

BRINGING OFF-ROAD RACING TO THE PUBLIC

The Pacific States Series kicks off in June.

by John W. Ross

The Pacific States Off-Road Bicycling Championship Series, beefed up for 1985 with the co-sponsorship of *Winning* and SunTour, kicks off in June. A \$15,000 purse will be split evenly among five events, including a championship contest in the San Francisco Bay Area in July. The "mountain-bikes-for-the-people" concept has been embraced by the newly formed PSS Corporation. Citizens' events are scheduled for each day's activities in the series.

The criterium format will be patterned after the Gant Challenge series, with shorter, looped courses near major metropolitan areas. In addition to the San Francisco finale, series events are scheduled for San Luis Obispo, California, San Dimas in suburban Los Angeles; Eugene, Oregon; and Seattle, Washington.

Schwinn, continuing to display an aggressive interest in the all-terrain bicycle boom, is preparing 65 High Sierra ATBs for spectators to try in the citizens' sprints over half-mile looped courses. For a \$5 entry fee, citizen riders will be equipped with Kiwi helmets and introduced to the bikes in morning clinics staffed by NORBA pro riders who will compete in main event races each afternoon. The citizens' events are being promoted as rides rather than races to entice competition-phobic nonbikers. Citizens will ride in groups of 25 to 50 within three age classes for men and a single, open category for women. For some the event offers a first experience on mountain bikes.

Although it won't be called racing, there will be certificates and prizes awarded for finishing. Top riders will be selected for ride-offs to determine the fastest rider of the day. The overall winner will leave with a new Schwinn High Sierra.

The courses will be expanded to a one-mile loop for the main event, which will be ridden in Grand Prix style by up to 100 factory-sponsored pros and NORBA amateurs. Under the Grand Prix format, the experts will ride for an hour-and-a-half, at which time the race will be stopped and the order of finish determined. The overall series winner, decided on cumulative points from each of the races, will be awarded a round-trip ticket to Japan.

The race schedule opens on June 9 at Bonelli Park in San Dimas on a relatively flat course. On June 16 the series will move to Madonna Mountain in San Luis Obispo, and the following week to Eugene's Autzen Stadium. The focus then moves farther up the Pacific Coast to include a June 30 date at North Sea-Tac Park in the Seattle-Tacoma area before swinging south to the July 7 finals in the Marin Headlands just across the Golden Gate Bridge from San Francisco.

The schedule for each of the five race days begins with a morning period of brief but mandatory clinics for citizen riders covering mountain bike operations and techniques. The 9 to 11:30 a.m. period will also include bike safety check-ups for riders using their own bikes, SunTour and NORBA displays and routine registration activities. The citizens' events begin at 12:30, with awards ceremonies before the 4 p.m. start of the expert races. Cash and merchandise awards for top expert finishers are scheduled after the 5:30 p.m. race conclusion.

Winning Vice-President Agnes Pierret said the races will be heavily promoted within the five local markets through posters, newspaper articles and radio coverage. "If you want the mountain bike sport to grow, you want corporate sponsors to come in," Pierret contended. "But corporate sponsors won't come in if only 30 people are watching." Pierret said she had witnessed her first major off-road race last year and was disappointed by

the number of spectators. She said the off-road racing scene was struggling under inadequate promotion and with the inaccessibility of many of the race courses.

Pierret said the Pacific States Series was being run on shorter courses to involve spectators in the excitement of the sport and increase its visibility. Standard off-road racing formats generally cover 18 to 40 miles on large, rural land tracts in more remote wilderness areas, which she feels discourages people from watching.

"For the Tour de France it's okay to camp out overnight to see the riders pass by for three minutes," Pierret said, "because it's an institution — it's been around for 80 years. But for mountain biking, which is something new, you had better make it attractive to people."

Pierret said that the rider-friendly qualities of all-terrain bicycles make them ideal machines to open up bicycling to people who otherwise shun the sport. People can begin to identify more with the professionals in the sport and eventually take more of an interest in cycling in general, she proposed.

Series Director Brian Skinner said the Gant-developed short-course format was adopted to seed interest that he feels will carry over to cross-country and point-to-point off-road racing. "Our goal is to make the course as visible as possible," Skinner said, admitting that he shared concerns that exhibition-oriented racing may come to dominate off-road cycling. "I hear a lot of concern about it, but it's something I feel needs to be done. It's fun and people like it. I don't want to see it go totally this way — not at all."

Skinner likened the concept to that found in motorcycle racing: a variety of styles, including stadium, exhibition-style racing as well as cross-country events.

Next year the sponsors hope to launch an East Coast version of the Pacific States Series. ■