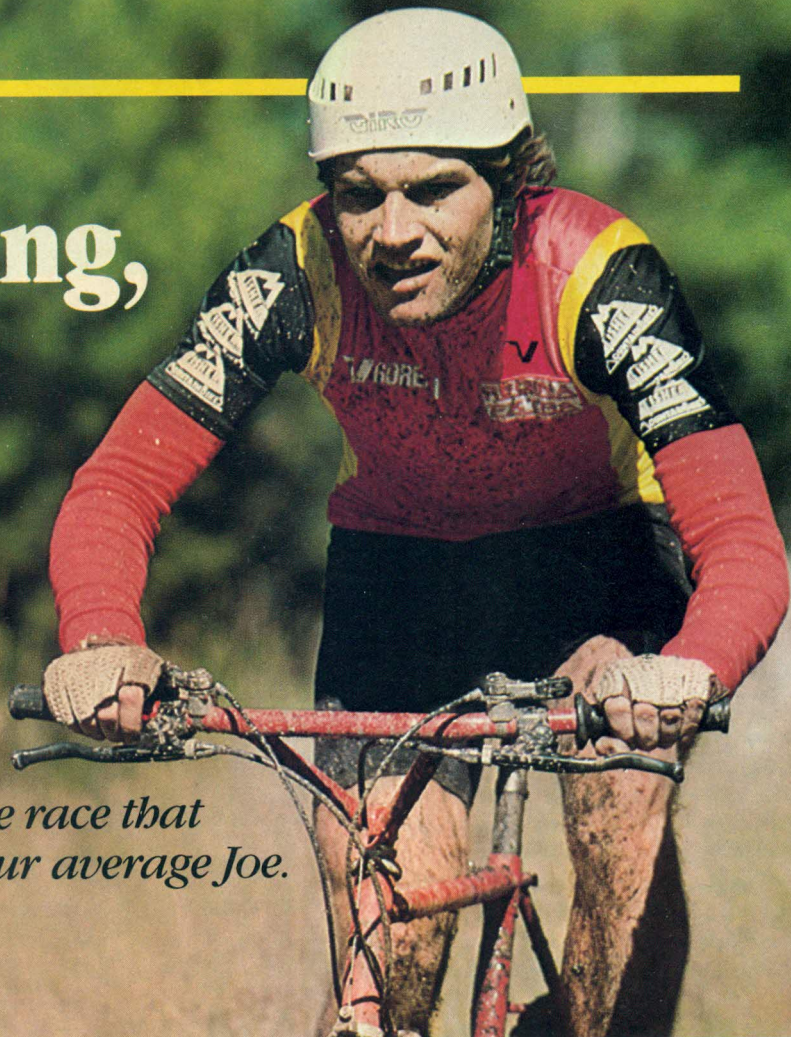


Mud Slinging, Mountain Style

Only 22 of 60 finished the race that proved Murray is not your average Joe.

By Charles R. Kelly



It was two days before the National Off-Road Bicycle Association's national championship race, and the second-guessers were having a field day. Because last year's December Nationals in Santa Barbara, California, had been rained into submission (three laps completed of five scheduled), NORBA honcho Glenn Odell had moved the date up several months, to September 30. But in selecting the site of Lake Eldora ski area near Boulder, Colorado, he had also moved the elevation up 8,000 feet, and as the snow piled up on the Friday before the Sunday race, pessimists pointed out that the average date for first snow in Denver, 3,000 feet lower, is October 9. At the last minute another disaster seemed to be shaping up, and Odell was sweating Edsels.

The sky responded to fervent prayers, however, and Saturday dawned clear and sunny, although six inches of new snow lay on the ground. Warm would have been too much to ask for.

The championship race was actually two races, one for fun and one for money. The fun race was Saturday's "qualifier" heat, three laps of the 4.5-mile course which had been scheduled in order to cut the field for the championship to 100. Since only 60 or so showed up to qualify, there wasn't much point in using the race to eliminate anyone, but it was run anyway because it says so right here on the schedule. The qualifier results were to be used to select starting position, a civilized aspect of the Nationals that will appall road race promoters. Fringe benefits of the few practice laps were that riders became marginally familiar with the indifferently marked course, which was laid out on a series of winding cross-country ski trails, and that most of the snow on the trail was melted to begin the process of turning the trail into goo. Some riders took the warmup seriously and actually tried to win it, but at least one pair stopped at the finish line after two laps and waited to see the leaders

finish before riding their last lap.

After the "race," riders swapped stories of the obstacles they had hit that were covered with snow. Some had taken spectacular crashes, but with nothing at stake except starting positions, and with plenty of soft snow to land in, these were only the basis for a number of anecdotes that all started with, "You should have seen this one I took . . ."

By Sunday morning the weather had warmed up, and was actually perfect for a bike race. Although snow still lay in shaded areas among the trees, it had melted completely off the trail. A few boggy spots and a little more water in the stream crossings were all that remained of the storm only two days before.

The day's action began with a one-lap "Citizen's Race/Rally" for NORBA non-members, and a bicycle "trials" demonstration. Trials is a test of cycling skill rather than stamina on a short but tricky course, with riders scored not on speed, but on whether or not they can ride each

section of perhaps 50 feet without putting a foot on the ground. Adherents of this form of competition would like to see it on the NORBA national championship next year. Just an example of trials skill: Rich Cast, a Southern California rider who was clearly the best of the trials riders, can easily ride his bicycle over a picnic table (either way: end to end or over the benches). Even after seeing it, most people will still argue that this stunt is impossible.

As the sun passed the meridian, riders began preparing for the year's biggest showdown. The course that had been laid out would be an excellent test of mountain bike ability, and roadies-turned-mountain-bikers would not be able to do well merely on the basis of superior oxygen uptake. Except for about 100 yards across the parking lot, the course was all on rough and narrow trails or unmaintained four-wheel-drive roads that demanded the utmost in concentration and handling ability, and offered no chance for the riders to relax, even on the downhills. Passing zones were limited, and this made for some fast action when downhill experts overtook slower riders. Although not a super hilly course by mountain bike race standards, each lap would involve about 480 feet of climbing and dropping.

Although there were only 60 riders in attendance, they represented the best

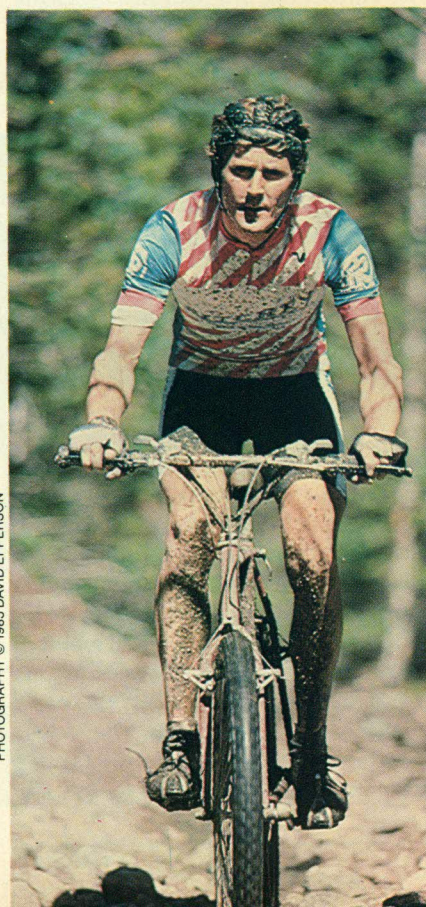


mountain bikers in the U.S. as well as the Canadian off-road champion. Teams on hand included the powerful Fisher crew, Team Stumpjumper, the Ross Indians, Ritchey U.S.A., Schwinn, Suntour/WTB, Mantis, and Levis/Raleigh.

Joe Murray of team Fisher had to be respected as the favorite; he had a miracle season in 1984 with 15 wins, including seven in a row at one point. Joe is a super preparer (he has been called the "Homework Kid"), who always checks out the course before a race, and in this case his preparation had included arriving in the mountains a month early (aren't sponsors wonderful?). He seldom has mechanical problems, and his sense of pacing and the

timing of his attack have been instinctive to the point of being flawless; his attacks nearly always work because they come at the right time.

Chief among the challengers was Ned Overend of Durango, Colorado, who had picked up a few trophies including the Pacific States Series championship and a win in the Crested Butte Stage Race the week before (Murray had retired from the latter event with a shredded tire.) Don Cook of Crested Butte, riding for Ross, had been ahead of Murray in a race two weeks before until he flatted close to



Rough terrain made this year's NORBA Championship course a technical one. The pure mountain bikers, led by Joe Murray (opposite), put away the roadies like Dale Statina (far left) and Steve Tiltford (right). Statina was as high as second on the last lap, but two flats put him out of contention.



the finish, so he was a definite contender. Riding for Suntour/WTB was Don's brother Steve, one of the best off-roaders in Colorado, but he had separated a shoulder in a race two weeks earlier. Steve had trained in the interim by riding the back of a tandem, but his arm had been in a sling right up until race time, and although he would start, no one expected him to fly on one wing.

Among the "converted roadies" in the race were a couple of big names from the Coors Classic, 1983 winner Dale Stetina, riding for Ritchey U.S.A., and Levis/Raleigh ace Andy Hampsten, who finished second at the Coors in 1984. Also riding for Levis/Raleigh was Steve Tilford, last year's NORBA champ and 1983 national cyclo-cross champ. Stump-jumper rider Gavin Chilcott had raced on an Italian professional team, and his teammate Laurence Malone was five times national cyclocross champion. Joe Murray's Fisher teammate John Loomis was third in the 1983 abbreviated nationals, and could not be discounted.

In the women's race Jacquie Phelan

was riding for her second national title and did not expect to be seriously challenged, although for the first time in her racing career she had lost an event, finishing second on hillclimb and third in downhill the week before in Crested Butte (she still won the overall in the stage race). Carmen Carrouche of Ross would be her only serious challenge in this race, which for women was four laps, or about 18 miles.

With the competitors lined up in order of qualifying times, 12 rows of five riders each, the start was more orderly than most bike race starts. For about two seconds. The short distance across the parking lot was the last chance riders would see for some time to pass freely, and the mob widened to fill the lot as riders tried their best holeshots. Just as abruptly, the parking lot ended, and with a gnashing of teeth, a crashing of gears, and many muttered curses, the pack funneled onto the trail, the following riders trusting instinct to keep them from hitting obstacles in the dust-obscured path.

Those lucky enough and aggressive

enough to find themselves on the trail first pressed the advantage they had scored by being ahead of the bottleneck, and these included Andy Hampsten, who surged into the lead immediately. On the back stretch of the first lap Hampsten was putting together a good lead, and he looked fresh. Behind him was Don Cook and then a group that included Murray and Overend, but at the finish of the first lap Hampsten had stretched his advantage to nearly two minutes while everyone behind him was gasping on the climbs.

Mountain bike races are not like road races, and as talented as Hampsten is on the road, his instincts failed him here. Murray didn't win 15 races accidentally; he won them because he knows how to pace himself. Joe never goes for the front from the gun, he just makes sure whoever is leading is catchable, and the rare few who have had the pleasure of leading him in a race will all say that he is hard to drop on the climbs. The rough trail is more taxing than many riders realize, and it will always take its toll; in this

"Bicycle trials" (left) is a test of handling skill, with points lost for tapping down a foot, hand or face. But in the NORBA finals, strength and stamina counted too; although Schwinn's Ned Overend (below) won the Pacific States Series and the Crested Butte stage race in his first year of racing, this time he couldn't catch Murray. For Smokin' Joe and women's champ Jacquie Phelan, the thrill of victory included a champagne shower (right).

case it beat Hampsten, or perhaps he blew up. In any case, after Murray passed him on the third lap, Hampsten rode mechanically and looked completely exhausted by the finish, having slid from the lead to seventh place.

As hard as Murray is to drop, he is even harder to catch once he has the lead late in a race. Murray held his lead, stretching it to over two minutes, and made it look easy. His effortless style on the rough "single-track" trail stood out in contrast to other riders who not only went slower on the descents, but used more energy in doing so.

Behind Murray it appeared that the only race was for second place. After a slow start, Dale Stetina had moved up a dozen places and was riding in second place as he started the last lap. Two and a half minutes down to Murray, he thought he might be able to close that gap too, but as soon as he hit the first climb of the last lap, he knew it wouldn't happen. A flat tire, a repair, and another flat cost him any chance he had, and pushed him back to eighth place.

Only a few seconds behind Stetina, Ned Overend took up the chase for Mur-



RESULTS, N.O.R.B.A. NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP RACE, LAKE ELDORA, COLORADO

1. Joe Murray	(Fisher)	2:43:56 1st Pro
2. Ned Overend	(Schwinn)	2:47:32
3. John Loomis	(Fisher)	2:49:24
4. Kent Eriksen	(Moots)	2:51:10
5. Don Cook	(Ross)	2:57:02
6. Aaron Cox	(Ross)	2:58:07
7. Andy Hampsten	(Levis/Raleigh)	2:58:08
8. Dale Stetina	(Ritchey)	3:01:30
9. Ky Sharp	(Mantis)	3:04:33
10. Charlie Cunningham	(Suntour/WTB)	3:04:50 1st Veteran
11. Jeff Norman		3:06:35 1st Expert
12. Greg Dres	(Moto-cruiser)	3:06:53 1st Iron Man
13. Don Davis	(Ross)	3:07:46
14. John Durst	(Mantis)	3:09:02
15. Joe Sloup	(Mantis)	3:11:23

Women's Results (four laps)

1. Jacquie Phelan	(Suntour/WTB)	2:25:18
2. Carmen Carrouche	(Ross)	2:29:06
3. Carol Bauer	(Paradise)	2:45:03

ray, but settled for second three minutes back. John Loomis picked up his second third place in as many national championships. Bike builder Kent Eriksen showed that he can ride them as well as build them, taking fourth, and Don Cook showed Ross that he was a good investment by picking up fifth. Hampsten gave up one more place to hard-charging Ross rider Aaron Cox, who nipped him at the line for sixth.

In the women's race Jacquie Phelan gave herself a scare by taking a wrong turn while leading handily and nearly getting caught as a result of the time lost in getting back on course. Entering the last lap, she had Carmen Carrouche only 30 seconds back, and not knowing that this was mostly the result of Phelan's getting lost, the crowd sensed an upset in the making. Phelan had plenty of gas left in her tank, however, and when she found Carrouche so close behind her she

turned on the afterburners and gave herself a four minute cushion at the tape.

In the other categories contested at the nationals, Charlie Cunningham (Ms. Phelan's Significant Other) rode his aluminum bike to 10th overall or first place Veteran, his first stars-and-stripes jersey but possibly not his last, while Jeff Norman took the Expert (un-sponsored) crown in 11th. Greg Dres motored home in 12th place to win the "Iron Man" award for the first finisher on a one-speed. For his effort Joe Murray took home \$500, while Phelan collected \$200. The severity of the contest is illustrated by this statistic: of the 60 riders who started, only 22 finished.

With the race a success, NORBA has legitimized off-road racing, and the national championship seems firmly rooted after two years. World championships are probably another two years away. ■

