

PLANNING TO DETHRONE MOUNTAIN QUEEN

Several women racers have appeared on the mountain bike horizon to challenge the American champion Jackie Phelan.

by Jeremiah Kaplan

Until recently, the story of women in mountain bike racing has been the story of Jackie Phelan of Fairfax, California, who races for Charlie Cunningham, one of the top custom mountain bike builders. She has dominated women's mountain bike racing and seen little in the way of serious competition. The 1984 National Off Road Bicycle Racing Association (NORBA) championship, held in Colorado last September, was decided among just six women, most of whom were new to mountain bike racing.

This is not to say that 28-year-old Phelan has taken it easy. She is intensely competitive and outspoken. She revels in being unconventional, and her combination of caustic wit and drive to win, turns off some people. Lacking competition



from other women, she has worked at beating the men, and she succeeds against all but the best male riders.

In 1985, competition is likely to increase among the women. Cindy Whitehead and Marianne Martin are two strong road racers who will be giving chase to Phelan. Both began mountain bike racing at the tail end of the 1984 season. Carmen Carrouche, Paula Nara and Casey Patterson, some of the other top women off-road bicycle racers, are also training seriously for 1985.

Abundant sponsorship in this wide-open area of bicycle racing is one reason women's mountain bike racing is growing in popularity. Another is the potential for a strong woman to become competitive within a year. But what is there about mountain biking that could lure some of the world's fastest women off the asphalt and into the hills?

Almost everyone interested in bicycle racing knows that Marianne Martin won

the women's Tour de France in 1984, but few people know what motivates her. It's the same reason she is getting into mountain bike racing. She races for the fun of it.

"Like a potter, my attitude is what can I do with this piece of clay, rather than comparing the finished product with other pots," explained the slim, red-haired 27-year-old. "When I started racing, I was way behind everybody else, but in each race I could feel myself improving. I'd feel some of my weaknesses. The next race — to go out and overcome them — that's

An adventurous Marianne Martin (left) is out to challenge the chief 'turkey' of women's mountain bike racing, Jackie Phelan (below).

Jeremiah Kaplan - Gordon Bainbridge



winning. That's the joy of racing."

And that same joy is what attracts Martin to mountain bike racing. Bill Woodull, who manages the Specialized team, approached her in March 1984 about racing with Specialized. She watched a few races and decided she would rather ride in the mountains for fun than competitively. At one race she rode a Fisher bike. Gary Fisher talked her into racing. "I agreed because I love his bikes," she said. Gary Fisher will be coaching her on her off-road technique.

Mountain bike racing is much more technical than road racing, in a way that Martin feels could improve her road racing.

"There's always room for improvement but I think I'm pretty good at climbing," she said, characteristically understating what she is best at. She won the Tour de France based on her hill-climbing ability. "I've got to learn how to descend. Descending was a weakness in the Tour de France. European descents are different from those here. They're steep gravelly roads with a lot of switchbacks. Real hairy. Going downhill is something I want to work on in mountain biking and on my road bike."

In general, the male racers go downhill faster than the women, though this is likely a matter of experience. The men develop their skills with a certain suicidal adolescent spirit, and many have been at it for over a decade. The insane crazies who are willing to risk their lives go down faster, if they don't crash. The women have not had the same opportunity to hone their downhill techniques.

"The hot men are faster than me going down," said Cindy Whitehead, who races for the Ross team, "though I'm best at descents. I love it. I just let go and do it. It's a thrill-seeker's sport. There is nothing comparable in road racing."

Whitehead, aged 23, is a solidly-built, blonde-haired woman with eyes that light up when she talks about the thrill of descending or when she considers the competition she will face in the 1985 race season. She placed in the top 20 at the US Olympic road racing trials in 1984, in spite of a not-yet-healed broken collar bone.

She is also strong on the uphills. She kept up with Martin on the climb in the criterium race at the NORBA championship, and then beat her on the difficult downhill section. Whitehead used to be a ski racer and wanted to go into outdoor education before she was recruited into road racing by the University of California at Santa Barbara bicycle club.

"I rode in a double metric century, a 200 kilometer ride, with the bike club. The route went over two mountain passes. It wasn't a race but I finished first of all the women.

"The next year I was in ten races," she said with a grin. "I won them all except one."

Paula Nara, aged 29, is a graduate student in agricultural economics at the University of California at Davis. She raced throughout the 1984 season, though her studies demanded a lot of her attention in the fall, keeping her from racing in the NORBA championship.

Like most of the women racers, she rides regularly with a group of male friends who are into mountain biking.

"If you're a woman and you're in the back, the men are impatient. The reason I started racing is finally one day I went faster than everybody else," she explained. "I went faster on the uphill and I went faster on the downhill and I smoked them on the flats. And they gave me so much s—. They didn't want to ride with me anymore. Sometimes I get fed up with the guys I ride with, so I decided I'd learn more if I raced."

Nara is very competitive, and she approaches bike riding and graduate school with the same intense energy. This year she expects to find the balance between the two to continue to be a top competitor.

"I was such a belligerent kid. I harrassed people so much." She thinks she has as good a chance as anyone of harrassing Jackie Phelan this season.

Carmen Carrouche, aged 28, is dedicated to people, teaching biofeedback and working in drug rehabilitation. And she is dedicated to mountain bike racing.

"I ride a ten speed to work 16 miles every day," she said, "and then up over

the hills behind where I work to home. There are lots of good training rides around where I live in Arcadia, California, and I do them a couple times a week. On the weekends I ride my mountain bike."

Carrouche was a swimmer in college. She was also a runner for six years, and used to compete in judo. In 1978 she was fourth in the national collegiate judo competition.

Naran, Casey Patterson and Phelan have all beaten Carrouche on occasion, but she knows where her weaknesses are and she is working on improving.

"I was a coward on the downhills. I'd hammer on the uphills and then be on my brakes on the way down. I think we all have the potential to beat Jackie. We haven't been in the sport as long as her. I caught her two miles before the finish in last season's nationals. Jackie has a lot of finesse and expertise."

Casey Patterson is one of the oldest mountain bike racers, and the only racer

Veteran racer Casey Patterson is determined to surprise her younger rivals in 1985.

Jeremiah Kaplan



in the same class as her son. At age 40, she's almost twice as old as some of her competitors, though this petite blonde could pass for 30. She became involved in mountain biking through her son, who is one of the faster men in the sport. But she is just as serious about training and racing as the younger women.

She runs a wilderness bike touring business, leading trips of up to a week in the mountains in California, which makes it difficult for her to train in the summertime. She became very discouraged after her poor showing at the National Championships in Colorado in 1984.

"I got pretty bummed out," she said. "Gonna quit racing, I always come in last, I said to myself. But when I got back into riding locally I found I was a lot stronger than before the week in Colorado. And then I raced here in California and I managed to beat Carmen once. An occasional victory and I'm a new woman."

This will be Patterson's third year of racing. She did better in her first season, when there were very few women competing, than in her second, even though she is technically quite skilled. She exhibits a high level of finesse picking her way among rocks and ruts on steep up-hills. As the competition got stiffer, she found it easy to blame her lack of success on everyone else being so much younger.

"But no more excuses. This woman is going to train!" she stated.

All of these women are trying to put together the right combination of technical skill and strength to beat Jackie Phelan. They all have a shot at it but it will not be easy. "All I do is ride and eat," Phelan says. "If anybody could immitate that regimen they'd probably thrash me."

Within what might be a cut-throath competitive scene is a strong feeling of sisterhood. They are drawn into mountain bike racing by a common sense of adventure and love of the outdoors, as well as by a common desire to do something out of the ordinary. The women racers mostly know each other, though few of them live near enough to any others to regularly ride with each other.

"There aren't all that many uppity women in a certain population, so the only time we ever get together is for racing," Phelan explained. "That's one great inspiration for racing, because you see your friends there. It's pretty friendly, although a lot of times I find myself sniping at somebody. You put on a certain persona for a race, and then afterwards it's all buddy-buddy again."

Phelan, more than any other individual, has been active in bringing more women into mountain bike racing. "I tell all the girls I know that they've got to try it, but none of them has beaten me yet. I'll kick myself when somebody does." ■