

'Crossed Up At The Nats

Most American cyclists are familiar with the concept of cyclocross, although few have seen an actual race. To the general public it is almost completely unknown—about 20 places below logging on the list of obscure sports.

The 1984 United States Cycling Federation (USCF) National Cyclocross Championship, held December 30 on the University of California's Santa Cruz campus, shows why. With fewer than a half-dozen American 'crossers dedicated enough to be competitive in our own Nationals, the level of competition in the United States is not sufficient to gain public notice, let alone prepare our riders for the Europeans.

Here's the obligatory brief description of cyclocross: it's a traditional European winter cross-country cycling sport conducted on a lap course usually less than two kilometers long. Conditions require running and carrying of the bike as well as skillful handling and strong riding, usually through a lot of mud.

Competitors may freely switch bikes, and unlimited spares are permitted, so machinery is as light as possible for the carrying aspects while at the same time strong, with modifications for riding in muddy conditions. On the Santa Cruz course the promoter, Velo Promo, had placed artificial barriers here and there, nasty little things that were just high enough to force the cyclist to dismount and destroy any rhythm he might get going.

Symbolic of the obscurity of cyclocross is the ease with which one may enter the U.S. National Championship. Do you have a USCF license? Do you have \$25? It will help if you have a bike, but it is not required. Also symbolic of this casual attitude toward the sport is the National Championship prize list, which is just for senior men and . . . senior men. If a junior, vet or woman wants a prize, he or she must compete as a senior man, al-



At the national championship of America's secret off-road sport.

By Charles R. Kelly

though the UCI recognizes a Junior World Cyclocross Champion. Bikes are apparently the great equalizer. And it certainly simplifies the judging.

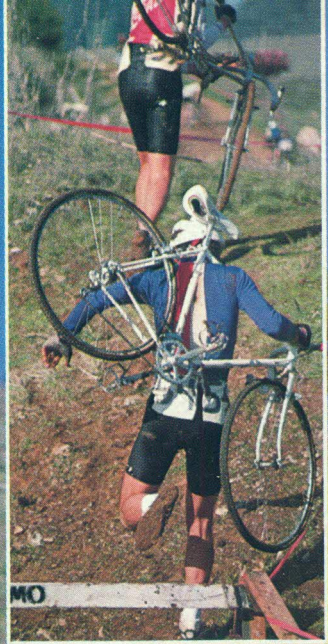
With the recent popularity of mountain bikes, one would expect to see a lot of them entered in an off-road event, but there were only a few and they didn't figure in the results. Ned Overend and John Loomis, respectively second and third places at the National Off-Road Bicycle Association (NORBA) championships, both entered on mountain bikes with limited success. Loomis retired after 10 laps with a broken saddle; having decided to ride mountain bike-style, he rode without a spare machine in the

expectation that the bike would make the distance. Overend broke the steerer on his custom bike, making an emergency bailout by stepping through the area where his handlebars had been, then continued in vain on his second bike after running back to the pit area to retrieve it.

The spectators were a different story from the riders; nearly all who had bikes had the fat-tire variety. Apparently not too many people have a cyclocross bike just for the hell of it; because they are practically disposable to the racers, cyclocross bikes emphasize lightness at the expense of durability, especially by using light wheels with special knobby sew-up tires. Usually the wheels are the racer's oldest and most beat-up road pair. Anyone who is a contender at the Nationals has several bikes and sets of wheels stationed at strategic spots on the course with appropriate support personnel to take care of them, and a single rider may be aided by a half-dozen non-racers.

Sixty-four people, some of them qualified, paid the \$25 necessary for them to ride a national championship event. Lined up along with the slickly uniformed racers from the Specialized and Levi's/Raleigh teams were riders in less fancy uniforms right down to the limit of what the USCF will allow in terms of dress or undress. Since 'cross races are frequently conducted in snowy, rainy and extremely muddy conditions, strict dress codes are not often enforced. Cyclocross participants tend to show up on cold days in several layers of clothing with the most ragged on the outside, but the 1984 Nationals were held on a clear and warm day that had many riders reduced to t-shirts and shorts.

It is axiomatic that cyclocross includes mud and tough riding, but the National Championship course was nearly dry except for a couple of crossings of mostly dry streambeds and a few small areas that had been watered in order to create the



Cyclocross

impression of winter on a day that would have passed for late spring in most parts of the cycling world. Those portions of the course that could be ridden were for the most part smooth and dry dirt paths, hardly the sort of challenge the Europeans think of when it comes to cyclocross.

Weather, which has traditionally been a major influence in deciding cyclocross events, was obviously not a factor in Santa Cruz. The site was selected in part because of the high local interest in cyclocross, and previous events in the area had been held in appropriate weather, but the fine day didn't provide the toughness of a typical European

'cross, which at this time of year would be conducted in the snow and slop of Northern Europe. The difference between "fit" and "tough" is vague, but cyclocross in nasty weather defines it. (In defense of winner Steve Tilford, he has proven his mettle on bad days as well as good.)

But we digress. For the race was about to begin.

The start was on an uphill section of the wide, paved entrance to the U.C. campus. The hill and the wide road served to string out the pack slightly before it turned across a wide grassy area for the first of 15 laps on the 1.1-mile course. Down the bike path they go, and right behind the racers is a mob of spectators heading for the spots on the course likely to have the best action. A competitor, late getting off the line for some rea-

son, weaves through the crowd, shouting frantically for people to get out of his way. His race is already over.

The riders come around on their first lap. First rider is Roy Knickman in a Levi's/Raleigh jersey, and right behind is teammate Steve Tilford. Both have been recent national 'cross champions, Tilford's title coming last year when he also won the NORBA off-road nationals. Third rider is Laurence Malone, who owned the national title for five straight years during the '70s, then a crowd of riders that is rapidly stretching out. Cyclocross racers do not ride in packs.

On the second lap Tilford takes the lead, and the order of Tilford, Knickman and Malone no longer changes for the rest of the race as Tilford grinds out lap after consistent five-and-a-half-minute lap. As they approach the obstacles all three demonstrate championship form with dismounts, jumps and remounts that lose no speed, while many of their opponents seem to be operating in slow motion. One section of the course requires the riders to carry their bikes over a pile of

It was a big day for Levi's/Raleigh, with Steve Tilford (page 32) winning and Roy Knickman (left) in second. Laurence Malone (below) practically owned cyclocross in the '70s, but finished third this time.



redwood logs, then straight up a 50-foot embankment, the top of which is crowded with those spectators who value agony over ecstasy. Even on this hard section the leaders seem to jog casually past the others.

By the third lap the officials at the finish line begin pulling lapped riders, a necessity because the course is now a circuit of mostly solo riders whose places are getting vague. The crowd only recognizes the leaders, and it's a mystery as to how well any of the others are doing. "Number seventy-nine, off the course please."

Two of the lapped riders are unhappy about being pulled—the only female riders. Jacque Phelan pulls off when told to, but Beth Vanderliet keeps riding, to the (mild) embarrassment of the officials. Although women have attempted to compete in the 'cross nationals since 1977, the USCF has not yet officially recognized a women's title, ostensibly because there are not enough competitors.

Every time Vanderliet comes around, she doesn't reply as she is ordered off the course, until the official threatens her with pulling her USCF license. (A technical punishment; the season had only one day left in it.) Angrily she rides into the pits and climbs off her bike, while the immediate crowd gives her a round of applause.

Meanwhile, back on the course, the race is starting to resemble a merry-go-round. The only riders whose positions are obvious are the three leaders, especially the Levi's/Raleigh riders in their distinctive jerseys. As the number of competitors is reduced by accident, bike damage, and pulled riders, the officials stop ordering lapped riders off with about two dozen left, since the race is beginning to resemble a miss-and-out and they are faced with the possibility of only one rider finishing on the lead lap.

At the pits, which are located in several places around the course, the broken bikes are beginning to pile up. A rider comes flying into the finish/pit area shouting, "Broken derailleur!" He gets off his bike while it is still doing about 20 mph, and without losing speed grabs a spare held out by a mechanic, mounts, and is away. Just before the damaged bike sails into the crowd, a spectator steps out and makes a great snag to scattered applause from those watching, unnoticed

by either rider or the mechanic. Photographers gleefully record the damage to the machinery scattered on the ground, and the more expensive the damage the happier they are. One of the things cyclocross is about is broken bicycles.

Those riders who are on the course but who are out of the money have nothing left to ride for but fun, so former BMX ace Jim Deaton clowns for the crowd, flying off a small jump, then riding through the finish area in a one-handed wheelie for an appreciative audience who are gathering to watch Tilford claim his victory.

At this point Tilford has a lock on first place, as he has for an hour, and the drama of a close finish is denied the spectators. Only three riders are on the lead lap, and Malone is just seconds away from being lapped, desperately sprinting ahead of Tilford to avoid the ignominy he has dealt to so many others.

At last the bell indicating the last lap, and those spectators who aren't already there rush to the finish line to watch the by now standard hands-in-the-air celebration by the winner as he crosses the line, the bicycle equivalent of spiking the football.

Beyond the first few places it is difficult to pick riders' positions, as the crowd has begun to get in the way and riders are told that they are done, so many laps down. An indication of the casual nature of the promotion is the fact that after the race, no one has recorded any time other than Tilford's 1:21:36 for the 16.5 miles, so Knickman and Malone will never find out how much he beat them by. Estimates on Knickman had him between 45 seconds and two minutes down, and Malone barely finished on the same lap, which would have him about five minutes in arrears.

The fine weather and the relative popularity of 'cross in Northern California brought out what may have been a record crowd for the sport in the U.S. The local print and broadcast media had a fine time regaling non-cyclists with the crazy aspects of this obscure sport, and then cyclocross vanished again for another year. ■

Results, 1984 U.S. Cyclocross Nationals

1. Steve Tilford (Levis/Raleigh) 1:21:36
2. Roy Knickman (Levis/Raleigh)
3. Laurence Malone (Specialized)