

15-speed clunker 'mongrel' bikes take to the mountains

Designer rides his hill bikes down Mt. Tam

By Sandra Lee Katzman
Examiner correspondent

SAN ANSELMO — "Mountain bikes are user-friendly," says Gary Fisher, 34-year-old designer of a rugged multi-speed bicycle that is gaining popularity.

"They (mountain bikes) are the easiest bikes to ride in the street. Skinny-tired bikes won't disappear. They have a legitimate place on the road — but only when the road is smooth."

The road down the mountain wasn't smooth when Fisher, owner of Mountainbikes of San Anselmo, turned to off-road riding after doing 15,000 miles a year as a national-class road racer. "I discovered that I liked riding fat-tired bicycles down Mount Tamalpais. It made me laugh a lot."

Ten years or so ago, he and other young men would take beat-up balloon-tire newsboy specials down the mountain. The challenge was to see who could come down on the bikes instead of under them. "The others bought Schwinn for five bucks at Goodwill. I went to Pittsburg where old men with antique bikes in chicken coups wondered what I wanted with the junk."

Fisher took the junk bikes home, sandblasted and painted the American-made frames and put various European components on them.

The results were what he calls "mongrels." In 1974, Fisher built 20 mongrels. His Marin County neighbors bought them and came back for more.

Fisher kept modifying the mongrels. Meanwhile, he had made a comeback in racing, and in 1979 he won the Davis Double Century, a 200-mile Sacramento road race. The same year, he quit competing.

Convinced that mongrels had a future, he started designing and producing mountain bikes in his own shop. The first year, working with



frame maker Rom Ritchey, he sold a hundred bikes. The next year, 450 bikes were sold, and 900 last year.

He didn't trademark the name and now "mountain bike" is generic. Designed to roll down mountain trails, the mountain bike has knobby tires, wide handlebars, sealed wheel hubs and at least 15 gears on a three-sprocket front crank. A quick release seat allows the rider to adjust the center of gravity without dismounting.

Fisher is the first to admit that "There are still refinements to make. The end result looks simple, but the path to simplicity is cluttered."

In 1981, the first Japanese-made mountain bike hit the American market. The Stumpjumper, made by the San Jose-based Specialized Co., got a jump on the imports of major bike manufacturers by a couple years.

"In the beginning, there was some rivalry, but the Stumpjumper really just opened up the market," Fisher says. "At first it hurt, cutting the price by one half."

Fisher now also has a Japanese-made bike which sells for about \$700, still higher than the Stumpjumper

Gary Fisher, right, and friends John Loomis and Jim Deaton, above, take their rugged multi-speed mountain bikes to Mount Tam

and the cheaper imports due to design and components.

He takes business competition in stride. He can afford to. Balding, with his own team of racers, he plans to expand to a bigger shop in San Rafael.

The Mountainbike store still makes the custom domestic machines, which sell for as much as \$1,800. "The perfect machine that has to be weighted down so it won't roll away has yet to be invented," Fisher says with enthusiasm. "Our cheapest bike now is better than our most expensive one a few years ago."

Fisher's inventiveness was honed at an early age. Born in Guam, he learned English from grandfather Fred Applegate, a script writer for "The Treasure of Sierra Madre."

As a teen-ager he raced bikes until he was ousted from the Amateur Bike League of America when he was



18 for having long hair. His first business was "The Lightest Show on Earth," providing illumination for the psychedelic music shows of the '60s, including Janis Joplin's.

In 1972, he went back to bikes, leading what he calls "a bike-bum existence — working in a bike shop, sponsored by clubs, winning prizes."

He road-tested and reviewed new bikes for "Bicycling Magazine," and when the San Rafael publication moved to Pennsylvania in 1977, he went, too. He returned after three months, rode a "clunker" on the mountain — and the rest is two-wheeled history.

At Mountainbikes in San Anselmo, Ken Fuetsch checks specifications and welds bike frames

Fred Mertz photos

