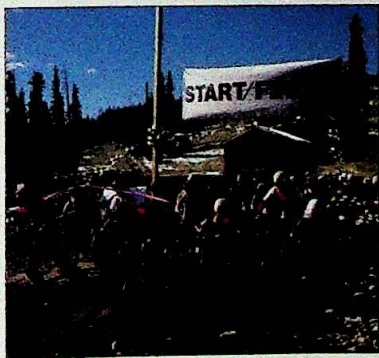


FAT CITY

Anybody can race a mountain bike. Only a few are paid

By Carter Coleman



The starting line

You have to perform well in this race to have anything to do with the team in the future," said Captain Kirk, steering a van on a serpentine two-lane through groves of golden aspen and green pine, beneath dark granite peaks in the Colorado Rockies. Captain Kirk, a mustachioed, fit fellow in trendy fall-fashion attire, was addressing his mountain bicycle racers, the Ross Indians: five men, ages 24 to 34, tan and wiry with gorilla legs in blue jeans, who sat in the back of the van silently sipping mineral water. The Indians are of a rare species

of high-altitude, cross-country cyclists: Only 150 athletes total, including a half-dozen women, are devoted to their infant sport.

It was late September, the end of seven months of racing in New England, California, and Colorado and a long, losing season for the Indians, who, with a \$50,000 budget, are by far the best-funded of the five factory teams. (Besides Ross, such companies as Raleigh, Schwinn, Suntour, and Shimono support teams and pump money into the American and Japanese circuit; Specialized, Fisher, and Ritchey also field teams.) Although the Indians took an occasional second, they didn't win once all year. The current roster was the aftermath of a midseason overhaul. Only three of the six racers who started in March were in the van; two were brand new. Captain Kirk, a.k.a. John Kirkpatrick, director of advertising for the world's largest producer of mountain bikes, was not trying to be coldblooded, but the Ross boardroom wanted a win.

"If one of you wins, the whole team gets a bonus and Ross will support that individual through next year's nationals," he continued as the van rolled into Eldora, a small ski resort outside Boulder. The National Off-Road Bicycle

Indians' summer: The Ross team looks back on an unsuccessful season and vows revenge in the last race of the year.

Association (NORBA) Championships were going to be the Indians' last shot, and Captain Kirk was using dual incentives. First he threatened them with loss of sponsorship—then he offered them money and, for one rider, nothing short of an athlete's idea of paradise: unlimited time to train.

"I want to make some stipulations," he added. "Before the race you are not to ride the course with other teams." In the two years of the Indians' existence he had been letting them coach themselves, but the urgent need for a victory demanded new measures. Captain Kirk was shifting into covert mobilization. The team was arriving in Eldora days before their rivals. They were to "wire" the course, ride it repeatedly, memorizing every rock, rut, stump, and bump. Once "dialed in," they were to work out the particulars of a strategy that, loosely, went as follows: Three braves, on a kamikaze mission, would "level out the field, abuse, waste, and destroy key contenders" so that one of the other two, holding back through the massacre, could bolt to the front to become the national champion.

The buildup to the nationals had begun two weeks before, in Crested Butte, and culminated in Fat-Tire Bike Week, the grand conclave of the mountain bike subculture: two days of racing, an overnight bike ride to Aspen (just north over the mountains), symposiums, expositions, and genteel hedonism. Up and down Elk Street, in front of saloons and outdoor cafes, were piled hundreds of bikes—from \$300 assembly-line jobs to \$3,000 handmade specials—unlocked and unattended on the sidewalks. Cycleheads slugged carbohydrates in the sunshine and wore the latest Sierra styles, the "Patagucci look": sleek, skintight Lycra bodysuits; vivid, quilted polypropylene tops; black wool tights; Gore-Tex windbreakers; and French mirror shades.

Down the street a yellow tent covered manufacturers' displays—a \$4,000 tandem with a built-in TV, stacks of a new magazine aimed at America's burgeoning cycling population (more than ten million adults ride once a week), racks of state-of-the-art helmets. Beside the tent, a crew-cut Japanese man with six pens in his breast pocket snapped photos of minute innovations on a Californian's customized bike. Later a Japanese engineer would imitate the Yankee's ingenuity, and an Asian equivalent would be mass-produced in Taiwan. So goes the flow of fat-tire technology, which began ten years ago in the hills above San Francisco.

The Crested Butte conclave originated in 1976, when a band of Aspen



Top of the trail: Approaching the final lap in the 37-mile ordeal, where are the Indians?

motorcyclists on a barhopping jaunt rode into Crested Butte and the Grubstake Saloon by way of an old mule trail over 12,700-foot Pearl Pass. Some of the Grubstake regulars, mostly firefighters, decided to out-macho the riders from the rich side of the mountain. They pedaled old single-speed klunker bikes 40 miles over the Pearl and, dripping sweat and dirt like high-plain drifters, hit Aspen's posh Jerome Hotel for an afternoon bacchanal. Word of the mountain passage reached California and, in 1978, five Marin County cycleheads came to Colorado for the ultimate test of their prototype bikes.

"The Grubstake guys, who were drinkers, not cyclists, thought we were some kind of California faggots for having high-tech bikes," remembered Charlie Kelly, one of the Marin County five. Kelly, who's 38 and still sports a ponytail, is editor of *Fat Tire Flyer*, the aficionado's bimonthly. He also covers the off-road scene for three cycling magazines. "At first the Grubstake guys didn't want to go with us, but we persisted. Then we saw their bikes. They were in no condition to handle the mountains, and we spent two days revamping them." Eventually, all of them made it over the pass.

The first day of the Crested Butte races, more than 400 riders were in town, mostly from California and Colorado, the hotbeds. But some made the pilgrimage from the provinces, as it were—England, Canada, Connecticut, West Virginia, Florida—to meet the people they'd seen in biking magazines and to ride the infamous high-altitude paths. The town was alive with communal passion, simmering like some sort of athletic Mardi Gras.

"All statistics aside," said Charlie Kelly, "they just happen to be the ultimate form of transportation ever devised on the planet. Think about it. Goes anywhere. If it can't go, you can pick it up."

FAT-TIRE WEEK WAS INTO ITS FOURTH DAY, and the experts—52 men and eight women—were about to warm up for the nationals with a little race, a 37-mile loop through the gravel roads and narrow trails above Crested Butte. Elevation gain: 4,500 feet. The gun went off, and the pros sprinted out of town.

Forty novice racers gathered behind the starting line to try it for themselves. Four rows from the line, dead center of the pack, I stood and scanned the competition. Two women in Team Stump-jumper Lycra suits looked like pros. Could be tough. A pair of thirtyish men in touring outfits. No sweat. A swarthy, sinewy guy in a green jersey—yeah, I could beat him. You have to be brave. I searched the pack for my rival, the guy

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from *Rolling Stone*. He promised to race but wasn't here. The word was that he'd been drinking late at the Cantina last night.

Tony, a friend of mine from New Mexico, was offering helpful advice from the back of an 18-gear all-terrain tandem. "A pack of novices is as dangerous as a pack of rabid dogs," he said. "You don't want to go down in one. If you crash, crash safely."

"How?"

"Throw away the bike, kick yourself away from stationary objects—boulders, trees, and such—tuck your chin to your chest, and roll."

"Aha. Got it. Anyone get hurt last year?"

"A guy from Gunnison bit off his tongue in a crash."

The starter raised his gun.

I wish I could deliver here a fitting account of the bodywork I'd put in for this salient moment—how I'd pursued a long, methodical training program, monitored my oxygen-transport systems and the other components of the fitness equation, and then down-shifted into a tapering period to assure maximum energy levels—but it hadn't worked that way. In June, three weeks after Ross sent me a bike, I had hit an unpainted speed bump in the twilight, flown 20 feet over the bars, and bounced on asphalt, spraining a wrist and elbow and fracturing my collarbone. In July I had mended on a beach. In August, on bridle paths in the green hills of Tennessee, I had ridden two hours a day, cautiously, for the doctor had said, "One good blow within three months of the accident will crack your clavicle like wind snapping a dry twig." With only 45 days of training, I was the quintessential novice.

"Bang!!" We pedaled two blocks out of town and onto a highway. The pack—80 legs pumping cranks, driving 40

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chains—droned like an amplified swarm of bees. I momentarily locked handlebars with the guy beside me, felt my stomach jump, and muttered an apology. "Take it easy!" a mean voice grated from behind.

A half-mile later, as we turned onto a rolling gravel road, the pack "dropped" me—slipped past and sped away. Well, I thought, this sort of thing takes years: mastering pack dynamics, techniques for holding position, blocking and threading through the maze.

"Kick ass, brother! Catch them! You're embarrassing me!" Captain Kirk yelled from the sidelines. I shot him a thumbs-up; settled into an easy-gear, high-rpm spin; and proceeded to pass riders—mainly women, children, and potbellies.

At 11,500 feet the experts had taken a left to climb to 13,500 on a "single track," their synonym for a footpath, but we novices turned toward town. I crested the top in 12th place, deep in a groove untapped since high school cross-country track days, then began the descent. Tony had coached me on this stretch the day before. "Take the downhill like a giant slalom racer. Read them in sections. Pick a line between the rocks and ruts and let her loose. Don't hit the brakes. Crouch low with your butt over the rear tire to lower your center of gravity. Straighten your arms to get leverage for any frontal impact, and let the bike float over the bumps," he had said. "Otherwise you'll break your collarbone again." I assumed the position.

"Good form!" shouted a weathered rider, a spectator pedaling uphill. Seconds later five riders with egregious form, clearly road racers, blew by, leaving me in a wake of dust. The other ten miles down a winding gravel road, I cruised in solitude, wrapped in rushing wind. I finished 18th, 12 minutes behind the leader. In 45 days I had become a mediocre novice—which attests to the fact that mountain bike racing is an easy-entry sport. You just get a bike, go out, and ride.

Most of the top ten novice finishers, in fact, were Colorado riders in their thirties who had been playing in the dirt for several months or longer. "Sandbaggers," someone called them, riders good enough to enter the expert class, but who had deliberately held back to win prizes of cash and merchandise. Once you actually win a novice race you are automatically an expert and banned from the little league. Somebody bought beer for me and the guy who finished 16th, and we, strangers to each other but ephemeral comrades-in-arms, waited for the pros to arrive.