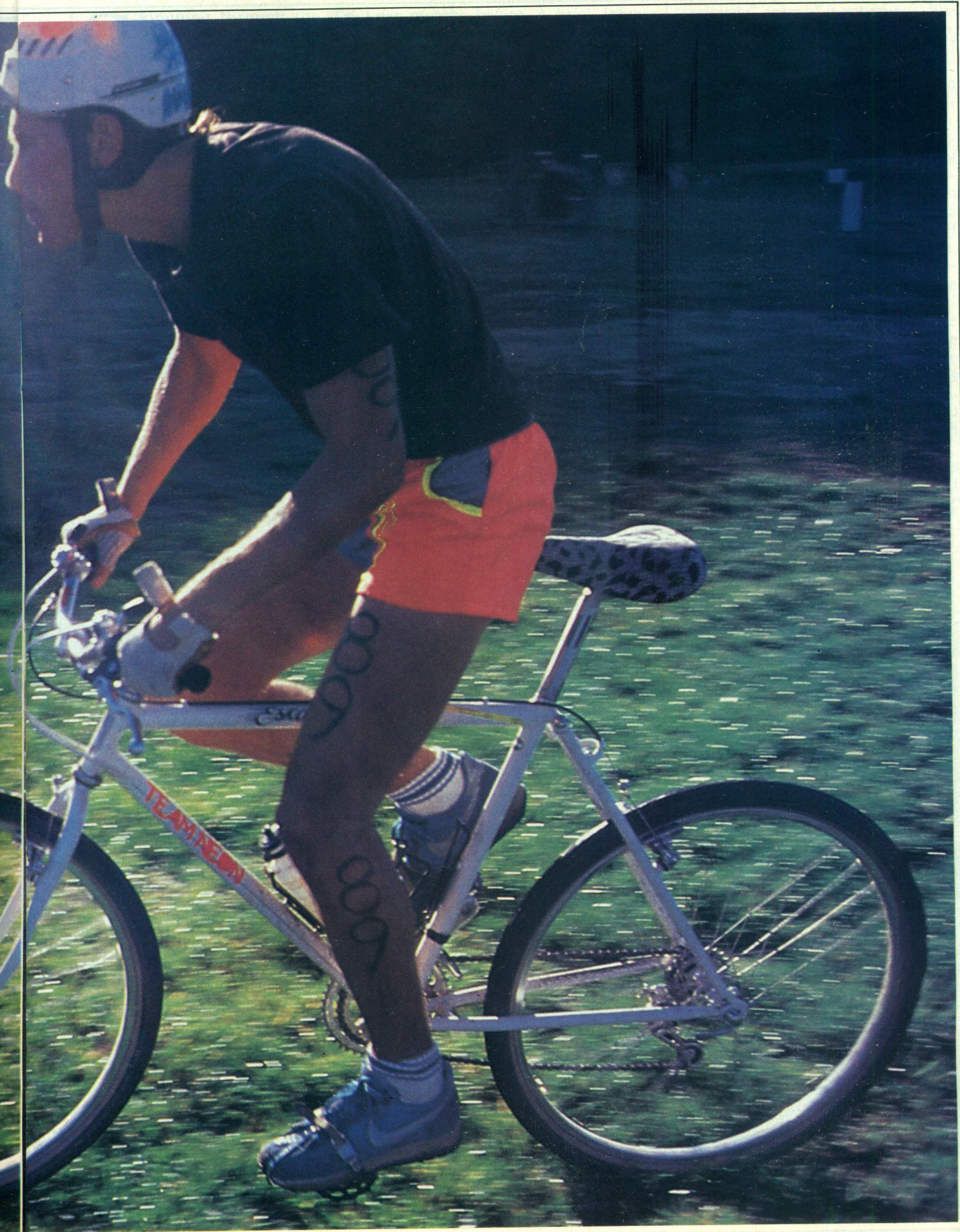


THE OFF-ROAD TRIATHLON

DOING IT IN THE DIRT

BY BOB COOPER

The very idea of transforming myself into a George Plimpton on fat tires was too appealing to reject.





ROGER ALLYN LEE

Skimming through the *Tri-Athlete* race calendar last spring, a fall event caught my eye. I was looking for any triathlon that I could handle without drowning. Like so many ectomorphic runners, I take to water like a cougar to scuba diving. Yet I was covering triathlons on a regular basis and felt fraudulent writing about a sport I had never experienced firsthand. One event promised to solve my dilemma — the swim distance was 175 yards. I promised myself that I would look into it later and mentally filed it under “Vague Possibilities.”

When Labor Day rolled around, I had refiled my prospects of doing a triathlon under “Some Day.” Then the phone rang.

“I want you to cover an off-road triathlon in Santa Rosa,” said my editor, affectionately known as Mr. K.

“Okay, what are the details?” I mumbled. After listening for a while, I realized that it was the same small-time race I had noticed in the calen-

dar months before. A brief, intense battle ensued between the left and right sides of my brain. The irrational side emerged victorious. “I’ll do it,” I told him.

“Okay, the article deadline will be...”

“No, I mean I’ll do the triathlon, and I’ll crank out a first-person piece.

“Are you kidding?” Mr. K. interjected. “Well, okay, but you will need a mountain bike. I’ll loan you mine. That, quite literally, set the wheels in motion. Never mind that I had been on a mountain bike only once before and have a phobia about leaning into curves. Here, at last, was a triathlon that I could complete. The very idea of transforming myself into a George Plimpton on fat tires, all practicalities aside, was too appealing to reject.

Mr. K. loaned me his bike a few days before the race. I got out for only one trial run, a joy ride over the rockiest, sandiest, narrowest trails I could find in San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park. Like my first foray on a 10-speed, the ride was delicious. Mountain biking is right up there with Frisbee on the beach and horseplay in the pool as an activity that instantly turns adults into kids. The very notion of taking mountain biking

“seriously” seemed incongruous, like eating Twinkies for nutritional value. But the race was approaching, so I tried my best to lean into the curves.

An even 100 starters gathered at a tiny swimming lagoon on the semi-rural edge of Santa Rosa, California. Santa Rosa is just above Marin County, the birthplace and heartland of mountain biking. There were probably more mountain bikers than triathletes there, an assessment given credence by the awkwardness of many during the swim. To be sure, this was no ordinary triathlon. Besides, the trifling distance of the swim, the ride was a nine-mile adventure over dusty dirt roads, and the run a six-miler on rocky trails. The second annual event was dubbed the Specialized Tri-Cross 4-Lungs. It is one of a handful of off-road triathlons, a phenomenon that is certain to grow as mountain biking continues its surge in popularity.

“The local Lung Association puts on two triathlons [the 800-participant

The short, 175-yard swim in the tiny lagoon was attractive to mountain bikers.

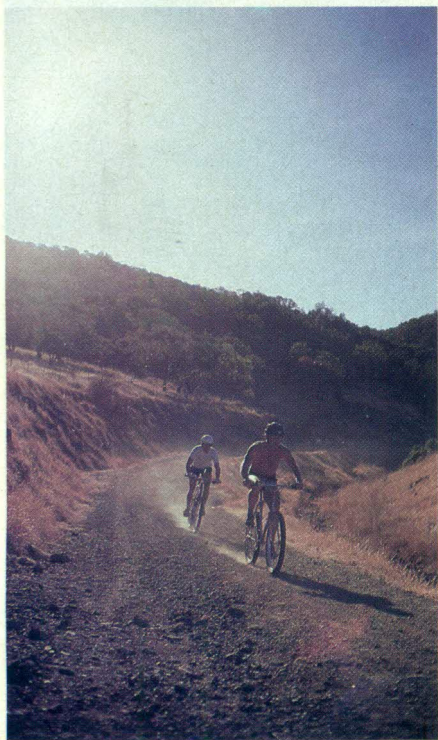
Catching a few rays during the transition.



Tin Man Triath-A-Lungs is the other] and four rock hoppers [mountain bike races of 15 to 36 miles], so we decided to offer a blend of the two," said race director Lynn Woznicki. "The swim is intentionally short enough to give mountain bikers a fighting chance. I imagine that there will be more of these events popping up as more promotional money flows out from mountain bike manufacturers. I noticed a lot more mountain bikes here this year, while last year it was mostly just adapted 10-speeds."

Since most of the contestants were inexperienced in the art of triathlon, a handful of veteran triathletes scrambled for the win, notably Reed Gregerson, the course record holder and a seasoned triathlete, and Julie Moss, who should require no introduction. Moss had gone after the top three places the morning before at the U.S.T.S. Bass Lake National Championship, but tire troubles had destroyed her hopes. Not one to have her weekend ruined so easily, she partied till midnight at Bass Lake and then drove all night to get here.

Mercifully, I got through the swim with a minimum of effort and no panic, thanks to the absurdly short distance and small field. The swim was so short that many simply wore cycling or running shorts rather than



**A nine-mile
adventure over dusty
dirt roads.**



swimsuits or tri-suits. I switched to the backstroke only once and actually crawl-stroked well enough to pass a few people after politely starting in the rear. I suppose I proved that swimming 175 yards does not require the massive pecs, smooth form or other traits that one connects with triathletes. But I still found myself behind 85 of the 100 participants, many of whom were also hacks in the water.

Jim Moyles is a prime example of how offbeat triathlons like this one tend to bring out folks who do not usually compete in triathlons. Like me, Jim is a runner. I'd known him from the ultra-marathon circuit for years, but seeing him here was a surprise. He adapted his old Peugeot to accommodate thick tires and came to have fun at his first triathlon. He was destined to come out of the lake dead last, relying on a medley of strokes. But he changed fast, beating me out of the transition, fared well on his wheels because of his background as a motorcycle dirt racer and was up in eighth place after a strong run. Not bad for a beginner.

My fortunes were a bit shakier. Unaccustomed to riding without toe clips, my right shoe slipped off the pedal coming off the first hill, and the crack spun around to clip me on the shin. I stung and looked down to see blood staining my sock. As we were not even onto the dirt yet, I wondered what misadventures lay ahead.

The first dirt hill climb was of the sort that make grown men weep. A gaggle of riders ahead of me dropped their gears to the bottom; good mountain bikes are equipped with gears so puny that you can pedal up a cliff. I activated my secret plan — dismounting and running up the steeper hills. It worked. I pushed my borrowed Mt. Fuji past a half-dozen riders. Then the hill mellowed out and I had to mount again or else throw away my gains. Unfortunately, that was the only steep climb worth deploying the strategy.

My success continued as we followed a 700-foot fire road ascent. Putting my running legs to good use (pedaling up a hill is much like running up one), I passed one triathlete after another. One encouraged: "Go for it, man." This was getting to be

fun. But halfway through the ride, the inevitable descent began — the whipped cream of the mountain biker's sundae. The same group I had just passed began returning the favor. I tasted dirt as crazed thrill seekers skidded around the hairpins, leaving amber clouds in their wake.

"Lean into it," I thought, but my survival instincts are strong. On downhill skis, I am a disaster. Here too. Then I remembered a friend's suggestion that I drag my feet for balance on the turns. Just as I prepared to try that for the first time, a wild-eyed maniac careened past on close terms and screamed, "Hey dude, don't drag your feet." I now realized that the advice was one good way to lose a foot in someone else's spokes.

Around the next curve, I spied a teenager who had taken it too tight on the inside. He pushed his bike up to the trail from two body lengths below in the bushes. Three round-house curves later, someone started passing me on the outside and didn't take the turn fast enough. I heard: "Sshhh." I was beginning to feel smug. I was moving up by forfeit, thanks to the zeal of my fellow competitors.

I dismounted and broke into the run in the middle of the pack. I felt like a newly freed slave, the way that all triathletes must feel when they shift to their respective specialties. Also like most novice triathletes, I initially broke into a near-sprint as the transition area adrenalin rush surged through my veins, but soon enough rubbery legs reminded me of the toll already taken, and I was forced to negotiate with the distance still ahead. I settled into a rhythm. The gaps were huge at first, but during the second mile I pushed it on the steep, rocky climb up North Burma Trail to overtake a dozen or more puffing triathletes at once.

Astonishingly, I wound up 20th in 1:14:14, just three minutes off Gregerson's old record. Of course, Gregerson improved his time by five minutes to win again, and Moss, the first woman and 14th overall, was also light years ahead of me. True, the race was clearly slanted toward the run and away from the swim, both to my advantage.

Finishers milled around a cluster of picnic tables, escorting their bikes like proud pet owners. Have you noticed how pets resemble their owners? Likewise, there were tall, lithe triathletes with tall, slender 10-speeds; short people with cycle-cross, Stingray-style miniatures; and

With his helmet perched in a rakish tilt, the author bounces merrily along.

medium-sized, stocky men with like-sized mountain bikes bearing such names as Trail Streak and Escape Goat.

"What a contrast from Bass Lake," Moss remarked. Competing on a Specialized Stumpjumper, she noted that it had been a while since she had ridden it. First out of the water, she dropped to 20th during the ride. "I got a little out of control a few times, so that scared me into being timid near the end. I knew I'd get a lot of them back on the run though." Indeed, her 37:00 run moved her back up six notches.

Moyles, the novice, and Gregerson, the veteran, both expressed incredulity over the daring of some of the young and restless mountain bikers they had encountered. "Some of these kids were passing me on the turns going sideways," Moyles gasped. "But I got them back on the run." Gregerson, after coming out of the lagoon just behind Moss, was beaten by only one biker, but soundly. "One guy on a cycle-cross bike went by me like I was standing still," he said, "and got about two minutes on me." Given Gregerson's running ability, it could have been a close race, but the phantom rider took a wrong turn early in the run, quit and disappeared with his hot bike before the race was over for most.

"The whole way you are out of control, but that's what makes it fun," Gregerson said of mountain biking. "I wish there were more triathlons that test different skills, like bike handling and trail running. They bring in a lot of people who would never do most triathlons. The shortness of the swim helps too. More people seem to be scared away by long swims than anything else." He didn't have to tell me.

Mountain biking, I found, can be a rough-and-tumble, crash-and-burn sport for those who take it "seriously." But it doesn't have to be. More often, it is child's play, and the mountain bike is both cheaper and less intimidating than the sleek, high-tech 10-speed. There are no good reasons why mountain biking and off-road triathlons won't flourish in the years ahead. As for my career as a triathlete, I just might start take swimming lessons. **T**

Julie Moss admitted that she got out of control a few times. She checks her leg wound after the race.



ROGER ALLYN LEE

