend.

There's a rumor afoot to create a riders' union to assure consistently high-quality races, which is why there are a dozen restless riders in this room. All we do is trade horror stories: unmarked racecourses, death by dehydration, et cetera. Just one problem with the idea of a sanctioning body: Racers' rights imply racers' responsibilities. Wonder who will type up the "manifesto," who will have time to represent a roomful of fidgety athletes?

Rode to Ned's to pick up a replacement tire for my bald rear one. He was home playing with his baby daughter, Alison: "Only four months old and already getting sideways," he notes. Everyone else in town is running around going nuts; he's

babysitting.

Word is out that Cindy Whitehead is riding for Schwinn this weekend, having dumped Ross and now Klein. I'd like to meet her tailor. I also hope the message reaches my lizard brain to go hard when I see red and blue stripes on *white*—it's still wired to go at the sight of bright blue and red.

Saturday: Today's hillclimb up Mt. Vilelli will do one of two things, depending on how I do in tomorrow's circuit race. "Perfect warm-up!" goes the scenario if I win *mañana*. "Guess I overdid it" goes the other one. As it stands, I'm today's winner and ready to dissolve in some jacuzzi in some motel and then lie awake in the dark all night watching a hundred different botches and saves in tomorrow's race in my "upstairs cinema."

This morning, my friend Mary Lee Atkins (second in the 1985 nationals) finished impressively close behind—13 seconds. Cindy (wisely?) decided to blow off the hillclimb, to save up for the Real Thing. Third was Martha Kennedy, the midwestern mountain mama. We assure one another that a 2.5-mile climb with a few 20 percent grades acts as an aperitif to the main course.



**Cindy Whitehead (above)
and Deadly Nedly
(center, top right)
conquered all.
The victors basked
in the sun.**

In the Pro-Am men's hillclimb, Ned (Schwinn) and John Tomac (Mongoose) are the top two, separated by six seconds, followed by Ross rider Todd Switzer. Tomorrow could be a big surprise, Tomac's meteor is rising so fast. But Ned has an account to settle with Lady Luck. Last year she kicked him with a flat tire. This year she's teasing him with all kinds of pressure, both subtle and otherwise. The local paper wants a prediction; nobody will provide one. Mustn't irritate whoever it is that dishes out pinched tubes and broken chains.

Spent the rest of the day watching trials, a bona fide hybrid between balance beam and bicycling. Today's predictable winner is Kevin Norton, winner of the '85 Observed Trials championship. But number two is competing on a bicycle for the first time. He's a quiet 19-year-old from Pennsylvania, fresh from motorcycle trials. Ryan Young's his name, and he's developed a fan club as he visits each of the taped-off obstacle courses. They're following him like a cloud of angels, all holding their breath and silently urging him over the impossible routes in the rocks. Levitation is a key technique.

Sunday, September 28: Sunny, clear, and gorgeous! Maybe there is a God after all.

Our race is one of the first ones off. Three short, intense laps, a total of 11 miles. The course has dried to a perfect degree of tackiness. Today we can commit to a turn as late as we like, then follow through with the body while setting up for the next turn. It's almost like being on rails, dodging assorted perils on the Wild Mouse.

A fistful of spectators are coagulating at the pit ("Vulture's Roost") to watch us fly headlong in, only to crawl humbly back out again. Here's where your friends *walk* alongside and urge you along. Here's where the photographers stand, turreted with telephoto lenses.

Warming up with Mary Lee I notice she is doing a good job of hiding her nerves. Me, I'm trying to out-talk the dissonant demons. Cindy's trembling visibly at the line—wonder if she's bothered by those pests too? Problem is, no athlete in her or his right mind will admit to self-doubt. This is the USA, and we only love winners.

After the "Go!" the only thing I hear is the familiar broken recording of "Ain't No Sunshine When She's Gone," the part where it goes, "I know, I know, I know, I know," ad infinitum. And for the first lap, I thought I did know. As my lead

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stretched to half a minute, I found myself rehearsing a winning scenario. Only one recurring problem—when I imagined the part where I actually put on the NORBA champ's jersey, I couldn't fit it over my ego.

Meanwhile, back in the race, a gathering roar on lap two warns me that I'm getting caught. "Let's see," I think—scan the trail ahead for rocks with treachery on their minds, then a quick glance backward—"Yep, it's the girls"—a blonde girl whose head is cocked sideways, which on Cindy means "Prepare for takeoff."

At the end of lap two she's caught me and for the remaining lap I keep her in sight, and wonder if it somehow displeased the clunker diety that Mary Lee and I had the nerve to practice finishing together. It's no wonder that athletes seem superstitious; when a few seconds separate the winner from the rest, you invent your own magic. For years my bike was invested with magic: "I didn't beat you, my bike did." Now Ms. Whitehead has converted to aluminum and the score is evened out.

Another few minutes and the test is over, and Cindy's it! She's stoked, and the cameras are all seeking a moment with her. Mary Lee, today's third place finisher, is surrounded by a passel of admiring Atkinses, four of them sisters.

Cindy Whitehead's mom wanted a tennis champ and got a mud-caked racer instead. Mary Lee emphatically dumped Olympic-level skiing when the scene grew too political, and backed into off-road racing, kicking and screaming all the way. So here we are, finishing within a minute of one another, and in a single day bringing women's racing to an excitement level close to the men's. No more

will we have time for a quick swab and a long drink before the next one comes in.

The Pro-Am men's race had the biggest-ever pack, but no sign of the golden boys who were rumored to show. Maybe all races are visited by the myth of Boyer turning up, of Hampsten on his way.

By the first lap, Tomac opened a lead that widened to 35 seconds, the same as the one I'd made a few hours earlier. And just about as long-lived: in lap four of the seven-lap, 25-mile race, Ned caught him at the Knife's Edge, the part of the course where a 20 percent uphill grade turns into an equally steep descent on a zigzag trail. But Tomac sprang away, and in so doing noticed a strange tugging in his rear wheel.

"First, I thought I'd broken my axle, but then when the rear wheel kept hooking in the rear dropout, I knew the bike had gone lame," he told me afterward. He looked pretty matter of fact for a fellow on the verge of out-Nedding Mr. Overend (Bear in mind that Ned dished out generous helpings of humble pie when he won all his '84 races on a stock Schwinn).

Tomac's chrome-plated Mongoose with a broken rear dropout was only the first of several disappointments. Shortly thereafter, Joe Murray's ex-works Fisher was severed at the down tube, and with it his hopes of a third straight championship. Steve Cook fizzled out with nothing more than a broken seat rail. Throughout the three hours it took for them all to finish, the pack suffered equipment failures ranging from frozen freewheels to para-

lyzed derailleurs. Nobody knows better than second-place finisher Max Jones that only the intensity of high-level racing will test the quality of componentry and design. Last year his chain broke at the nats, and like Ned he had an account to settle.

Ned is, as they say here, a happy camper, finishing with enough time for an entire Talking Heads song to play itself out and then some before anyone else crossed the line. "Mad Max" Jones drew raves for his convincing portrayal of a foaming, rabid animal. Avis has a point: Number two *does* try harder. And Mike Jordan never veered from third.

Todd Switzer barely made it to the finish in 25th place, then collapsed and got a noseful of oxygen and an armful of I.V. solution. Poor kid spent the rest of the sunny afternoon wrapped in a blanket looking like a disaster evacuee.

Amid the random, post-race shuffle en-



demically to these endorphin-drenched athletic events, Mary Lee and I conspire to meet for dinner one last time, get a couple of guys together, and attempt to put a hasty seam on summer's edge before we scatter for good. Or until next year's races, and another turn on the NORBA muddy-go-round. □

MUD LUSCIOUS

Pro-Am Men

1. Ned Overend, Schwinn; 1:56:49
2. Max Jones, Ritchey; 2:01:36
3. Michael Jordan, Ross; 2:01:40
4. Casey Kunselman, WTB; 2:01:55
5. Michael Kloser, Fisher; 2:02:08

Pro-Am Women

1. Cindy Whitehead, Schwinn; 1:01:01
2. Jacquie Phelan, Cunningham; 1:01:19
3. Mary Lee Atkins, Schwinn; 1:01:47
4. Lisa Muhich; 1:06:31
5. Karen Woodford, Zinn; 1:07:04