

## The First Time

### *Mud, Sweat, and Gears*

By Peter Leeds

• It was my first cyclocross race. I'd cleared the first barrier, a six-inch-high railroad tie, with ease. I expected to do the same with the second one I was now approaching, since I'd had heavy traffic for the first one and now, 500 meters into the race, the field had spread itself. I'd settled in comfortably, neither impeded nor distracted by other riders—secure in last place.

My first dismount had been precision perfect, much better than the three or four times I'd practiced it before the race. As I'd been instructed (but had never quite done until being laid on the starting line), I'd swung my right leg gracefully over the top tube and put it between the other leg and the frame. Two strides from the barrier, I'd pushed the right leg forward, yanked the left from the toe clip, landed neatly on the run and simultaneously jerked the bike over my shoulder while nimbly hopping the railroad tie. Then with right hand on the top tube and left on the handlebars, I jolted the bike to the ground while still on the run, and leaped neatly onto the saddle.

I repeated the steps perfectly over the second barrier, but, inspired by my earlier success or fresh adrenalin flow, this time, instead of leaping onto the bike, I hurled myself right over it. I heard several cries of oh-my-look-what-Peter-did-is-he-alright; if grace was remotely retrievable, I found it and remounted my bike from the other side. I was laughing, the same way I might at a depressing Vonnegut joke; I felt no physical pain at the moment, but knew well the aches would attack in my sleep and haunt my waking hours the next few days. I did look on the bright side—I'd landed in grass; mud would have been softer, but a lot messier.

So my first 'cross race went. Three more times I leaped the bike, though I never suffered the indignity of an "endo" in the sand or the loss of ei-

ther shoe in either ankle-deep mudhole. On the other hand, my style improved throughout the race: by the final lap, I was no longer leaping the bike; in fact, I was barely lifting one leg over it for the remount. When it was over, I had slogged my way past (or survived longer than) half of the starting 23.

Midway through that race, clarity of mind returned. I recalled the incidents which led me to join the ranks of the fabled mudmen of autumnal cycling lore. In the fall of 1983, my friend Ron Manizza, owner of Rainbow Cycle Sport in Willimantic, introduced cyclocross to Connecticut by hosting two races, including a State Championship, at nearby Mansfield Hollow State Park. I helped him stage the races and made a vapid promise to do a 'cross race the next year, of course expecting some cataclysm to intervene. Even when Ron unveiled plans in the summer of 1984 to host four races, including again the State Championship, my meeting with cyclocross remained vague and distant.

Still, something primal and wrenching about cyclocross had always intimidated but attracted me. Neither my first mile-and-a-half ocean swim, nor my first hundred-mile ride, nor my first Cat Four criterium, nor training for nor doing a marathon inspired the tension that cyclocross did. Yet this sport seemed perfect for me: some running, some rugged riding, cramping conversions from one mode of motion to the next, spinning sand in the teeth. It was a few guys out to grind and get grimy, not worried about keeping pink skinsuits spotless or custom frames waxed and shiny. To ride cyclocross, a person has to like getting dirty. This sport requires baptism, not by fire or water, but by mud, and that was the one part that *didn't* worry me.

So in late autumn of 1984, when I



understood the eastern seaboard wasn't going to sink into the sea and that Ron wasn't moving to New Jersey, I knew my fate was inevitable. I thought of my road bike, my only bike, fondly, and considered buying a used steel bike from The Salvation Army and having it cheaply converted. I weighed my chances for any kind of success and opted to have my 22-pound Peugeot low-g geared and knobby-tired. A study in optimism, I also figured that if I trashed my bike, I'd have the excuse to buy the new one that I really didn't think I needed but could easily talk myself into getting.

I then trained for the race with the same discipline that I apply to all my athletic pursuits: half-fast. I continued running the scanty 30 miles a week I use to maintain fitness when light is too dim or days too cold for serious riding. I met Ron for some near-dark coaching. I watched him ride headlong into a log, dismount neatly, and



remount flawlessly; I watched him again and again, listened intently as he told me what to do with my hands and feet, then watched him again.

By then, it was dark, so I invited him over for Watneys and nachos and mentally planned how I would leap a barrier. Several nights later, by the light of a full moon, I performed three or four dismounts and mounts, though not over barriers. Then, because the race was less than a week away, I applied the same methods which I as a track coach require of fatigued pole vaulters before a season-end championship meet: I ordered myself to taper, knowing that further practice, far from benefiting, could actually tire me for the Big Event.

Thus, I had entered my first cyclocross race well-rested, untested, childishly anticipatory, and scared. I finished that race, all 54 minutes of it, as a converted mudman with fresh personal insights.

I knew immediately that the race wasn't the most difficult thing I'd ever done: surviving my first 23 years of adolescence was tougher, and so was the six months I'd driven a school van around New York City, and so was surviving a punk rock band at 1:00 a.m. The 54 minutes of effort didn't even rank as the most difficult athletic event of my life; my first marathon was rougher, and so was a 24-hour relay. Running mile repeats every hour around the clock and the triathlon that took eight hours to finish were harder.

So what if I had pains where I didn't know there were muscles? So what if the mud my wife thought I didn't wash off my legs was really black-and-blue? So what if I had to taper another whole week to prepare myself (doing mental and nutritional homework) for the second race in the series? So what if, as I noticed later while doodling with words in my journal, I realized that a mudman is only a vowel away from being a madman?

Weeks later, the series over and mental and physical bruises all mended, I asked Ron how many races he'd host in 1985. I also wondered out loud if this time I'd practice like mad. ■

