

Season Opener:

The Spring Runoff

The best bets for the off-road racing season gather at the starting gate.

By Owen Mulholland

The first big gathering of the clunker clans for the '85 season came in the California gold country of the Sierra foothills. March showers had given way to April flowers and everyone was set to party and boogey in what is one of the most scenic settings of the fat tire world.

It all started three years ago. Bob Edwards knew he'd found knobby heaven one day in the maze of logging roads around Sly Camp on Lake Jenkinson. Being a gregarious sort he couldn't keep his find a secret. Seems to be an indigenous infection in those parts; just up the road

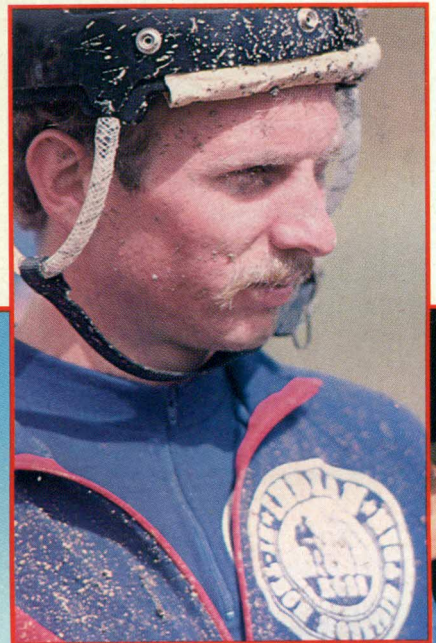
134 years ago John Marshall's loose lips started a stampede to this region. This time, though, Bob stayed out in front and organized the rush.

Organizing the Spring Runoff and its late summer successor, Mountain Mania, has become a second job for Bob and his wife Judi. At a time when off-roaders are becoming *personae non gratae* in ever more wilderness areas, Sly Camp stands as a monument to what close cooperation and mutual respect can do. Recreation Director Don Pearson was actually the first person to suggest having a race, and now every edition is assisted by a platoon of enthusiastic rangers.

The only grumbles came from racers who felt the \$15 to \$25 entry fee, plus park charges, made the weekend financially intense. Bob and Judi are hurt by the insinuation that they're making money off their promotions. "Some people just don't understand what time, effort and money go into making this race a success," Judi protests. "In fact, with 138 entries this year, this will be our first break-even promotion."

For the majority of riders, a chance to party with their friends among the giant sequoia is enticement enough, and having free beer, snacks and water bottles is just more nest liner.

Those with serious ambitions, however, went home with over \$2000 in race prizes. Yet more prizes were distributed



through a raffle in which 50 percent were winners. Few left without some sort of tangible souvenir.

It's the sort of ambiance that makes dirt riding so attractive to neophyte and hot dog alike. Many of the better riders are skinny-tired crossover who enjoy the low pressure and new challenge.

Bill Best, for example, is a crossover rider in a time warp. The San Franciscan was one of those great Northern California riders during the 50's and 60's when Californians ruled the national road racing scene. A Pan Am team member in '63 and one of the handful of American pioneer pros a decade later when he retired, Bill is now back on fat tires and loving every moment.

"I went to a USCF race last year," Bill

says with a disgusted laugh, "and some guy told me I couldn't ride with a stripe on my sock. I gave 20 years to this sport. I don't need that nonsense."

Now on the Fisher team, Bill gets a custom bike and all the other goodies. The support shows. As a master (he's 46), Bill finished the Sunday enduro well up among the pros and experts and light years ahead of the nearest vet.

Picking up Bill shows how astute Gary Fisher is. No one gets more bang for his buck. Fisher's big gun is, of course, Joe Murray, with in-depth back-up from John Loomis and "Jammin' Jimmy" Deaton.

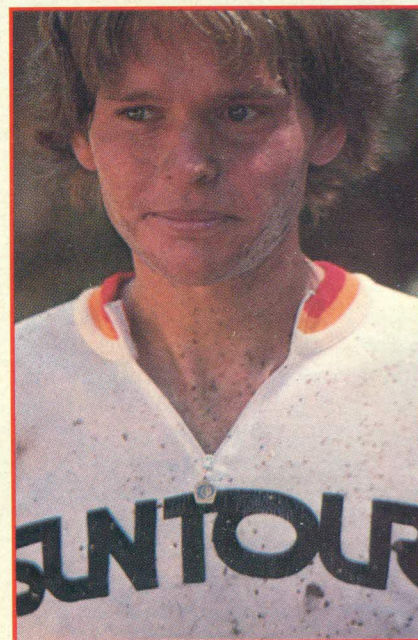
While the big teams pay their riders primarily with bonuses dependent on performance, Gary gives his guys a straight salary. "I think bonuses are a dis-

incentive." Gary insists. "They only work if you do well. Last week Joe went to a race in New York, got sick, and didn't ride. He got the same \$200 he gets every week. He knows I have faith in him." Nor does Fisher think he overpays. "Sure, \$200 a week is a lot of money compared to my day, but it's really way below what a guy of Joe's quality should get. As the business grows, of course, he and the others will get more."

Naturally there are teams even less well funded than Fisher Mountain Bikes, who still produce top riders. The loan of a bike, a team jersey, and some expense money keep such teams as Ibis, Sun Tour/Wilderness Trail Bikes, Mountain Goat, and Ritchey together.

At this season opener these low budget

Looking for wins to match its budget, the Ross team has added Don Cook (left) this year. But judging by the Spring Runoff, the man to watch may be tiny SunTour/WTB's Roy Rivers (bottom right). And as further proof that money alone doth not races win, Mountain Goat's George Theobald finished third and the Ibis team (bottom left) placed Mike Jordan in fourth.



operations placed seven in the top ten of the pro class. Pushing Murray all the way was Sun Tour/WTB's Roy Rivers. A former Smokey at Marin's Mt. Tamalpais summit lookout, Roy used to ride his bike to work every day. Nothing like 5000 vertical feet (up and down) as a standard diet to put a turbo in the legs!

Such gobs of climbing can sometimes trim the leg speed, but Roy showed he was perfectly at ease on this super fast course. His from-the-line dog fight with Joe catapulted the two of them into a private duel.

Toward the end of the first of the three laps Roy dropped his chain and Murray motored off to nearly a minute's lead. Then Rivers showed the full breadth of his talent. On every portion of the course he took time back from his Fisher rival. He fairly floated over the uphill boulders and made short work of the succeeding steep half mile climb.

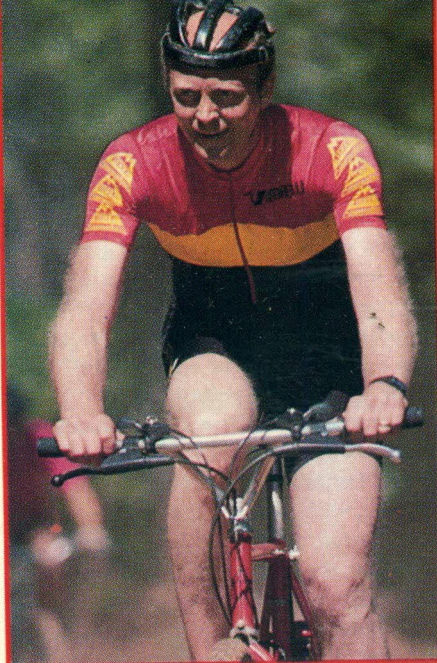
His real potential showed in the way he tackled the remaining ascending mile. The gradient is only three per cent or so, and the hard packed dirt was almost as fast as pavement. At first glance the descent posed few problems. The dried mud surface was relatively free of surprises and the open nature of the turns meant high speeds were obtainable.

To the surprise of everyone, including himself, the new Sun Tour recruit caught Murray at the bottom of the descent. Attack followed attack until the experienced Murray launched a decisive one within sight of the finish line. We can certainly look forward to this being one of the hottest rivalries of the season.

Also on the same team are Casey Kunselman, Todd De Angeles, and Joey Peters. All finished in the top 10 of the pro race, the best showing of any team. Casey shows the kind of enthusiasm dirt riding engenders. By some standards he's nuts. He dropped out of Cal Poly and turned down an offer from the powerhouse, Specialized, just to ride the "trickest bike around." He meant, of course, a Cunningham, the aluminum fat tubed, fat tire bike.

Scot Nicol, founder, owner, builder, and promoter of Ibis bikes, takes his fun seriously, or if you like, seriously has fun. His jersey logos are a tipoff. Abstract circles throw a bird shadow on a knobby grid. Riddles making statements are as old as the sphinx. Scott attempts to clarify matters by saying, "If Ritchey is yang, I'm yin." Is that clear now?

However circuitous the approach, the Ibis gang has the essentials of the sport down well: train hard, go fast, and have



fun in the inverse square sense (twice as much pain equals four times as much fun). A Chico import, Mike Jordan, is currently their best rider, and his fourth place at the Spring Runoff shows it. Scot is no slouch either, if he can ever get out from under the crush of being 20 frame orders behind. Wes Williams, Paul Draper, and Ginny Allen make up the rest of the team.

Mike's Chico training partner, George Theobald, is Jeff Lindsay's in-house Mountain Goat star. George makes no secret that he desires more support than Jeff can provide. His third place makes him very marketable.

The only man in the top 10 of the pro event with a solid road background was Roger Marquis. Roger's been such a permanent fixture of the Northern California scene it's hard to believe he's still only 26. Until Tom Ritchey threw Roger a life-line last year he was considering early retirement. "I was living as minimally as possible, had borrowed all I could, and

the inevitable was closing in on me," i.e., a job. Roger now puts in a full week at a bike shop and admits that his seventh place is more the result of a deep base of miles than current fitness, but with daylight savings time upon us he's convinced he can do better, especially as he acquires road fitness.

Who gets the fittest—pure roadies, pure dirties, or crossovers—is a hot topic in bike circles. Currently, Roger's is a minority opinion among dirt riders, but unlike politics and astrology where there's no finish line to end the b.s., the results sheets provide an ongoing tally of right and wrong on these issues.

Also on the Ritchey team is Tom "Origin-of-the-Species" himself, and Eric Heiden, who needs no introduction.

Of the big money teams only Ross sent a delegation. Ross has had to do a major rethink after two years of high expenditure/low performance. Their newest recruit, Los Angeleno Joe Sloup, was their only man to crack the top 10. Ross's not-so-secret weapon is Coloradoan Don Cook who should show up as the season progresses. Conversely, hopes are fading for Don Davis, Aaron Cox, Clark Roberts and Jim Harlow, and it seems likely they will only contest local events.

Part of Ross's problem is that it's an eastern-based team with mostly western riders. The lack of the personal touch shows. The sense of team comradery and direction, so evident among the small teams, is missing with the Ross team.

John Kirkpatrick, the team director, is perfectly aware of, if not apologetic about, the problem. He has publicly referred to Westerners as "flaky" and "spaced-out." He claims Easterners are more organized. The entire dirt bike world is grateful to John for his strong opinions. Good jokes are hard.



Specialized's Laurence Malone came to mountain bike racing from still another direction; he dominated the cyclocross scene in the 1970s, winning the U. S. championship five times.

Fierce competitors both on the bike and off, Gary Fisher (left) and Tom Ritchey (right) may settle the question which is fastest, dirt purists or roadies. Fisher has the dirtmen, 1984 NORBA champ Joe Murray, John Loomis and "Jammin' Jimmy" Deaton, while Ritchey has signed roadmen Roger Marquis and Eric Heiden.

Pro

- 1) Joe Murray, Fisher
- 2) Roy Rivers, Sun Tour
- 3) George Theobald, Mtn. Goat
- 4) Mike Jordan, Ibis
- 5) Casey Kunselman, Sun Tour
- 6) Roger Marquis, Ritchey
- 7) Joe Sloup, Ross
- 8) Todd De Angeles, Sun Tour
- 9) Joey Peters, WTB-Sun Tour
- 10) Jim Deaton, Fisher

Expert

- 1) Ken Franklin
- 2) Pat Bybalek
- 3) William Archibald
- 4) Chris Mahannah

Sportsmen (novice)

- 1) Paul Thomasberg
- 2) Ken Beach
- 3) James Daniel
- 4) Gary Walecke
- 5) Alan Liebthal

Master

- 1) Bill Best
- 2) Bob Shaw
- 3) Tyson Hedley

Vet

- 1) Glenn Mangseth
- 2) Louis Lines
- 3) Doug Page

Single Speed

- 1) Peter Leunendal
- 2) Chester Gordon, Team Shade Tree
- 3) David Gray

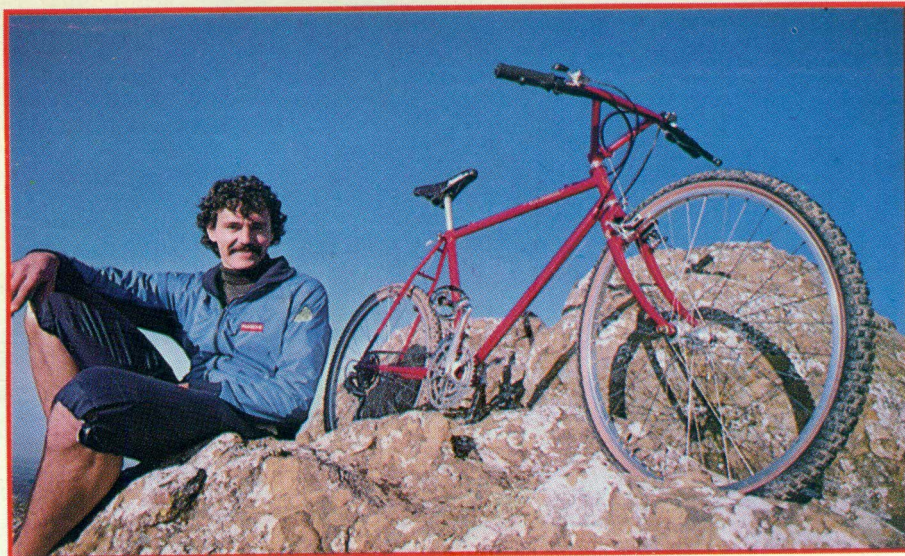
Women

- 1) Jacquie Phelan
- 2) Ramona d' Viola
- 3) Paula Mares, Team Shade Tree

Not represented at the Spring Runoff were factory-funded Schwinn and Specialized teams. Schwinn's main threat is Coloradoan Ned Overend, the Gant Challenge series winner last year.

Along with the Specialized boys, Ned believes in getting fit on the road first before hitting the dirt. Specialized riders Gavin Chilcott and Dave McLaughlin completed the road phase of their preparation at the Vuelta de Bisbee in Arizona the same weekend as the Spring Runoff, and now plan to make the Santa Rosa, California, Rockhopper in mid-May their first fat tire foray.

Also on the Specialized roster are the legendary Laurence of Malone and new regional discoveries Mike Tidd of Georgia and New Jersey's Sandy Chapman. Laurence is legendary for his five national cyclo-cross titles and myriad alleged adventures off the bike. Even at 33 he is one of the most talented Americans to put a leg over a frame. Under equally legendary team director Bill Woodul (in his case legendary for his knowledge, experience and deft touch with sticky personalities)



Laurence can probably look forward to more time at the top.

Woodul's wisdom is nowhere more evident than in the selection and development of talent outside of the mainline mudbath. "Quite simply," Bill says, "we sell bikes nationwide and we want to be represented nationwide."

While the men made up five categories at the Spring Runoff, the women made up one, which pretty much sums up the present stage of development for mud loving ladies in this sport. Jacquie Phelan (Sun Tour/WTB) continued her domination despite newly recruited opposition in the form of Ritchey rider Ramona d'Viola. Just a couple of weeks earlier Ramona had easily left Phelan behind in the road race, but the reversed finishing order of the Spring Runoff shows how dif-

ferent the two-wheeled races are. Ramona swears she is just getting started on the dirt, and if that's the case then perhaps we can look forward to a little more intensity in the ladies' races.

Those who take their off-roading seriously can anticipate a fairly full season. Aside from regional favorites such as the Rockhopper and Whiskeytown in the West and the Ross Challenge in the East, the meat of the season will be provided by race series on the Pacific and Atlantic coasts, as well as one in the Rockies. Most are scheduled to not clash with the others so racers with big budgets and tolerance for jet lag can get to all of them. The season will reach its now traditional climax with the Crested Butte Fat Tire Week and the NORBA Nationals. Should be interesting. ■

