

JOE GEORGE MAX RAY AND KEVIN STORM THE EAST

by Owen Mulholland

Joe Murray leads the pack
in the Ross New England
Fat Tire stage race



One index of great riders is their ability to dominate all aspects of their discipline. Bernard Hinault hates Paris-Roubaix and refuses to ride its life-threatening cobbles, but he won the race before taking such a stand. Needless to say, in races he likes such as the Tour de France he does even better. In terms of breadth of mastery, Joe Murray can be compared to the Frenchman. Mountain bike racing is still new and obstacles are constantly being invented, but so far the young Californian has mastered them all.

It was said he only likes long races, but when short circuit events were added to the menu he was right up front. Sure he could climb, but downhill he was nowhere supposedly. It's true he doesn't try to keep up with the kamikazes in the specialty vertical-drop events, but in mass start races he's always right there with teammate "Jammin' Jimmy" Deaton, Joey Peterson and the other gravity honchos. Murray is a Marin County lowlander, but high altitude has never slowed him. Big name crossover riders such as Alexi Grewal, Andy Hampsten and Dale Stetina have discovered just how tough and versatile this guy is on his own turf. They've yet to beat him.

Yet another twist was added to the off-road racing mix during the Ross Bicycles sponsored New England Fat Tire Three-Day stage race last September. In the Wendell State Forest of western Massachusetts organizer John Kirkpatrick and his crew spent three months hacking a trail through the deciduous maze. New England farmers who did the same thing three centuries ago found that tree-clearing was just a prelude to the even more killing task of boulder clearing. However, Kirkpatrick couldn't have been happier.

Those boulders were just what he wanted. Trying to go fast through this natural chaos demands total concentration and instant reflexes. Pure power junkies would go endo. Yet with the most sublime, deceptive ease Murray cruised through these obstacles. Only the mayhem behind showed what talent was needed to be out front.

Kirkpatrick is not a one-shot guy. This is the only major event to incorporate "trials." It's no secret that the California invaders can go fast, but could they go slow? Trials riding has been hanging on the fringes of the mountain bike movement since its inception.

I remember one of my first off-road rides on a rainy dawn with Marin hot dogs Joe Breeze and Otis Guy. We came to a rock staircase that nature had done a good job of reclaiming over the last 50 years. Guy didn't hesitate. Down he

Ross Bicycles New England Fat Tire Stage Race (USA)

September 6-8, 1985

Men

1. Joe Murray, Fisher	39
2. George Theobald, Fisher	32
3. John Loomis, Ross	27
Ned Overend, Schwinn	27
5. Roy Rivers, SunTour	17
6. Joe Sloup, Ross	16
Max Jones, Ritchey	16
8. Joey Peterson, SunTour	14
9. Mike Jordan, Specialized	12
10. Todd D'Angeles, SunTour	10

Women

1. Jacquie Phelan, SunTour	12
2. Carmen Carrouche, Mantis	7
3. Cindy Whitehead, Ross	6

went, ka-boom, ka-boom, ka-boom, slithering over the sharp edges and jagged angles in a display of bicycle ballet George Ballanchine would have loved. Breeze was a ka-boom behind. The last few stairs went around a corner and Breeze had to dab a foot when a slip threatened to get out of control. Immediately he yelled, "Put my foot down!"

All this I observed from above while carrying a borrowed Schwinn Excelsior on my shoulder in order to make a tenuous three-point descent of the treacherous rocks. When I heard Breeze's announcement my mind flashed to the confessional, "Father forgive me, for I have sinned." At that moment I understood trials.

Mountain bikes are still in that early experimental stage every new sport undergoes. It took decades, for example, for the Tour de France to achieve a sense of balance — things like how much flat, how many mountains, or how long the stages. Always the goal is to produce a worthy winner, the "complete" rider.

A question confronting mountain bike enthusiasts is how and whether to incorporate trials into the race mix. One acrobat crusading for their increased use is a slim 24-year-old man from Newport Beach, California. In time the name Kevin Norton may become as well known as Joe Murray. At the moment he is in his own class when it comes to trials.

With a body that alternately appears to be made of steel rods and elastic bands, Norton, as he said, "cleaned" all seven trials sections the first time through. In this case "cleaned" means untouched by human feet. During the afternoon he got

lax and "made a few mistakes," but he could afford to. Every foot "dab" cost a point. After seven times through the seven trials courses Norton had accumulated 44 points. This was less than half the total of Scot Nicol (Ibis Bikes) from Sebastopol, California. And Nicol is no slouch. He blithely carries on conversations while doing "wheelies" on his front wheel and rotating the bike 360 degrees.

Norton has been at this game for a while. When he was eleven, he set up a trials course in a vacant lot near his home and began the intensive practicing such defiance of nature's physical laws requires. For a decade he followed the motorcycle circuit where trials are big. But he knows he'll never cut the top levels there. "Naw, I started too late. I'm not even close to the Europeans," he admits.

He has long used mountain bikes to improve his motorcycle trials riding, so the switch to full-time bikes wasn't that difficult. At the moment he's the only sponsored pedal bike trials rider. Kuwahara has made him a totally tricked-out machine with 24-inch wheels, super short wheelbase, 71-degree head tube with no fork rake, very high bottom bracket, special tires and a plastic skid plate. But this is only a prototype; a secret super trials bike is in the works. Kuwahara also pays him bonuses for wins and travel expenses. Not a bad start for a rider in his second event.

Norton obviously feels the ultimate mountain bike formula should treat trials as a comparable worth issue. "Hey, anybody can go fast," he blandly asserts. "Trials riding would really improve these guys. It's hard work to practice going slow and balancing, but it pays off at speed in the ruts and rocks."

A more neutral view was offered by Jim Deaton, another member of Murray's fearsome Fisher team. Deaton also has a motorcycle background, and in the few specialty downhill time trials, such as Repack and Mammoth Mountain in California, he's been unbeatable.

"I like trials," Deaton unreservedly asserts. "Some of these guys [read Murray] dislike them. They're too much of a sub-specialty. But I'm decent at them so I like them. The problem right now is the rules are too loose. Kevin's great, but he does have a total trick bike. I think it's too much to expect everyone to have two bikes. I don't like it when the machinery is more important than the riders."

Murray barely tried in the trials. He figures he's already on the bike enough and he hasn't been dropped yet due to inferior handling skills. He practically walked the trials courses and was relieved not to be in the finals. He was much happier relaxing for the Saturday afternoon road race. Of course he didn't get any points and practically put himself

in a must-win situation for the big Sunday show-down, but after winning Friday's time trial and race he felt pretty confident, especially with the opposition out there getting cramps trying to stay upright at 65 degrees.

Five laps of a two-and-a-half-mile triangular loop may sound like tame fare, but throw in a rock strewn descent, 450 feet of climbing, and a trail just marginally more navigable than the trials sections, and you have enough problems to raise a real sweat. Murray is not, to all appearances, an excitable sort of guy. He grew up in a rather "loose" home in the heart of "you-do-your-thing, I-do-my-thing" Marin. He discovered road racing about six years ago, but it wasn't until the advent of mountain bikes that he really showed his potential. This is one man who believes in letting his legs do the talking.

Just say, "Go!" and he lets out the tiger in the tank. On the Saturday afternoon he led virtually all the way. Joe Sloup from Los Angeles valiantly carried the Ross flag in a desperate chase for second. Up front Murray appeared on cruise control while Sloup battled for every meter lost. It's the kind of difference that drives grown men to tiddly winks.

For the Sunday 42.5-mile killer Murray appeared as complacent as ever. With the trail removed so that the entire course was on fire roads Murray waxed eloquent. "I like it," he said. "After a few laps you know the course so well you don't have to think about it much."

What he meant was that he had the course sufficiently wired that he could think about other more important things, such as keeping track of the SunTour-Wilderness Trail Bikes boys. Roy Rivers, a former Mount Tamalpais smokey, used to commute nearly 5000 vertical feet every day to work and home. Once recruited by SunTour-WTB he found races were just like leaving late for work.

All season Rivers has been crawling up Murray's freewheel. But Rivers knew he would need to place a few banderillas first. On the fifth of the 15 laps he sent teammate Todd D'Angeles off the front. Most mountain bike races are so precipitous and rocky that teamwork hardly helps, but on this fast course road racing tactics were needed, with D'Angeles down the road, Rivers was content to draft the pack on the flatter sections and then get to the front and go on the narrow bits.

Of course Murray wasn't without an ace in hand — in this case new Fisher rider, George Theobald. Formerly a Chico, California Mountain Goat Cycles man, George was only too glad to take the lucrative position vacated by John Loomis who had moved to Ross in mid-season. Without daily survival to worry about Theobald had achieved his best

ever form.

Rivers was only intermittently successful in keeping the Fishers at bay. They didn't let D'Angeles gain more than 30 seconds and eventually reeled him in more because of his fatigue than any acceleration of pace.

Not all the action was up front. Schwinn hope Ned Overend from Colorado had lost three minutes on an opening lap puncture. What could be more discouraging than a race-long chase? Out of touch with the leaders he naturally lost time at first, even while gobbling up dropped riders. But he never backed off, always fought as though the break were just around the corner, and in the end finished fifth with the day's fastest time, if you subtract his tire-changing minutes. It was a sensational ride that might have changed the race if it hadn't been done under such a handicap.

Other entertainment was provided by SunTour-WTB's answer to Jim Deaton: Joey Peterson. Peterson never quite matches his Fisher rival on timed downhills, but he appears to be going five times as fast when you see all the sideways action. Deaton's style is often neat, and therefore deceptive, whereas Peterson keeps his elbows on full flap and bike in every attitude but upright when approaching a turn.

I watched him on the course's most treacherous bend. Lap after lap he would approach this bend as though he might win the race if only he could get through it alive. Lap after lap the spectators swore, "He's blown it this time," as we ducked the gravel shower, and lap after lap he would prove us wrong.

When D'Angeles's great solo was over, he was deposited on the rocks of presumptuous ambitions. But Rivers still had a loaded gun which Murray, Theobald and Ritchey rider Max Jones fully appreciated. So did the gods of misfortune. For reasons known only to them they decided to dump on Rivers with four laps to go. They gave him a flat. Working in a frenzy of sweat and bugs, Roy made a record tube change and was on his way again in less than a minute.

Nobody was backing off up front so it was a miracle to see Rivers pull back 14 seconds in one lap. Far from being elated, however, he was devastated. "All that work and only 14 seconds. I died when I heard that," he exclaimed.

That left the front threesome to sort things out. Normally the final hill is the scene for the last rights administered by the High Priest of His Most Abundant Strength, but after three-and-a-half hours all had been reduced to survival tempo. Their motto seemed to be, "Don't attack me and I won't attack you."

My own guess is that Murray had a rocket in reserve, but by his own admission, "I wanted George to win." If that

happened Theobald would move up to second overall. Jones, riding the race of his life, was only too happy to let the other two dictate the pace. Who wouldn't be a bit euphoric to be in such company after an effort that Kirkpatrick compared to a six-hour continental road classic?

The final half-mile was on a smooth, straight, mildly undulating fire road which was as close to a road finish as mountain bikes are likely to come. Tactics would be as important as pure power.

Theobald and Murray went to the front and gradually wound up the pace. Jones followed easily, wondering what he was supposed to do to get by. On the last rise, less than 100 meters from the line, he made his move between his Fisher opponents. Just when he was fully committed and flat out, Theobald swung in, wheels touched and splat went Jones.

Epithets and blood followed Theobald across the line creating an exciting if anticlimactic finish. To Jones's great credit he quickly calmed down and restored personal relations with the other two. The question of what is a straight line in a sprint is precisely the same one raised at the Grand Junction stage of the Coors Classic this year. That was the one in which the East German Olaf Jentzsch and Greg LeMond were sprinting side by side when Andy Hampsten tried to come between them. Jentzsch's slight move toward the center effectively blocked Hampsten, and the Raleigh rider felt he had been unfairly impeded. The East German's disqualification and subsequent partial restoration showed the confusion on rule interpretation that surrounds this issue.

Rules can appear clear in a book, but out there in real racing land they always end up being interpreted in different ways. The European attitude is that bike racing is a game of brawn and brains, some deviation from a straight line is permissible because an absolutely straight line is impossible to hold when going flat out, and because some deviation is permissible for tactical purposes. American judges tend to see sprints as drag races.

Jones felt this way at first. "Hey, what was I supposed to do?" he asked repeatedly. When he was given three or four options he paused for a rethink. In their own way Theobald and Murray had been a bit naive too. Aside from filling up the road and going fast they hadn't been all that astute either. When Theobald claimed he moved to the left because his rear wheel slipped in the gravel he was sincere.

To their credit all three realized this was another rough edge to a growing sport. They would live to do things better next time. It was time to enjoy the benefits of such turmoil: the thousands of dollars Ross doled out for three challenging days of off-road action. ■