

Virgin Sacrifice

Their First Race

Want to try racing? These four did, and lived to tell the tale.

By Jacquie Phelan

Entering your first race is a lot like taking the first step on the Yellow Brick Road. Remember the good witch Glinda's advice? "It is best to begin at the beginning." And by the time they get to Oz, the travellers discover they've acquired what they were looking for without even trying.

Although none of the 10,000 registered road racers in this country begins at exactly the same point, they tend to converge (at weekly intervals) at communal joustings known as "races." Every year sees a new crop of would-be racers trying to break into the seemingly fixed numbers of the old guard (the ones who act bored as hell at the starting line). Up until this year, very few of these freshly-licensed initiates survived the psychological, not to mention the physical, rigors of the pack to become one of "them." Beginning this year, it may not matter. Unlicensed races are becoming all the rage.

Bike racing has rarely witnessed such a high-water mark. It results from the confluence of two roaring streams of participants: triathletes, and recreational cyclists who've been inspired by the Olympics, folks who may not relish the fun and games (read: "politics and priorities") the U.S. Cycling Federation has to offer its new riders.

These new athletes represent a rapidly expanding sector of the racing world. Like the entry-level runners (as opposed to joggers) of the '70s, they are mostly adults in their prime, not kids with their sights set on Seoul '88. They have different reasons for racing, but are just as serious as that group calling themselves "real bikies." Though the "real" ones may try to snub the new enthusiasts back onto the sidelines ("where they belong," I overheard someone snort), novice riders are finding competition to their liking and are putting themselves on the (starting) line more often.

CYCLIST went off to the races to dig up the sagas behind these "virgins," if you will, catching them before and after the

event, to see if racing for the first time in a pack had hooked them, scared them, or altered them in some fundamental way. One thing is certain: although you learn something valuable at every race you ever ride, nothing can compare with that first impression.

As little as a year ago, pudgy Tony Merz had a skinny guy inside, signalling wildly to get out. "My idea of a good time was always a box of cookies in front of the tube," grins the 17-year-old Marin County resident. "I used to weigh 225." He looks down at himself as if surprised. "I was inspired by a local kid who'd been to France, and was all, 'Attaquez! Attaquez!' when we'd ride. I was all, 'See you later!' but when somebody pointed out that my name was like 'Merckx' spelled wrong, I said, 'Hey! I'm cool!' I got a bike with that name, I got a nice jersey, and suddenly, 'Where do I sign up?' I guess I rode a lot this past summer, 'cause when I returned to school, half the kids didn't recognize me and all the teachers asked, 'What did *you* do over summer vacation?' I'd discovered cycling, or was it the other way around?

"My sister's a star basketball player at her school, and my brother's doing real well in college, and I needed to do something special. My mom has supported all of us in everything we've wanted to do, only I never wanted to do anything! That's why racing appeals to me. I'm doing something that I love to do, to find out how good I am. Meanwhile, it's just beginning to take off in this country and I am in the middle of it all."

The next time I saw Merz was at the first race of the season, a damp circuit course, getting spit out the back of the juniors pack, but gaining on every lap, refusing to quit until he was lapped. "He's over there, surrounded by those blonde teenage girls," his brother told me in a bemused (if faintly envious) tone. Sure enough, there was Tony, soaking up some of the fringe benefits of

hanging it out for all to see. Clearly, it was worth risking looking like an idiot to impress your friends and family. Believe me, they were impressed, too—anyone would be—watching him pound around in circles on that miserably cold Sunday morning.

The following weekend he experienced the quintessential junior's race, ("Where you avoid three crashes and finally go down in the last turn...") I saw him smiling at the finish, ignoring the road rash on his elbow, and making jokes about alchemizing \$50 wheels into potato chips. To him, this was just part of the package: "Next time I'll know to stay out in front at the last turn, or I'll deserve whatever happens. I can't believe how



much one race taught me, though. It's simple to stay *with* the pack—it's getting away from it that counts after it's all over. Maybe I'll do that next week."

Gerry Freitas is an open-faced woman with a trace of impishness dancing behind her blue eyes. Her Brazilian ancestry doesn't show until you hear her *correctly* pronounce "Carlos Lopes," complete with nasal vowels and the typically sloshed Portuguese "s."

"I have always had some form of two-wheeled transportation, starting with a JC Penney special that broke down so often that I *had* to learn to fix it. That was nothing; I like being able to work on machines. Back then, even *that* was taboo, not to mention *riding!* Girls just didn't do

that in the '50s.

"Even when I was an adult, and rode the few miles every day to work, I was regarded as . . . well, *peculiar*. At work they always had some comment aimed at my physical appearance. You know how it is: you come indoors, and your eyes are still red, and your nose is runny, and your hair . . . ! They never got used to it.

"Well, times have changed, and society's changed, but I'm still the same old me, only now I can ride all day unnoticed. I kind of got into the idea of racing through trying to get my son into some kind of athletic activity. Softball, riding, hiking . . . but he just wasn't into it. Then it dawned on me that it was all sort of an excuse to get out there myself. After wait-

ing 12 years for him to be old enough to do all this stuff, it was time for me to do something for myself.

"Health had nothing to do with it. I never smoked, never put on weight, never had to rediscover physical activity. I felt as though riding long and hard was a way of expressing something within myself. I don't understand it, but it's there: you love hills, so you go climb them."

That was *before* the Tassajara Road Race, a simple, extremely popular 20-mile test in the gently rolling hills east of the San Francisco Bay. This year, over 600 riders entered the race. Over a hundred were unlicensed.

Afterward, things were a little different



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First Race

for Freitas.

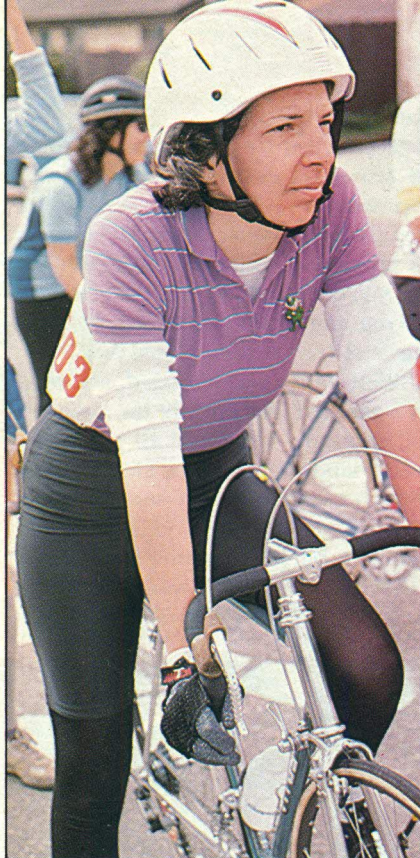
"I didn't realize they came off the line like *racehorses!* We had to wait three hours 'till ours started, and it drained the enthusiasm right out of me. And replaced it with nervousness. Then there was the speed they took the corners at. I know you've got to stay close, but I couldn't do it. I thought to myself, 'Well, I'll just duck down this side street and be done with it.' But I stayed on course. Felt like I was the last one in, but I don't mind, 'cause I got out and did it. I'd love to light a fire under all those women you hear complaining about how fat they've gotten over the years, and maybe someday hear 'em talk about how stong they're getting."

Sal LoBianco is a 34-year-old transplanted New Jerseyite who still remembers the names of all the early bands Bruce Springsteen played in, because he was signing them up to play at the local high school dances. Music figures big in this second-generation Italian's life, along with good food, hard work and exceptionally hard play.

"But I'm not a workaholic," he insists. "The only time I got up at six for workouts was when I was a runner. I had this friend who was a real rider, the head of a local club in Philly, and he'd always be trying to convert me to bikes while I would rave about the joys of running. He won out, I got a touring Motobecane against his better advice, and for years I cut my teeth on that."

Sal found that heaping on the road miles was a lot more fun on a borrowed racing frame, so he took the plunge for a handbuilt De Rosa. "Maybe it's a way of recapturing my buried heritage, but it seems like I'm a helluva lot prouder of being Italian than my hyper-American ancestors ever were . . . bikes fit in there too, don't they? Guess I sound like I'm straight out of "Breaking Away," but I even like singing opera when I'm out there by myself. And it's fun to look at the racing dailies in the North Beach bookstores, along with the other *tifosi*.

"OK, then, since you're riding so much," I told myself, 'you might as well go do it for real.' So I waited for this point-to-point road race to get that pack experience. It turned out to be a pack's race, with a stiff breeze keeping us all together. Then came the inevitable crash, with everybody capitalizing on the distraction . . . I wasn't involved, but I lost contact, and had to work like mad to reel in a few others.



"I'll do this until they have to drag me off the bike. This has made me look forward to getting older, because each year I'm stronger."

"Funny thing was, it was nothing like even my hardest training rides. There, all your friends wait around the next turn for you. Here, all I saw was asphalt and rubber for 20 miles. One guy came up to me to congratulate me on my heroic pulls and I had to edge around behind him to see which guy it was: the one with the hole in his shorts, or the one with his number pinned on upside down. I instantly recognized his seat post.

"I'll do this until they have to drag me off the bike. This has made me look forward to getting older, because each year I'm stronger than I was the last; it's easy to measure your progress on a particular hill, with a particular gear . . . I come home every day purged like some Zen bikie; the problems of the world are a million miles away. You could never *pay* me to trade this for a lifetime pass to watch nine overpaid pros batting a ball around a phony patch of grass on a hot summer afternoon. You think I'm nuts? I'm out to *do*, not to watch!"

Stephanie Whidden got her start when she began to ride with a group of beginning women in the Berkeley area headed by Cindy Olavarri.

"She came up to me and told me if I wasn't racing, I should be. Naturally, this had a big effect. I was waiting around a lot those days last fall, waiting to find out if I'd passed the Bar, and as soon as I did, I took out a (USCF) license. I thought: 'NOW I can go out and endanger my life!'"

She was preparing for the start of her first race, and like so many others that



day, had never even *seen* a bicycle race—except for the televised portion of the Olympics.

“What do I expect? Well, I’ve already done the hard stuff, forcing myself to go out on club rides where none of the guys would give me the time of day because I hadn’t proven myself. I earned some respect by staying with them to the top of a climb, and descending reasonably fast, but frankly, I don’t care what they think.

“I know I won’t suffer today. I regularly ride three times this far, and I’ve been athletic as long as I can remember. Tennis team, school swim team, that stuff.

“I even get a morning off for training once a week, where I work. Naturally bike racing isn’t everything. I love to be out riding when I can, but I also have a career I’ve devoted my whole life toward attaining, which obviously comes first. I even got to return the favor Cindy did me; I represented her in her negotiations with Trek. That was kinda neat.”

After the race, as we stood around listening to the usual post-race social hour—the gripes concerning “flagrant” rule infractions and the petty niggling of would-be winners—she told me how surprised she was that even such an easy ride would involve tactics. “It doesn’t seem to matter how strong you are, it’s all a question of position and experience, if there’s still a pack at the finish. And the only way to learn that stuff is through constant trial and error. In time I’ll get it down.” ■

How To Start

• If you think you’d like to try your hand at racing, without suffering the indignities of the so-called “public” races that are occasionally appended to popular USCF events, here are the names of two clubs with different approaches:

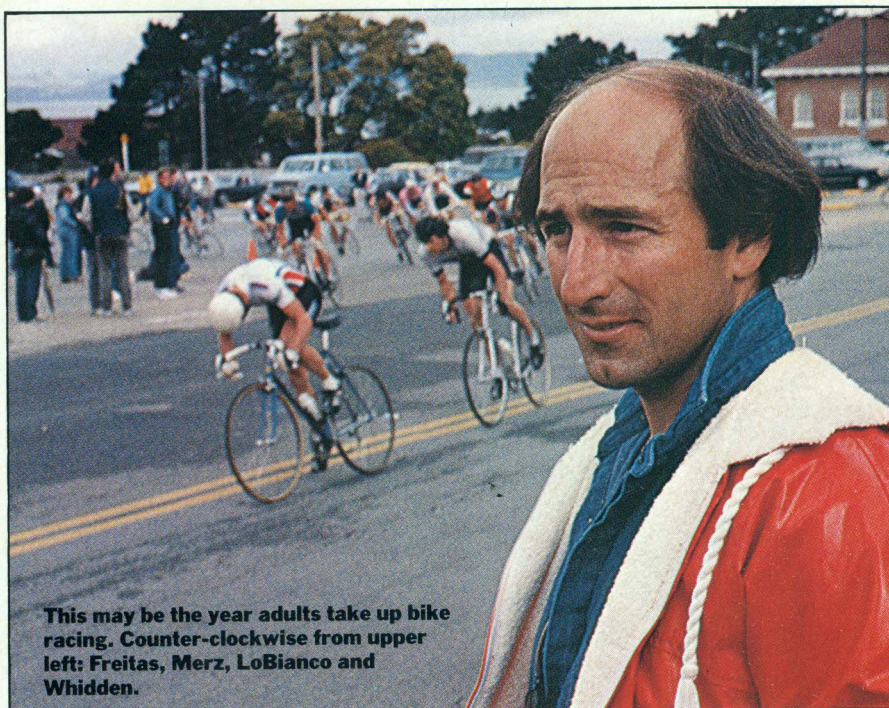
In Northern California, a San Francisco-based group calling itself the “Pac-O-Dogs” provides an atmosphere of comraderie for entry-level riders, and rides together when it can. It is informal, relaxed. Write Norm Vogel at: 3352 Clay St., San Francisco, CA 94117.

On the other hand, if a structured club is what you want, write Stan Stolin of the Open Bicycle Racing Action (OBRA), at 6550 Paseo Alcazaa, Anaheim, CA 92807, or call 714/998-5505 for upcoming races, and how to join. This is a very unusual club in that it is both a USCF club and an independ-

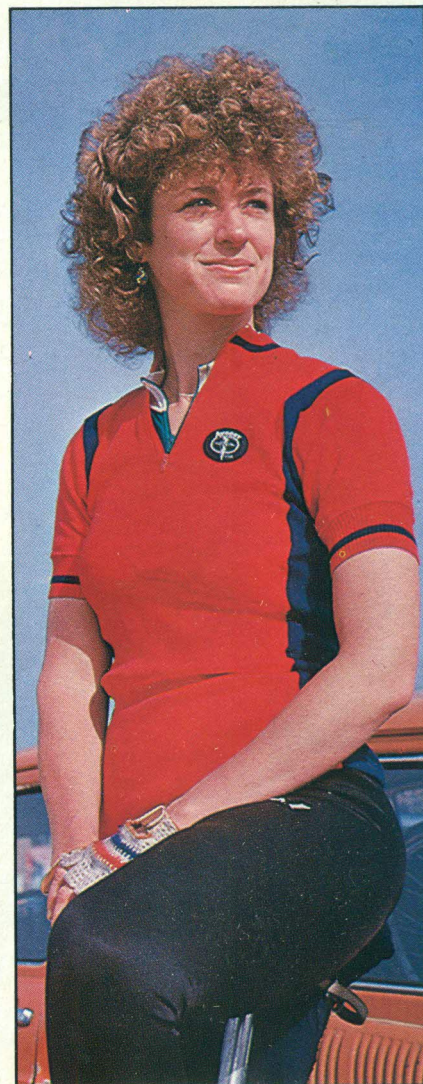
ent entity. Your \$15 yearly membership cost includes entry fee for all their local events, amounting to 68 cents per race if you attend all 20 events! “No races under 10 miles (except the hill climbs),” insists Mr. Stollin.

“In addition to local races there are long-distance point-to-point races, from 80 to 100 miles. We have to limit the number of riders in these to 60 for reasons of logistics and safety.” He also stresses the fact that many an elite rider has sprung from their ranks, but OBRA exists for the majority (“ever heard of ‘Fred’s?’”) of men, women and kids who are the life blood of any club. “We’ve seen people join just to get our great club jersey. We get ‘em involved in riding clinics, volunteering at the Olympics, get ‘em *into* it. Our prizes aren’t elaborate; it’s fun at its purest, racing for its own sake, and the chance for a winner’s jersey at the end of the season.” ■

“I thought to myself, ‘Well, I’ll just duck down this side street and be done with it.’ But I stayed on course.”



This may be the year adults take up bike racing. Counter-clockwise from upper left: Freitas, Merz, LoBianco and Whidden.



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