


**Bikers and spectators alike doubted Joe Murray's ability to win the national fat-tire bicycle championship. He quietly set out to prove them wrong.**

# FAT CHANGE

**Story by Ron King**

**Photography by Wade McKoy**

 It has rained for two days straight. A thick fog hovers at 11,000 feet; below, the mud is ankle-deep in places. Suddenly a young man on a bicycle shoots out of a stand of aspens near the top of the mountain. He pedals intensely toward eight spectators who are watching from an open area about halfway down the slope.

"Whoooooaaaa! He's bookin'!" says one onlooker who had pedaled down the mountain earlier in the day. He wears a black stripe of mud down his back as proof.

"Heeyyyyyy. Check it out!" adds his mud-streaked companion.

The bicyclist they're watching is riding in a race against 42 competitors. But he is far ahead of most of them, riding alone on a ski trail near the town of Crested Butte, in south central Colorado. It's a dreary September day, and the steep ski run is snowless, muddy, and cluttered with stones the size of bowling balls.

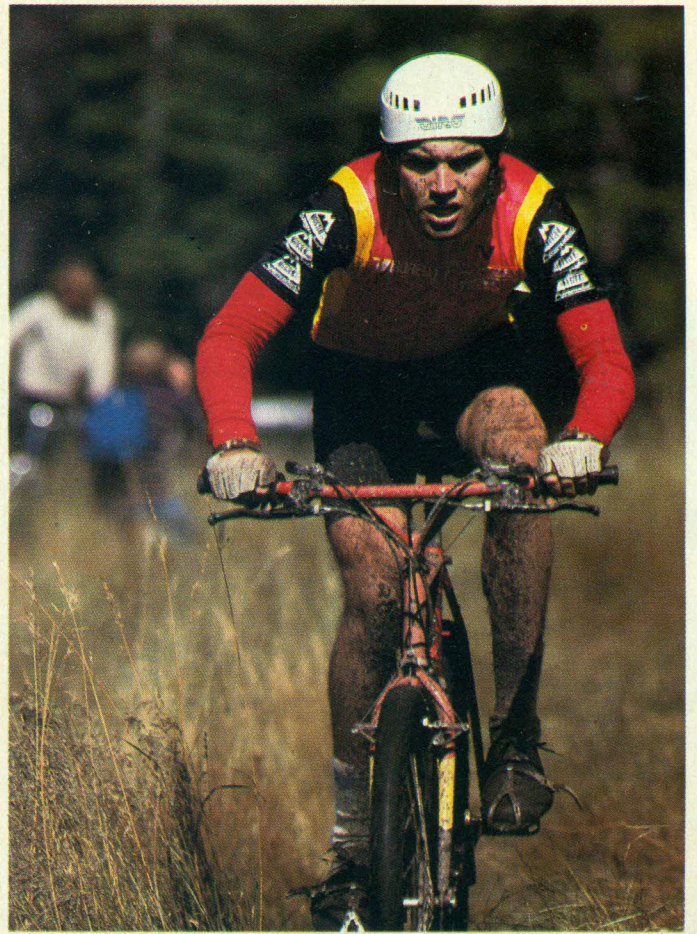
The bicyclist negotiates the trail on a fat-tire, or mountain, bicycle. It has motorcycle-style handlebars, manual brakes, and fat, knobby tires built to handle rough terrain. The rider wrestles the bike over huge rocks and splashes







*Long before he considered becoming a bicycle racer, Joe Murray spent many hours riding his fat-tire bike in the mountains for the sheer fun of it. The experience paid off by giving him the handling skills needed to negotiate racecourse impediments such as mud (at right). The national fat-tire bicycle championship drew the nation's best racers to the Eldora Ski Area in the mountains of Colorado (below).*



through puddles, somehow managing to keep both feet on the pedals and to hold the handlebars steady. He rockets down the mountain with the finesse of an Olympic skier in a tuck position. Soon the onlookers can hear the whirring of his tires as he spins across patches of mud. The sound becomes louder as he heads straight for them. They're cheering like maniacs. No one budges.

"Get it on!" one shouts.

"Way to tough it out!" yells another.

When he is 15 yards away, the cyclist turns his shoulders, leans slightly to the left, and steers his bicycle smoothly through the turn—barely missing the group a few feet away. The eight survivors express their admiration by howling like wolves: "Aaarrrooooo..."

The recipient of their esteem is Joe Murray, an unusually graceful rider in a tough new sport known as fat-tire, or off-road, bicycle racing. Murray has been drawing a lot of such notice lately.

Less than two years ago, he began racing fat-tire bikes as an unknown competitor—a shy 19-year-old from Fairfax, California. Today he rides on a team sponsored by Fisher Mountain Bikes, a maker of fat-tire bicycles, as possibly the sport's hottest racer. With 14 wins to his credit this season, including some against former national road-bicycling champions, Murray has a shot at winning the national championship next week at the Eldora Ski Area near Boulder, Colorado.



Right now, though, Murray is running low on luck. Competing in an annual series of races known as Crested Butte's Fat-Tire Bike Week, he has put in several lackluster performances. Unaccustomed to the high altitude, he finished 43rd out of 52 riders in a 37-mile race through the mountains. Two flat tires forced him to drop out of another event, and now, in the week's final contest, the mud is becoming problematic.

The muck is stalling not only bicyclists but also the only four-wheel-drive ambulance within 25 miles. Before the race, paramedics drove the emergency vehicle up the mountain in readiness for injuries, because broken bones and deep cuts are not unknown in fat-tire racing. They've spent the last two hours digging it out.

Joe Murray is also finding the mud difficult to contend with. He's having to stop every few minutes to clear it from his bike. After each cleaning, he pedals

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off in a rush, his tires whirring. Moments later, though, the tractionless turf stalls him again. Finally, he calmly dismounts from his \$1,600 custom-made bike, pushes it off the trail, and walks it downhill through a lush meadow of tall grass.

"I was immobilized," he says softly to an inquisitive observer. "The brakes were clogged and that was stopping the wheels."

"Too bad," the spectator replies sympathetically.

"Yeah," Murray says with a shrug. "Whatever." He lays his bike down, pulls off his plastic racing helmet, and brushes long strands of straight brown hair away from his light blue eyes. "It really doesn't matter that much, anyway," he says. "Next week is what counts."

Such a mild-mannered reaction to misfortune is typical of Murray. Among racers and builders of fat-tire bikes, he has a reputation as a cool, determined athlete who rarely shows either frustration or elation.

"Joe never gets excited," comments Jeff Lindsay, owner of a fat-tire bike factory in Chico, California, and a frequent spectator at races. "He's always friendly and polite, and he's always composed. It's impressive to watch him stay so calm under pressure to perform."

"The only way Joe shows frustration is by holing up a little," says Murray's coach Gary Fisher, the owner of Fisher Mountain Bikes. "He just gets a little quieter and talks a little less. It's something that you've got to be sensitive to in order to recognize. You've really got to know him to know when he's irritated."

A former top amateur bicycle racer himself, Fisher is Murray's boss as well as a pioneer in the development of fat-tire bikes. Ten years ago he raced road bicycles—lightweight European 10-speeds with skinny tires—and worked as a bike mechanic near Murray's home in Fairfax, California, north of San Francisco in Marin County. Fisher was among a small group of bike fanatics who began riding and racing old, heavy one-speeds in the nearby coastal mountains. The bikes' fat tires enabled riders to adeptly traverse uneven, unpaved terrain.

It wasn't long before Fisher and other mechanics in the group began tinkering with the old bikes, adding such parts as multigearing to make them easier to pedal up steep hills, lighter wheels to make them faster, and caliper-style brakes. The fad caught on, and an industry was created. By 1979, Fisher was manufacturing the improved fat-tire bicycles full time. His factory now employs a dozen mechanics and welders as the number of fat-tire bikes sold in the United States has increased from less than 15,000 in 1982 to more than 250,000 last year.



Fat-tire bikes were still rare, however, when Murray first became interested in bicycles. When he was in the seventh grade, a friend's mother gave him a 10-speed that had been rusting in her attic. Its wheels were missing, but Murray took the wheels and other parts from another 10-speed that was destined for the junk pile and put together his first bike.

"Ever since I was little I've liked taking things apart and putting them back together—clocks, radios, whatever," Murray says. "When I got my first bike, I didn't know anything about it, but I wanted to learn everything because bicycles seemed ideal. They're simple to work on and fun to ride."

During his sophomore year in high school, Murray acquired his fourth 10-speed and began riding on weekend tours with the Marin Cyclists, a 1,000-member bicycle club. On one ride, he was introduced to Gary Fisher. As he does with nearly every bicyclist he meets, Fisher sized up Murray's riding style as a potential racer.

"He was just another kid on a bike then," Fisher recalls. "He wasn't a great bike handler, he wasn't super strong, and he didn't have the kind of enthusiasm a racer needs."

A high school sophomore, Murray had more enthusiasm for playing trumpet in the school band and for painting than for riding bicycles. Most of his free time was spent practicing music, painting science-fiction scenes of warring spaceships, and occasionally tinkering with his bikes. Then during his junior year, a friend who worked in a local bicycle shop helped Murray land a job assembling new bikes there. By this time, fat-tire bikes were a big sales item in the shop, and Murray scraped together \$215 to buy his first one.

"I already liked bicycles a lot," he recalls. "Mountain bikes seemed interesting because they were different. On a mountain bike, I could ride to places that I'd never been before; there are about 10 times as many dirt roads as paved ones around Marin."

Soon Murray replaced his 10-speed with the fat-tire bike as transportation between school, work, and home. On weekends he rode with friends on long treks through the nearby mountains; during the week he worked part time at the bike shop. When Murray graduated from high school intending to become a graphic artist, he enrolled in a community college two blocks from the bike shop so he could keep his job.



During his second year in art school, some of his biking buddies entered an annual fat-tire race called the Rockhopper, and Murray decided to join them. The event, held about 50 miles north of Marin County, usually draws some of the country's best riders, including a number of professional road bikers who've turned to fat-tire racing.

"It's a real popular race and *the* thing to do if you're into mountain bikes," Murray says. "I decided to enter just for fun and thought I'd be happy to finish in the top 10 or even the top 15. I really didn't expect to do very well."

To his amazement, though, Murray pulled away from his friends early in the race. Several laps later, he easily passed some of the nation's top road bikers with years of racing experience. He finished the competition in fourth place. Among the surprised spectators was Gary Fisher, who'd attended the event to scout out riders for a team he hoped to assemble to promote his bikes. Murray appeared an altogether different rider from the high school sophomore Fisher had seen a few years before.

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racer," Fisher says, "you see a joy in his pedaling stroke; the rider sort of blazes with the flow. Murray had that when he crossed the finish line. And he had a big, ridiculous grin across his face. He was enthusiastic. He *tasted* that finish." After the race Fisher offered Murray a place on the team *and* a job assembling bicycles at his factory in San Anselmo, located 14 miles north of the Golden Gate Bridge. Murray accepted both offers immediately.

"I had realized I didn't like graphic arts that much. I was sitting behind a desk all the time," Murray says. "I knew I could always go back to it later, but I figured I might not be able to race later because bikers do the best when they are in their twenties. Also, I think I realized then that it wouldn't be that tough to be as good as the top riders. Everyone says I have natural ability, but I figure that anyone who rides a lot—even someone with an average physique—can be good, too."



In the summer of 1983 he began working for Fisher and racing locally on the weekends with four teammates, including a former national road-racing champion and Eric Heiden, the 1980 Olympic gold medalist in speed skating. Murray wore the Fisher Mountain-Bikes logo 10 times that summer and fall, winning two races and finishing among the top five in the others. However, the celebrity of his teammates—particularly that of Heiden—tended to overshadow his accomplishments. Most observers wrote off his high-place finishes as beginner's luck.

Murray had also begun working his way up at the Fisher bike factory. As a bike assembler he became fascinated with brazing, a complicated process of welding together bicycle frames with brass. The craft usually takes years of practice to perfect: to melt brass a brazer uses a welding torch fueled by a precise combination of two flammable gases. The gas mixture enables the brazer to obtain the exact temperature needed to make the molten brass flow smoothly. Controlling the heat of the torch flame must be learned by feel.

Murray had taken a welding class in high school and began practicing brazing after work. Within a few months, he was responsible for much of the finish brazing—adding brake mounts and other parts to bike frames built by more experienced craftsmen.

"Some people have a special touch for brazing," Fisher says. "I hired one brazer with seven years of experience; Murray turned out to be a better torchman than he was."

Murray revealed his quiet determination in an incident that involved his brazing skills. Because Fisher is a small company, it must purchase bike frames from outside contractors. At a race once, a competitor reminded Murray of that, and Murray took it as a personal challenge.

"The guy told him that our team didn't count because our bikes weren't made here," Fisher says. "It's not true, of course, but it hurt Murray's feelings. He didn't say much; he just came back and built a frame himself. He's like that—pride in our organization has become his own pride."



That winter Murray began riding three to four hours a day before and after work on trails and dirt roads near the Fisher factory. "I wasn't really thinking about training," he says. "I was just into riding. There's nothing I'd rather do. Having fun is what it's all about. If you're out there just training and not enjoying it, you may as well stop for a while and do something else."

In March when the next racing season began, Heiden and two other well-known Fisher riders were too busy to ride on the team, so Fisher assembled a new one. Murray became its top rider by winning the first four races, mostly against local riders. Other racers still doubted that he could defeat champion cyclists. But in the fifth and sixth races, which drew bikers from across the

country, Murray beat several of the nation's best.

He had found an effective strategy. "Basically, I hang back from the leader and pace myself," he says. "I usually wait until near the end of the race to make my attack." He also rides the course before each race so that he knows the best places to pass other riders. At 5 feet 8 inches tall and 145 pounds, his lean, muscular build makes him a strong uphill rider. Consequently, he often takes the lead on hills.

"Winning road races requires pure strength," Murray says. "The strongest guy goes the fastest. Mountain biking is more of a specialist's sport. It demands precise handling. If you don't know how to use your balance, you can waste a lot of energy. When climbing hills you have to keep your weight on the back wheel to keep from spinning out. On downhill stretches you have to use your weight over the handlebars to turn."



By the end of the season, Murray had developed expert technique and had won 14 of 23 races and \$3,000 in prize money, but he'd finished the week's races in Crested Butte in 46th place out of 52 entries. Many competitors were skeptical of his chances of winning the national championship. In fact, one sportswriter from a national magazine—in order to get a head start on an article about the 1984 fat-tire champion—had decided to interview members of another team. To him Murray seemed too young, too unaggressive, and too unknown to beat the more experienced riders on other teams.

Although the championship contest would draw the country's best racers, some of whom lived in Colorado and were far better acclimated to the 9,000-foot altitude, Fisher remained confident of at least a third-place finish for Murray. "All year long people have been saying, 'Ah, that lucky Murray. What a luck-out.' But what he's done is outrageous," Fisher says. "Anything close to winning 50 percent of the time is phenomenal. Murray's just been waiting for the nationals so he can say, 'Hey, I am the champion.'"

Murray was modestly confident of placing in the top five. In each of the last few races he had tried to save a little reserve, and he'd stayed in Crested Butte for three extra days of training. There he'd ridden the mountain trails and built high-altitude endurance for

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the final event. "This is the last race this year," he says, "so I plan to ride as hard as I can."

The Fisher team traveled 250 miles from Crested Butte to Boulder four days before the championship, and Murray continued his preparation there, including a 60-mile endurance ride. In his usual custom, he rode the course once for orientation. He would ride it six times for the title on Sunday.

On Friday, a cold front moved through Colorado and dumped six inches of snow on the Eldora Ski Area, site of the National Off-Road Bicycle Association championship. Most of the snow melted the next day, but long stretches of mud were left throughout the 4.5-mile racecourse.

Murray's quest for the championship wouldn't be easy. The course was laid out on a cross-country ski trail at an elevation of 9,300 feet. It ran across rolling hills and snaked through stands of spruce trees. One section twisted for a half-mile through a mine field of pine stumps, each about six inches in diameter. The muddy, winding course would require skillful handling and would make the race slower than usual. Murray's teammate John Loomis took one look at it and told Murray, "This is your kind of racecourse."



On the morning of the race, Murray remained his typically calm self. By now he had ridden in too many races to be nervous. "Before every race I always tell myself that I'm going to win. Then the minute a race starts, I always calm down," he says. He planned to

rely on his usual strategy of staying with the leaders until late in the contest when he'd make his move.

Minutes before the race, he wheeled his bike to the starting line and quietly said hello to some of his competitors. The field of 60 racers was assigned to rows of five abreast, based on a one-lap qualifying race held the previous day. Murray was placed in the fifth row.

As the starting gun sounded, he moved out with the pack in 20th place. A few riders shot ahead and soon disappeared over a hill. Murray picked his way through the stump field and slipped by more than a dozen riders into third place. He attained even greater advantage on a treacherous turn. Most riders slid through it, having to put one foot on the ground to steady themselves. But Murray, in his predictably polished style, negotiated the turn without lifting a foot from the pedals. At the end of the first lap, about 25 minutes later, he had passed another rider and was in second place.

Leading the race by three minutes was Andrew Hampsten, a rider who had finished second overall in Crested Butte. Murray had planned to wait until the last three laps to make his move on the leader, but in the second lap Hampsten began to tire and Murray caught him on a slight uphill section. Pedaling smoothly and strongly, he eased ahead; Hampsten rode a few yards behind him in hot pursuit for the next quarter-mile.

Murray increased his lead on another incline, where Hampsten again slowed considerably. The crowd of nearly 1,000 spectators cheered wildly for him. Two hours and 44 minutes into the race, Murray shot across the finish line an easy winner—nearly four minutes ahead of the next rider. But this time he didn't remain his typically reserved self. This time he raised his clenched fists and glowed with an exuberant grin. He skidded to a halt just beyond the finish line, grabbed the frame of his bike, and half-pushed, half-threw it to the ground as though spiking a football in the end zone.

"That's it!" he shouted to the cheering crowd. "This is what I came for."

At the finish line stood the sportswriter from the national magazine. Having spent the last two weeks interviewing the wrong team, he shook his head and sighed. Murray just beamed and didn't say a word. ■

*Ron King is the assistant editor of On Your Own.*