

A TEST IN THE WEST

by Charles R. Kelly

Of the five courses chosen for the Pacific States Series of off-road races co-sponsored by *Winning* magazine and Sun-Tour, the championship course was appropriately the toughest. The scene of Joe Murray's most dramatic 1984 victory, the China Camp loop, is located in Marin County, California, capital of the West Coast mountain bike community. Each lap of slightly under four miles gained and lost 1000 feet of elevation and included a quarter-mile of downhill that could easily be the steepest dirt surface ever used in a race. Other obstacles included steep and rocky climbs, narrow trails and a quarter-mile of deep gravel.

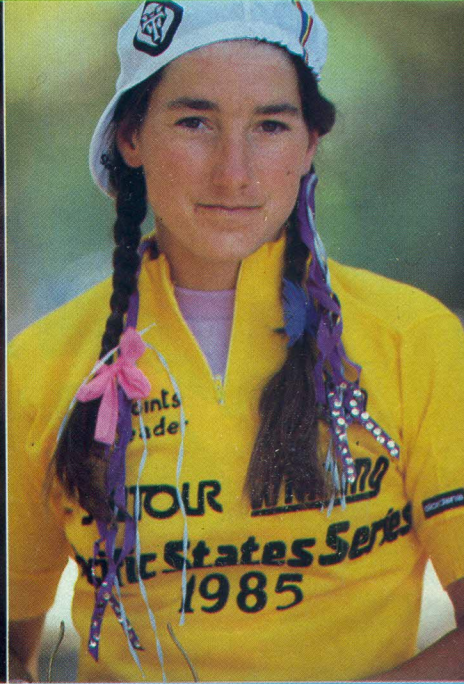
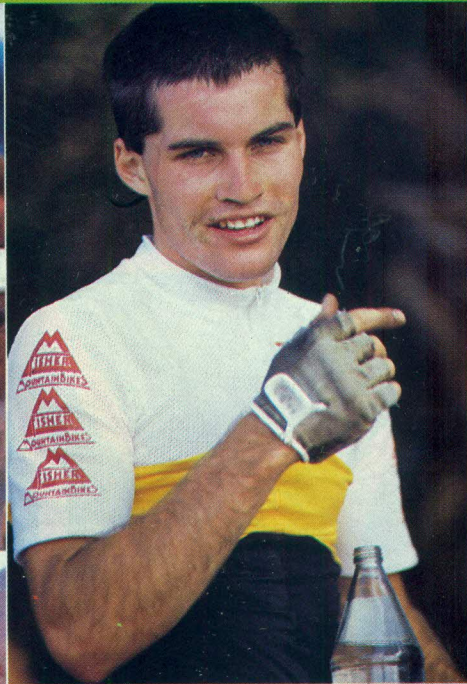
The Pacific States Championship was more than a pro race. It was a day of mountain bike activity whose purpose was to introduce the sport to interested spectators and involve as many people as possible. Events started at 10 a.m. with observed trials, followed by races of various lengths for novice and sport riders, capped off in the afternoon by the pros "Dueling for Dollars" as well as for a trip to Japan.

The observed trials held in the morning proved to be a popular event for first-timers. Trials competition, an untimed test of skill over a short and difficult course, has become popular at most of the major mountain bike events. Most multi-stage events now include trials as one of the stages.

Most competitors use the same bike for trials and distance events, but the custom trials bikes look like the next wave of off-road frame design. Most mountain bike framebuilders are currently experimenting with something along these lines. One such framebuilder is



**Joe Murray and
Jacquie Phelan won
the Pacific States Series
Championships in
Marin County, California.**



DAVID EPPERSON

**Pacific States Series
Championships**

July 7, 1985, San Rafael, California

Men (16 miles)

- 1. Joe Murray (Fisher) 1:23:27
- 2. Ned Overend (Schwinn) 1:23:44
- 3. George Theobald (Mountain Goat) 1:29:55
- 4. Casey Kunselman (WTB/SunTour) 1:31:56
- 5. Roy Rivers (WTB/SunTour) s.t.
- 6. Max Jones (Ritchey U.S.A.) 1:33:00
- 7. Ky Sharp (Schwinn) 1:33:22
- 8. Todd DeAngelis (WTB/SunTour) 1:34:18
- 9. Joe Peterson (WTB/SunTour) 1:35:09
- 10. Mike Jordan (Specialized) 1:35:43

Women (eight miles)

- 1. Jacquie Phelan (WTB/SunTour) 53:35
- 2. Cindy Whitehead (Ross) 56:53
- 3. Mary Lee Atkins 1:00:35

Scot Nicol, who rode his own custom bike for a win in the trials. Although "drop" handlebars enjoy limited popularity among mountain bikers because of a reported lack of control, Nicol, whose bike is so equipped, proved that theories are just theories.

Before the main event some 200 novice and sport riders tried their racing skills on courses ranging from 3/4 mile to eight miles, with bicycles and helmets supplied for those who arrived with nothing more than enthusiasm. A prizelist that included a complete bicycle kept the enthusiasm from waning.

In 1984 on the same course, Joe Murray came from behind in the last 50

meters to nip Steve Cook by inches in the most dramatic mountain bike finish of the year, his seventh consecutive victory in a string of a dozen. Since that time Murray picked up his NORBA championship trophy and jersey, not to mention a handy check, and relentlessly destroys hoardes of the best riders in the country. Although he was usually content to sit back and watch his competition for awhile in 1984, he has been putting them out of their misery early in 1985, attacking from the front and winning every race he has finished this year (he quit only one).

As winner of three out of four of the preliminary events, Murray was the favorite, with Schwinn's Ned Overend expected to give him the most competition in the absence of Gavin Chilcott and Dave McLaughlin, who were road racing that weekend. Rookie Roy Rivers has also battled Murray to the wire, losing by seconds in the Spring Runoff, and his downhill ability could be expected on such a steep course to counter some of Murray's edge in climbing. In mountain bike racing front-runners take their time on the downhill, and chasers take their chances.

Lap one turned it into a two-man race, as Overend and Murray powered away from the rest of the field, establishing a 30-second lead over Rivers and a minute on George Theobald and Casey Kunselman. The two rode together and switched leads until the climb beginning on the last lap. Overend, whose frustration was extended another week, told how he saw his chances ride away: "I'm pretty sure he planned to make a move there anyway, and I was so tired I don't think I could have beat him, but I helped him out when I blew a shift and had to get off my bike, while he rode up the steep part. I was using 1.75 tires, and Joe was using 2.125 tires. I think he had better traction on the climbs. But I'm glad I made it a close race — everybody else was way back."

Meanwhile back at the pack Roy Rivers had paid the price for trying to make up ground on the descents, losing two places as well as a little skin. At the finish line Murray had trimmed five minutes from his own course record, with Overend only 17 seconds behind. Theobald finished more than six minutes down on the pair, followed two minutes later by Kunselman and Rivers.

Along with taking the undisputed championship of the Pacific States Series, Murray continued adding to his commanding points lead for the Winning Super Prestige Mountain Bike title.

In women's racing Jacquie Phelan is even more dominant than Murray is in the men's, although at the expense of far fewer riders. Phelan just doesn't lose. In the women's two-lap race she easily outdistanced Cindy Whitehead for a margin of more than three minutes at the finish. ■