

FAT-TIRE MADNESS

Only the Strong Survive

The Rocks, Rain, Mud

—and Outhouses



wasn't miles from humanity, I was not about to alert anyone within shouting distance that I could not free myself from a temporary toilet. So I rummaged through my knapsack, found a disposable ball-point pen, and began wedging it between the door and the wall. A feeble attempt at escape, perhaps, but hey, I wasn't about to attack the door with my Swiss Army knife. Fortunately, the pen sacrificed itself in time for me to open the door, and I returned, quite nonchalantly, to my spot at the finish of the downhill time trial.

Since this was only the second stage of the two-day stage race — which consisted of uphill and downhill time trials, ten observed trials, a “road” race, and, for the top 25 trialists, five more trials — I was pleased to learn that I'd not missed any race action while contending with nature. There was still time to watch some of the 140 riders descend the hill they had climbed in the morning's uphill time trial.

In fact, there was plenty of time (read “delay”) between racing events while results were compiled and checked. The race organizers promised a more efficient system next year, but in the meantime I didn't mind.

By Patricia Peltekos

Having escaped from the porta-potty, the author (above) interviews Fuji/SunTour racer Elin Larson (second in women's division). Jacquie Pbelan (who was first) wears the customary badge of honor — a dirty knee — and her trademark, a large-bead necklace. She rides for SunTour/Cunningham Wilderness Bikes. Overall men's winner John Loomis (right) of Fisber MountainBikes.



COURTESY FISHER MOUNTAIN BIKES

UPFRONT

Time between races was time to enjoy one of my infrequent forays to the woods. (Native Minnesotans like me sprout pine needles behind their pedals—didn't you know?) Although I had no fat-tires with me, I borrowed a small Univega Alpino Pro to tootle from the downhill finish line to the food stand. As every bikie told me, all roads from the finish line were uphill. Dusty, loose, and deeply rutted, too. Oh, and rocky, as I found out when my pedal unexpectedly greeted a hidden biggie. I was glad no one was around to see my rock-crunching, gear-stripping uphill technique.

Ah yes, the simple pleasures of life in the woods with a touch of civilization thrown in. Namely me. I admit, I'm something of a road-bike snob—I've turned up my nose at fat-tire bikes for a while. But after one weekend of watching and (limited) riding, I'm ready to borrow on my college loans for a fat-tire bike.

On Saturday morning, I was taken in by the romantic, "let's commune with nature" ambience of being in a forest, with the sun filtering through the trees. Besides, the bikes have a beauty of their own—they're agile and comfortable and relaxed, as are fat-tire riders. It's kind of hard not to be relaxed when you get dirty.

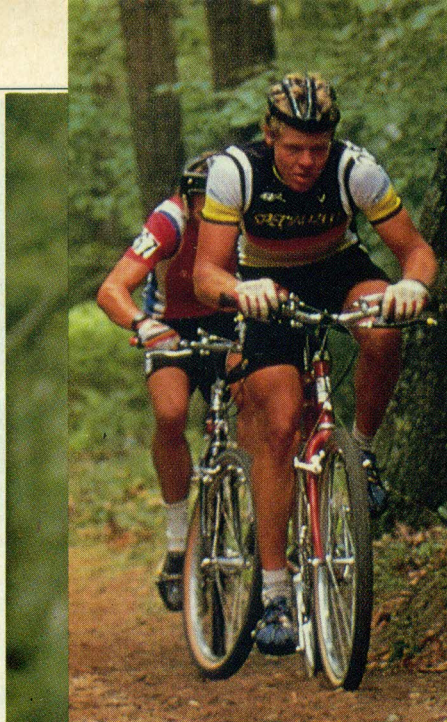
It's fun to ride in dirt and rocks and gravel and sand; over tree roots and twigs. Logs and boulders? Eh, like caviar, you've just got to plunge into it without building up your expectations; I'm holding off on boulders until I improve my relationship with logs, which began in Wendell. Like any sport, "the more you do it, the easier it gets," according to Californian Carmen Carrouche, who rides for Ross. "I'm terrorized sometimes when I go over big boulders. I see God on occasion. There are times when the road gets so rough, my eyeballs are jiggling and I can't focus. Then all you can do is hit the brakes and slow down 'til you're under control."

Though I did not see God that weekend, I did see some racers who may have. Like the novice rider whose yells of "Hup, hup, I'm coming through!" could not save him from crashing into the rider in front of him during their dust-raising downhill time trial.

Or perhaps riders in the men's expert road race saw dollar signs and bicycle accessories, as primes were offered on nearly every lap. Steve Cook, who rode a Cunningham oversized aluminum tubing frame, won a number of primes, although his exertions eventually forced him to drop out of the race.

Trial by Dirt

I also saw a lot of heartbreaking, checkbook-busting bikes: a red Fat Chance equipped with yellow tires; the shimmering purple Specialized bikes; the bike with Garfield and Odie tire



Pbelan, a.k.a. "Alice B. Toeclips," in winning form. Specialized Stumpjumper Gavin Chilcott (inset) took second overall.



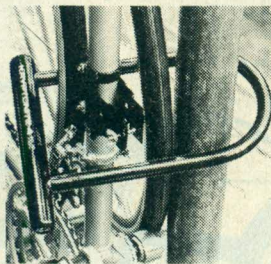
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UPFRONT

valve-caps—right out of the comics. And there were Betsy and Peter Weigle's brightly colored, custom-made bikes. Oh, for the chance to disappear into the woods on one! Betsy's red bike, whose handling was superb even in the observed trials sand pit, nearly rode away with me.

Fortunately, I wasn't going through for points in the observed trials, where the idea is to thread your way through tight turns, up tricky knolls, over logs and other bike-spillers, without putting your foot down, or "dabbing." Each dab means a point against you. Putting both feet down is even worse. That's called crashing, and it earns you five big ones. Take a bow, feet, and remember that the rider accumulating the least points is the winner.

So, yes, my sand-pit ride would've been a wipe out — they don't call them trials for nothing. It was a Sunday in hell for the 25 trials finalists, as a light drizzle dampened the dust while slicking the surfaces of rocks, boulders, logs, and leaves.

Observed trials are not usually included in a fat-tire road race and so they presented a new, unexpected challenge for the speed demons.

Trials demand concentration, agility, and bikehandling of a different sort from fat-tire road races, in which the objective — finish the race in the least amount of time — is the same as in skinny-tire racing. In an observed trial, control — of your bike, temper, and feet — is far more important than speed. Although a number of West Coast expert fat-tire roadies competed in the observed trials' finals, many were disgruntled by the trials' difficulty, especially since they had to ride the trials immediately following the grueling 37.5-mile expert road race.

One rider was particularly displeased when he approached a huge boulder at the start of one rock-filled trial. Lunging at the slippery mass, he nearly lost his balance halfway up and brought both feet down to steady himself—an automatic five points and the end of that trial. The next rider, who carefully studied the boulder's contours, pedaled up and over and became one of the few to successfully complete the trial. But if the rocks didn't get the riders, tight twists and turns over logs did. One rider spent an interminable time adjusting his cleats before tackling a course with lots of log-jumping, only to pull his foot out of the pedal at the first log.

To be a good trials rider, "you need to be graceful, and I don't think I'm going to learn to be graceful," Jacquie Phelan admitted, while massaging her legs after winning the women's 25-mile road race. The dirt-streaked, ectomorphic Phelan, aka "Alice B. Toeclips," had fallen in one of the nastier sections of the road race circuit. (Novices and experts raced at different times, although the same hilly, 2.5-mile circuit of unpaved dirt, gravel, and overgrowth

was used by both. Men and women course at the same time.) Phelan, known for winning every race she enters, just made a fat-tire bike. Form, technique, practice, racing handlebars with bar-end shifters, and a beaded necklace may not be everything it is to fat-tire racing, but Phelan uses that as her advantage when she races.

Phelan would like to see more women on fat-tire bikes, although she noted that women aren't going to be interested in going over into this bizarre, possibly dangerous sport." But, she added, everyone in fat-tire racing is so friendly and willing to instruct new riders that women simply need to try

A Passion for Food and Dirt

"Fat-tire racing attracts a different crowd of people. They're out here to have a good time. Skinny-bike racing used to be that way, unfortunately, it's become too prize-money oriented," Elin Larson, a Fuji/SunTour rider, explained in between cheering the dirt-sweat-encrusted expert men, who were cheering through lap 15 of the road race. Those who were left, that is. Many of the expert men were huddling around the concession table and eating beque grills, drinking beer while watching the hamburgers broil. But Specialized Studio Jumper riders Gavin Chilcott, Laurence Lone, and David McLaughlin, and Ross and Aaron Cox, determinedly pumped toward their top-place finishes, accompanied by other die-hard, albeit-lapped riders.

Fat-tire racing brings out the kid in people. There was a certain kamikaze aura to the events—a certain fearlessness mixed with the child-like desire to plow through all the sand and dirt and gravel and really make a mess of yourself. And with no much energy expended, you can imagine what fat-tire racing does to your appetite. Phelan rides up last night's fettuccine and think about tomorrow's Haagen-Dazs." Eat to ride, ride to eat.

Underneath their shared passion for food and dirt, fat-tire racers, like any group of bikies, are a mixed bag. "This is like the sixties—where all look like a bunch of hippies," the lone Canadian, Dave Nalley, observed. Hippies, ex-hippies, hardcore bikies, laidback bikies, and kids. No one would be out of fashion at a fat-tire race. Wear whatever's comfortable—no formality, no fashion standards. Tie-dyes are fine and so are hiking boots, tennis shoes, and cleated shoes. You want to wear elbow and knee pads? Wear them.

Likewise, ride any kind of fat-tire you want, knowing that a custom fat-tire bike will ride with a grace and ease that might make you wonder why you didn't ride a custom fat-tire before. Which reminds me, I've got to call a loan officer . . . ○

UPFRONT

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