

MAINSTREAM MARINITE

Roy Rivers goes with the mountain bike flow.

by OWEN MULHOLLAND

Roy Rivers? Sounds like a guy you would hire to go alligator hunting in a bayou swamp. But all this particular Rivers likes to do with running water is to cross it at high speed on two wheels. He is one of the California mountain bike elite, a Marinite. Born, raised and schooled in Marin County, Rivers almost didn't have a chance when it came to transportation. By the time he was a high school sophomore he was either cruising on his "cruiser," a Westfield Rambler featuring a single-speed gear and foot brake, or dropping the bike into the trunk of his four-wheel

Rambler and driving to the top of a local mountain for a downhill blast.

Cross out the names of the rider and bike and you could fill in no end of currently famous Marin mountain bike heavies who followed the same scenario at the same time. There was something about the late 1970s. Some might call this an aimless and bored era. More flattering appraisals might perceive a generation of bright young guys who discovered simultaneously that the clunkers they were riding were good for more than just getting around town.

With a ratio of something like 100 miles of dirt road to one of pavement, Marin seemed a natural place to hit the dirt. In this rugged peninsula, "natural" equates with, "If it feels good, do it." And nothing feels better than bookin' down some trail in the redwoods.

Rivers dabbled in cycling like he dabbled in school, and anything else interesting that came his way. He got involved in



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an abortive attempt to sail around the world. Later he hopped on a Honda 350 for a half-year trip to Alaska. At another time he landed a summer job as the smoky at the fire lookout station on nearby Mount Tamalpais.

Off and on through all this he attended U.C. Berkeley. Math and computer science may strike many students as heavy duty majors, but for Rivers they were another enjoyable enterprise. "I really did it because that's what I liked to do," he explained. "I knew I wanted to do something that would fit in with society a little bit, but I had no real goals. It was fun; I loved it."

Despite this apparently cavalier approach, his definition of "fun" is deceptively sophisticated. Although he finally graduated in 1982, it wasn't until he found his most recent job that he found employment that was fun. "It's a real free format," he enthused. "We can just sit around and let the ideas come. Management is really

receptive. I can say, 'Look, I have a great idea. Why don't you let me work on it for a couple weeks and I'll come up with a prototype.' And they'll say, 'Fine, do it.'"

Simultaneously, from 1979 Rivers became progressively more infatuated with bikes. Aside from the "cruising" he dusted off his road bike every year to do a century race — "Well, that's what it was," he protested. "They took times!" — the Tour of the Unknown Coast in northern California.

"Every year a bunch of us would go up and every year this one guy would win by 30 or 40 minutes. Finally, it rained hard one year, but

that century came on the same day as the first Rockhopper. I entered the Rockhopper and never did get back to the unknown coast."

Rivers had never been fanatical about cycling but mountain bike racing bit him pretty hard. "It was obvious it was going to take more time than just recreational cycling," he deadpanned. "It's become a little bit more a way of life." Understatement comes easily to this soft-spoken man.

As with everything else, Rivers didn't leap headlong into the sport. It was more a case of one thing leading to another. One day, for example, he found himself cruising along on his cruiser, hanging on to half a handlebar in one hand and a pair of vice-grips in the other. "We used to break handlebars fairly often," he said without the slightest emphasis. "The stock bars were good for two months or so before they'd crack. They'd give pretty good warning before they snapped. It so

happened that my bars broke one day, so I took the vice-grips off the seatpost and clamped them on the stem. We always had vice-grips with us as an all-purpose tool.

"Anyway, it was on that ride I met Mark Slate. We spoke for a few moments and then I didn't see him again for a couple of years." In the meantime, Slate started working with Steve Potts, and this connection eventually led to them offering Rivers a place in their new team.

Rivers's official debut in 1984 was a disaster. He broke a chain in the first two miles. The following week, they went to the first of the new Pacific States Series. "It was a hot, dry course over near Fresno," continued Rivers. "We were pushing up a steep hill and went by a truck. Later we discovered that this was the vehicle which was supposed to mark the course. Over the top people went in different directions. I ended up in a stream with a bunch of others. After a while I said I'd go back to the start to find out what was going on. What a joke. As I crossed the finish line someone yelled, 'You're seventh.'"

Things improved after that, but the very limited team budget meant they missed much of the critical action in Colorado where the NORBA nationals were held that year.

It wasn't until the spring of 1985 that Rivers moved up to the position of "Murray mauler," which was the most anyone could aspire to in top class off-road racing. Fellow Marinite Joe Murray hadn't lost a race through 1984 and exuded a



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Merckx-like invincibility. Then, in the Spring Runoff race, Murray was shocked to find he still had company at the top of the first hill. Even though he dropped his chain, Rivers got back to Murray, but the champion had to pull out some tricks toward the end before winning. Murray knew he had a serious rival at last.

Rivers was ecstatic. "Yeah, that race really inspired me. I knew I could do it," he recalled. Two weeks later he suffered a setback. "I'd had a four and a half months break from work — sort of between jobs and not looking very hard — and then I got this great job offer. I thought about it for a couple of weeks, but it was just what I wanted, so I took it."

After a period of adapting to juggling work and riding, in which the riding suffered, Rivers returned to top form and finally did the impossible: beat Murray. Even if it was by just an inch, it was a great win in the longest race of the season at Mammoth Mountain.

Other wins and top placings followed to ensure his reputation as one of the very best mountain bike riders. It's still a little world and the opportunities for comparison with other riders are few. One measure is Murray's beatings of Dale Stetina and Andy Hampsten in 1983 and 1984.

Throughout the spring of 1986 Rivers competed in road races because the liability insurance crisis put a halt on mountain bike events. He used road races for a workout; he didn't care about the placings. For miles he would burn along at the front as the rest followed with their eyeballs on

stalks.

Rivers's early season form was super. He went to Britain and won a race, and was looking forward to Whiskeytown. The immaturity of fat tire competition is revealed in the lack of support services. Rivers had what he thought was a slight cold going into the 35-mile Whiskeytown race, but he hurt from the first turn of the pedals. He managed a top-ten finish but the effort drained him for weeks after. A good sports doctor could have been of invaluable help.

This summer, Rivers was back to good if not top form, placing well and enjoying his team's new sponsorship by Trek and True Temper. The financial injection allowed the riders to buy a team car, an old Pontiac LeMans convertible. With the top down, racks dripping with bikes and laughter rampant, this is indeed team fun!