

PROFESSIONAL OFF-ROAD RACING: NOW OR NEVER!

by Charles R. Kelly



Professional road racing has been largely stagnant in the United States since the days of the six-day races, and the small band of American professional road racers still turns to Europe to make big dollars. To date, all attempts to introduce European-style professional racing have met with limited success at best.

Although most road cyclists regard it as child's play, BMX racing supports hundreds of pro riders making respectable salaries and racing as many as 30 weekends a year. Now along comes off-road bicycle racing, which seems to combine elements of both these sports, and which has a small class of professional riders, with half a dozen teams at various stages of support and organization. But will it become a real professional sport, capable of supporting hundreds of top riders?

Many riders are attracted to the off-road sport because the money prizes are there, and a rider whose ambitions do not require amateur status can do well. Most races are sanctioned by the National Off-Road Bicycle Association, which has a much more relaxed attitude toward money prizes, and does not insist that the sponsor remits a percentage to the league, as does the USCF.

The 1984 national off-road champion and winner of 17 races during the season, Joe Murray of team Fisher, is a good example of the current state of the professional off-roader. Joe's winnings ran to about \$3500, including only \$500 for the national championship race, and his sponsor picked up most of his major expenses. (These expenses included two months training in Colorado before the nationals.) Joe estimates that five or six riders did equally well, all riders whose factory teams are willing to pick up the expenses required to compete in races all over the country. At best, this is a gypsy living; if the sport grows it will have to support riders with decent incomes comparable to other professional sports.

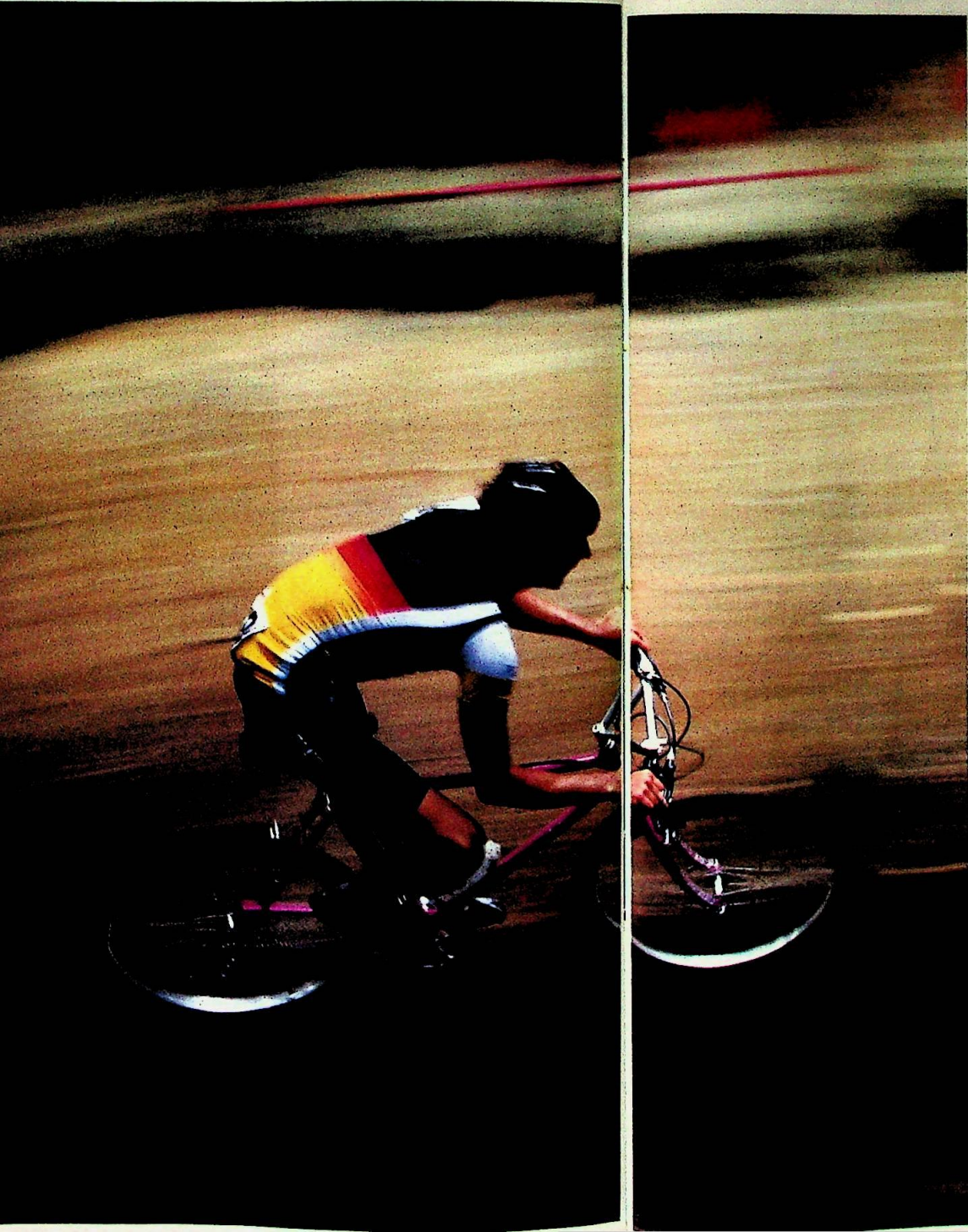
Off-road racing is only a couple of years old now, with the national sanctioning body just past its second birthday. One of the most visible teams during that period has been the Ross Indians, the first collection of uniformed and organized riders to make the rounds of the infant racing circuit. The manager and organizer of the Ross team, John Kirkpatrick, has some definite views on the level of pro racing as it exists.

Kirkpatrick's attitude might be described as "cautious optimism." For the sport to be a viable professional one, it will need to support from 100 to 200 riders, he says, but the way it is currently being handled, it is not promoted and organized well enough to do that. The main problem pro racing faces, he feels, is that the creative and organizational levels of those handling events and promotions has not lived up to the potential of the sport. He feels that the riders and the subculture associated with off-road riding is a marketable commodity which will either catch on very soon or wither away slowly. Since the widest and quickest exposure to the market would be through televised events, he feels that this avenue should be investigated by someone with a real package that the networks can understand, but one that does not shortchange the riders for the convenience of coverage. Kirkpatrick estimates that it will require from \$20 million to \$30 million spent on the professional circuit to support enough riders to make the sport viable, and he doesn't think that this figure can be approached unless television is involved.

Concerning Ross Bicycles' plans, Kirkpatrick said that the team will be back in 1985. In their first year, the Indians had a number of wins, but in 1984 the top spots eluded them as the competition became markedly tougher and the talent was spread over more teams. In the latter part of the season, Ross signed on two new riders, Don Cook and Aaron Cox, and these two rewarded their sponsor with the Indian's best placings at the nationals: fifth and sixth.

Bill Woodul is well known for his technical support at the Coors Classic. Among his many duties, he is also the manager of Specialized Team Stumpjumper, which features names familiar to many road cyclists, including five-time national cyclo-cross champion Laurence Malone and Gavin Chilcott, who raced professionally in Italy for one season. Team Stumpjumper was remarkably consistent over the season.

Woodul confesses that when he took on the task, prospects looked disappointing. The schedule he saw in January 1984 had only a dozen or so races, but as the season went on, it expanded to the point at which even a well-financed team couldn't get to all of the races. He feels that there are some areas in which it will be hard to sell off-road racing, and it will pay promoters to confine their attention to those parts of the country where it will be popular. As an example of a place where it might not be marketable, he



mentioned the Deep South, because "It's just too darn hot and flat."

As a team sponsor, Woodul realizes that the effectiveness of any advertising is measured in "cost-per-impression (CPI)," or how much it costs to expose the product to a single consumer. By getting the team to races, Woodul figures his CPI to be in the neighborhood of one dollar, as the team is exposed to the immediate spectators and local media. If television coverage is added, the CPI goes down to a fraction of a cent, which makes it much more attractive to sponsors.

The Gant Challenge series produced more exposure for the sport than any previous event, because the various regional events were designed to attract riders with no previous experience. These riders became spectators at the pro events, where crowds numbered up to 1,000, which was a big increase on previous levels.

In order to win an overall title in the Gant Series, a rider had to attend as many of the widely spaced events as possible, with stops at New York, Chicago, Minneapolis, Golden (CO), Los Angeles, Miami and Seattle. Anyone who tried to keep up with that schedule on the basis of possible prize money would end up seriously in debt halfway through the season without factory support. Only a supported pro had any chance to win the Gant, therefore the event was a promotional plus for the sport. Unfortunately, while the media aspects of the promotion were carried out brilliantly, the logistics at the race sites often broke down. While problems from one race to the next can be attributed to the fact that each local event was put on by a different local promoter, when the same problems crop up from race to race in a long series, something is wrong.

Such sloppy promotion — which included running far behind schedule and the abuse of the simple NORBA sanction rules — is not an indication of the professional level one has a right to expect in a money sport, and this underscores Kirkpatrick's contention that the sport has yet to reach the point from which it can expand.

It will be a couple of years before the future of the sport is secure, but there are several positive signs. Like tennis and unlike football or baseball, off-road racing is a sport which includes far more amateurs than professionals, and it will be the support of these participatory spectators that makes it or breaks it. With sales of off-road bikes growing faster than any other part of the bicycle market, there is a solid base of interest. It is up to organizers and promoters to present off-road racing to the public in a manner that will keep the interest growing. ■