



Schwinn

HAVE BIKE WILL TRAVEL

by Charles R. Kelly

**Ned Overend, a promising
star in the off-road circuit.**

In the rapidly expanding sport of off-road racing, new heroes are still climbing out of the woodwork. One of the 1984 phenomons was 29-year-old Ned Overend from Durango, Colorado. A strong second place at the NORBA Nationals, Overend took the season series from national champ Joe Murray, coming out ahead in six of their eight meetings. In 1985 Overend looks to be the core of a bid by Schwinn to field an off-road team that will give them the exposure enjoyed by the other major off-road sponsors.

Although he waited until his mid-20s to



take up bicycle racing, Overend has always been a good athlete with an emphasis on endurance. Born into a State Department family, he spent most of his childhood either overseas or in Washington, D.C. In the early 1970s his family moved to Marin County, California, the home of three of the 1984 NORBA national champions. There he went to high school and participated in cross-country running.

After high school Overend alternately attended junior college and worked as a motorcycle mechanic, taking up motorcycle racing as another pursuit. "I moved to San Diego to go to school," he said. "When I ran out of money, I started work-

ing at the Suzuki dealer's. That's when I met my wife, Pam. About this time I got back into running and triathlons, but Southern California is kind of crowded, so in 1979 we moved to Colorado."

Although primarily a runner, Overend said that he always had a bike. "Back in 1973, I rode my skinny-tire bike on the trails in Marin County, the same trails where all the mountain bikers started riding a few years later." But he also stayed with running, taking second at the Pike's Peak Marathon in 1980 and 1981. "I have to go back and win that one some day," Overend mused.

In 1981 he won a triathlon in Estes Park, setting a course record in the pro-

cess, but the race took its toll. "I messed up my knee and couldn't run," he remembered. "I was riding my bike a lot for the triathlons, and it didn't hurt my knee, so in 1982 I got into road racing as a Category IV. He didn't spend much time as a Category IV, however. By the end of his first season he was Cat II. The next year, his second in bike racing, he was not only Category I, but he won the Colorado Best All-Round title and rode the Coors Classic as a member of the Raleigh team. You can't rise through the ranks any faster than that.

Overend picked up the off-road bug pretty early. "As soon as the Schwinn Sidewinder came on the market, I got one. I started working in the Outdoorsman Bike Shop in Durango when I started racing; they really supported and encouraged me. They are a Schwinn dealer, so as soon as those bikes came in, I had to have one. I used the mountain bike for winter training as well as fun rides.

"In Durango there is a crowd of hardcore guys, both road riders and off-road-ers. They don't race, but they ride hard all the time. When you go out with 15 crazy mountain bikers after work and try to stay with them, it's just as tough as a race. Being around that element really helped my riding."

Overend's rise in the off-road circles was just as meteoric as his road career. "I raced cyclo-cross before, but the first real off-road race I got into was the Pacific States Series. I thought I could do well, and Pam was going to school in California, so it seemed like a good idea. I took my Schwinn High Sierra and went to the race."

Although he was riding some of the least fancy equipment in the series, Overend took the overall title in the eight events, with three wins and a second place in the preliminaries and third place in the championship race (one of his two losses to Murray).

"I was riding a Schwinn bike, so after the Pacific States Series I called Schwinn and asked for sponsorship," he recollected. The sponsorship was immediate, and for the last part of 1984, he was their one-man off-road team. He replaced the High Sierra with a handmade custom race bike, a one-of-a-kind Paramount off-roader that he used to take third overall in the Gant Challenge, a series of races held all over the United States.

He would have done even better in the Gant Challenge had he not lost a close match with Laurence Malone — to a safety pin. "We were right together until I got a flat. I usually don't like to say 'I could have' or 'should have' except for that situation, because in mountain bike racing you have to prepare your bike to deal with natural obstacles. If you get a flat because you run low pressure and pinch the tube, it's your fault. But a safety

pin doesn't seem like the usual off-road hazard."

He went to Crested Butte at the end of the summer to tune up for the Nationals. In the Farris Creek Challenge, he missed the \$500 first prize by inches, outsprinted by Steve Cook at the line in his closest finish. A few weeks later he won the Crested Butte Stage Race with two first places in the three stages, although chief rivals Joe Murray and Roger Marquis were taken out of action with tire damage.

"One of the reasons I like off-road racing so much," said Overend, "is that it has a different dimension from road racing. In a road race somebody else prepares your bike; if it breaks or you get a flat, you get help. But for off-road you have to fix your own bike if it breaks. The rider really has to set it up himself and work on it between races. Tires are really the key. There are trade-offs: You can run a 2.125 tire with lower pressure to get traction, but it's heavier, and if you don't run enough pressure, you will pinch the tube. Or you can give up on traction and ride 1.75 tires pumped up hard, but that takes away a little on the downhill. There is a lot to learn in mountain biking."

Overend's preparation was so good that during the season he had only a couple of problems other than the infamous safety pin. "I broke a chain in the Mountain Mania race in Sacramento," he re-

ported, "and I didn't have a chain tool. Then in the qualifier for the NORBA Nationals, I flatted, but that didn't mean too much except that I started at the back of the field."

Although he lost to Murray in the championship for only the second time last year, Overend respects him. "That course was a lot tougher than I thought it would be when I heard about it; it turned

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out to be one of the best courses I have seen for a mountain bike race. Joe rode a great race."

Although the mountain bike season ended at the Nationals, he didn't quit racing: he just turned his attention elsewhere. Back on a road bike, he set a new course record at the Mount Tamalpais Hillclimb near San Francisco, a race

whose list of former winners is a Who's Who of California cyclists.

Overend had raced cyclo-cross on standard cross equipment, but for the 1984 Cross Nationals he rode his team mountain bike supplied by his sponsor, Schwinn. "The course at the Nationals was not the kind a mountain biker could win, although at some crosses the fat tires might be an advantage. At Santa Cruz there were too many flat, fast sections, where a cyclo-cross bike was much faster, and there were so many carries and run-ups that the extra weight was too much."

Problems at the Nationals were compounded for him when his regular bike was damaged and he had to switch to his old bike, a stock High Sierra, hardly the machinery it would take to win this tough cross. The race marked a rare finish in which he did not figure in the results.

"I like cross," Overend said. "It's different from mountain bike racing, but it's fun. The Nationals really showed the difference between the two — I don't think any mountain bikers did very well."

The 1985 campaign looks as though it might be Overend's year. His sponsor is committed to strong support, and an excellent team is being assembled around him. The competition is getting tougher, but he seems to thrive on it. Who knows, maybe he will return and win that Pike's Peak Marathon. ■