



was: "somewhere in England") they might be a bit more tolerant of the notion of a bike, say, pitting itself against a horse. After all, don't they play croquet aboard mud-soaked ponies in the rain? Indeed, it was there that a certain Guto Nythbran wagered he could outrun a fit horse over a mile. A few victories and he undertook a marathon's distance, won the bet, then dropped dead.

That was before people understood about training: his idea of preparation was to sleep on a pile of slightly warm horse manure. Nowadays we pile it on *others* (in the form of massive shovelful of "hard-earned experience"), but never ourselves on it.

The idea of going to England (well, Wales, technically) to settle a private grudge against haughty American equestrians and at the same time scope out the off-road scene appealed to both the jerk and the jock in me. By May first, I was on

Welsh Triathlon

Man vs. Horse: The Women Won

*It was a scramble
to the finish on foot,
hoof and wheel.*

By Jacquie Phelan

Ever wonder why horses are allowed in wilderness areas but bicycles aren't? One look at the heavily-chopped pack trails and you'll know it isn't due to the impact of the soft, fat tires.

It's because horses (and the riders on top of them) are just naturally "better", and more deserving of the fun stuff. They've been here longer (evolution-wise) and they go faster. Or so they think.

I undertook to disprove this long-held "truth" by entering a race that, for five years, has pitted runner against rider: the Man vs. Horse Marathon in central Wales.

It all began during a morning perusal of rumbled back issues of *National Geographic*, where I chanced to see a tiny picture I'd previously overlooked: a Welsh "fell runner" (someone who likes only steep hills) being overtaken by a horseback rider.

Now, in my neighborhood, bikes don't mix with horses too well; cycling's proletarian origins tend to clash a bit with the nobler roots of equestrians. But in England (which is where I thought Wales





Eager to become a Welsh Crested Butte, Llanwrtyd Wells invited mountain bike riders to join the annual "Man Versus Horse" race. The winner was a woman (Nia Ludno-Jones) on a filly (Jenny), at upper left.



British soil; in another week I would find out that Wales is a separate place, complete with its own unlearnable language and ethnocentric jokes.

In case you haven't heard about the mountain bike center in the Welsh town of Llanwrtyd Wells (don't bother trying to pronounce it), take it from me that there is another place in the world like Crested Butte, Colorado, for fat-tire "user-friendliness."

Amid remote, rolling and very rugged terrain, this town ("the smallest in the UK!" squeaks the tourist map) decided to distinguish itself as the first of its kind, uniquely devoted to the clunker *tifoso*. In other words, it volunteered to endure a temporary invasion by wet, filthy, and loud cyclists, as long as they paid for their rooms and drank lots of ale. Like Crested Butte, Llanwrtyd Wells has known better times; for C.B. it was digging up slate, anthracite and silver; for Llanwrtyd it was pumping up smelly, sulfurous waters. But the rage for that kind of stuff has died out, and both places are happy to fill their old hotels again.

For two weeks prior to the 22-mile event, I lost myself in the densely-forested hills and the hedge-bound lowlands punctuated with hundreds of uneasy, stuttering sheep. Here and there, in the middle of a field or atop a naked, windswept ridge, I would find a cairn—the remnants of a prehistoric monument—or an up-ended "standing stone," mute evidence to the astronomic and geographic attunement of the previous residents. Modern analysis shows that these stones are arranged in neat rows over hundreds of miles of varied terrain, mimicking the paths of the planets.

After several such rides, which would take two hours to unravel three miles of public footpath, I took to the streets,

It all started when one Guto Nythbran raced a horse some 26 miles, won, and dropped dead. Others have been following in his footsteps ever since.

finding that there were 10 different ways to reach a given destination . . . most of them under sole control of wandering gangs of escaped sheep. Unlike their pent-up brethren, the escapees are less nervous and more stubborn: down to the last lamb, they'd rather race headlong before me than accept defeat by turning off the road. Inevitably, though, they had to take a dive, contributing a souvenir wad to the already fleece-covered barbed wire blowing in the evening breeze.

By the end of a fortnight, I was ready to talk to another bike rider, having drained the local resources in their various incarnations: the combination public library/snooker hall, the grocery/post office, and the pharmacy/sporting goods store. Before long, the town would be thronged with bikes and riders, as well as the traditional runners and horses.

They came (mostly by train) from Lon-

don, Bristol and Devon. Let me just reiterate what thousands of travelers already know about England: bikes are allowed, nay, welcomed on trains. The novelty of my bike's fat, red knobby tires sparked endless hours of discussion with a bemused conductor, who'd heard there were "no trains in the States." Unfortunately he was more right than wrong.

The fat-tire fun-addicts in Britain are largely punks, eccentrics and imports from Australia, New Zealand, and Scotland (another country, believe it or not), just as the ones over here are punks, eccentrics and imports from New York, Texas, and Los Angeles. There, as here, the mainstream is slow to catch on . . .

When they meet, they ride a couple of hours, then light up a fag (you know what *that* is!), then look at the view. Watch you don't complain too much, or someone's liable to blow smoke into your eyes ("What are ya? Some kind of 'ealth-food nutter?").

Oh, yes, while we're on the subject of interesting linguistic variations, don't *ever* say that you have left your knickers in your fanny-pack—it could ruin your reputation.

But I digress.

As the riders rolled into town, they met around the bar at the Neuadd Arms Hotel, a 300-year-old hoary edifice plunked in back of the town's scrawny central square, and drew up a couple of pints of good, cheap beer. In the same room could be found the town's biggest landowners, most famous singers, and chummiest alcoholics. There was even a lanky, pale fellow all duded up for a rodeo or something, with his 10-gallon hat and five-pound silver belt buckle. I'm sorry to report that his first words to me were,

Background of the Man v. Horse

- It was over the fabled pint (or six) that Gordon Green, landlord of the Neuadd Arms, conceived the idea of the modern race. Apparently he overheard two of his customers arguing over the relative merits of men and horses. A few more pints and one claimed that a man could beat a horse "over a significant distance of country" and the race was born.

For the next five years, "the Horse" (it never mattered which, to the gambler's point of view) ran away with the race, only once being closely pursued by a runner. A few extra hindraces—such as added mileage and increased difficulty—didn't change things, either.

Just when it looked as though regulars of the Neuadd were onto a loser, mountain bikes burst onto the scene, and your intrepid reporter was dragged in to do the dirty job.

The horses are still sitting pretty, with their 40-minute lead, but that's just about how long my training buddies have to wait for me on a 20-mile loop. So Jenny, look out; we're coming back in '86.

"Howdy! You can call me Tex!" in an accent that resembled Richard Burton imitating Tom Mix.

Then the riders found their way to the attic (bargain digs up there, with 10 others to share with) and tried to fall asleep, only to wrestle in their dreams with incorrigible derailleurs and twisted, mutant chains.

Race morning was unbelievably peaceful. Huge flags of various and sundry nations, unearthed from cellar boxes, flapped proudly in the wind. A 30-foot inflatable red dragon ("a little something for the kiddies") slowly reared itself up to full size. On a regular workday, logging trucks routinely rumble through Llanwrtyd, shaking the old stone arch bridge on the river Irfon. But on this day, only a shrieking horse shattered the morning still, and the sun poured through a hazy filter of Cambrian blue sky. No hint of pandemonium yet.

Then, suddenly, there was a crowd, and 12 "horse boxes," 80 runners and 14 cyclists coagulated in the town square. Because the horses hadn't been "properly introduced" to the bikes, they were whisked out of town a quarter mile to regain their haughty composure.

Bikes started first, then, after a 15-minute gap, the runners and then those horses—one at a time because, as it turns

out, they haven't been properly introduced to each other, either.

The usual jokes on the start line, the unprintable kind. Matt "Meals on Wheels" Mills is heavily favored, along with Rob Lally, the Welsh cyclocross racer. Then there's time trialist Chris Tatton who, along with "Meals," broke away with me at the very start while most of the riders attempted to squeeze past one very wide Land Rover on the very narrow bit of road left on either side.

Within two minutes, we were away, and for the first third of the race we tried to drop each other (in vain), then stuck resignedly together as we struggled to decipher the course markings and finally settled into the grind. By the last third, Tatton was dropped, leaving a volatile young punk with me, cursing his flabby derailleur and scrambling to keep up. At that point, I realized that I'd have to stop being polite and dump the poor guy, or risk him doing the same unto me.

Shouldering the bike to avoid getting literally bogged down, I stepped ahead, glad to have got in a few short runs that week. Most of the course was a dreamy kind of firm, springy turf that has infinite traction, but the wet sections defy belief.

They may look funny, but fat tire fanatics are the same everywhere. The mud is still ahead.

They were nightmarish peanut butter-textured mires with no way around; I was afraid I'd lose the shoes off my feet.

I never looked back.

Despite being first into town, the time trial nature of the event required that everyone finish before the actual times could be calculated. The delay was put to brilliant use by the local women's auxiliary, who shoveled out the sandwiches, tea and homemade welsh cakes with blinding efficiency.

By 5:00 it was announced that Nia Ludno-Jones had won on her part thoroughbred, Jenny, in 1 hour, 40 minutes, to my 2:07. Nobody finished between us, and the first runner, David Woodhead, took third in 2:08. So that got me thinking about bringing over some of the guys that never let me train with them 'cause I'm so slow: I bet they could easily best Big Jenny, and (for once) even up the score. ■

If you're thinking of doing something really different on bikes this year, try clunking in Wales. Interested riders should contact Frank Styles at the Carleton Court Hotel, or Gordon Green at the Neuadd Arms. Both are in Llanwrtyd Wells, Powys, Wales LD5 4SN. Camping is also available for the hard of core.

