





Newcomer Tomack (left) gave an outstanding performance and Whitehead (above) demonstrated her talent yet again.

TOMACK GRABS THE LOOT

A former BMXer hits the big time in the Ross New England Fat Tire Four-Day.

by JOHN WILCOCKSON

When a sponsor puts up a \$5000 prize list for a mountain bike race and advertises the event with a Wild West type "wanted" poster he doesn't expect to see an unknown kid gallop into town and make off with the loot. Or does he? The organizer of the Ross Four-Day John Kirkpatrick is an ardent propagator of off-road racing in the United States, and the uncovering of new talent is one of his greatest pleasures. But he could hardly have been prepared for the immaculate demonstration of mountain bike skills displayed by John Tomack to win his mid-September stage race.

Yes, Tomack was the kid — well, he is only 18 and in his first season of off-road racing — and he perpetrated his deed at Wendell, a township incorporated in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in 1781.

All the races were held in the Wendell State Forest, which is a sandy-soiled dirt biker's paradise of pine and birch set on a rocky hillside above the lush Millers River valley. This former hunting ground of the Mohawk Indians proved a delightful setting for some high class competitions on a long weekend of sparkling early fall weather. As Cindy Whitehead the vanquisher again of Jacquie Phelan in the women's section said, "I love to be out in the woods. I mean, how can you beat these settings?"

Like Whitehead, Phelan and Tomack, many of the 352 entrants had crossed the continent from California to take part in an event that has become to the NORBA national championships what Paris-Nice is to the Milan-San Remo classic: the ultimate preparation race.

The other main contender in the men's race, Ned Overend, was using the four-day to reestablish himself in the off-road ranks. Overend, almost unbeaten in the 1986 mountain bike season, had raced and finished the 105-mile world amateur road race championship at Colorado Springs only five days before the start of the Ross race. He found the change in pace, style and effort pretty brutal. "It's hurting me here because of the world's," he admitted after ending the third day of competition with a deficit of three minutes on the surprising Tomack. "I think my arms are hurting most. But I hope to be back in gear by the nationals."

Overend, who is married with a six-month-old daughter, lost half of his time to Tomack in the trials section in which the younger man displayed an almost

faultless aptitude. Tomack negotiated the boulder-strewn courses as though he were taking a gentle spin along a city street. Where others were crunching to a halt or making bunny hops to correct their trajectory around the yard-high rocks, Tomack slowly pedalled with perfect poise, whether going up, down or around the obstacles. For winning the various sections of the trials he collected bonuses totaling 90 seconds which were deducted from his overall racing time. Overend didn't contest the trials, having banked on decisively defeating his opponents in the time trial, hill-climb and two massed-start races that were all held on a variation of a 2.7-mile loop in one of the thickest parts of the forest.

Each morning the fat-tire fraternity would arrive in their four-wheel-drive vehicles, station wagons, campers and cars, the bikes inside or filling the racks. Those staying nearby or on the Wendell Forest camping ground came by bike, their wide, treaded tires singing on the dawn-damp tarmac. At the meeting place beside the placid Ruggles Pond, a Division of Forests and Parks noticeboard contained in its small print the regulation that visitors "shall not operate an all-terrain vehicle on a frozen lake or pond." With the midday temperatures in the mid-70s the warning was superfluous, but the other competitors must have felt that *wunderkind* Tomack would have been capable of riding the unfrozen waters.

Most off-road competitors come from a background of conventional bike racing, like Overend, Whitehead and Phelan, but Tomack comes from BMX racing. This lean 5-foot 9-inch, 165-pound rider — originally from Owosho, Michigan — said he had grown out of BMX racing. "I was national champion for my age and class when I was 16," he stated. "I wanted more of a challenge and when I couldn't get a sponsor last December I decided to try mountain bike racing. BMX has given me good bike handling skills, but I knew I needed to develop more stamina and speed.

"I now live in Northridge, near Los Angeles. I sometimes go training in the Santa Monica Mountains. I might do 10-minute time trials in the hills, or 10-minute intervals and cruising in between. I go out with a club and ride for two to three hours. Once in a while Thurlow Rogers or Wayne Stetina comes out training with us."

During the four days of the Ross race Tomack, now sponsored by Mongoose, proved that he had learned quickly some of the skills of road racing as well as adapting his BMX knowledge to mountain bike competition. Earlier in the year he was third in the uphill stage of the Rockhopper South, and fifth in the marathon

Bishop 50-miler. Perhaps his best previous performance was leading the Mammoth Lakes off-road stage race; but he flatted on the downhill race and dropped out of the top 10. "I've been getting stronger all season," he confirmed. Part of this strength has come from road racing. He won a 65-mile open race, and next year intends to take out a USCF license. During 1986 he trained five days out of seven in the hills near his adopted home, building up his strength for races like the Ross Four-Day.

His victory was based on his performances over the first two days when he used both his hill-climbing ability and his BMX skills to create his commanding lead over Overend. On both these days, the basic Wendell State Forest circuit used its trickier variation: entering the woods for a narrow, twisting section on the longest of the four sides. Tomack dominated the first day's time trial and then he described how he contested the 10-lapper on the second day.

"I knew that it was important to get to the narrow path first so I took the risks learned in BMX racing to go into the right hander faster than the others," he stated. "I went on the outside and put my foot down to get around the corner. My coach told me I was four minutes ahead at one point, but I crashed twice. I hit a log once, then hit a rock and went over the bars. Overend took back about three minutes in one lap. He eventually passed me in the forest and I was 30 seconds behind. I had to work hard to keep in touch with him."

Besides Tomack and Overend, also in contention for the overall title were the Ross Bicycles' pair of Joe Sloop and John Loomis. The more experienced Loomis lost his chance on the second day. "I heard something clicking and thought it was the brake. So I carried on. But it was a stick in the spokes and it ripped the rear derailleur off. I've had only one other mechanical the whole season when I broke a crank." With no mechanical assistance allowed in mountain bike competitions, Loomis was out of the race. He could compete only for primes and stage

Ross New England Fat Tire Four-Day

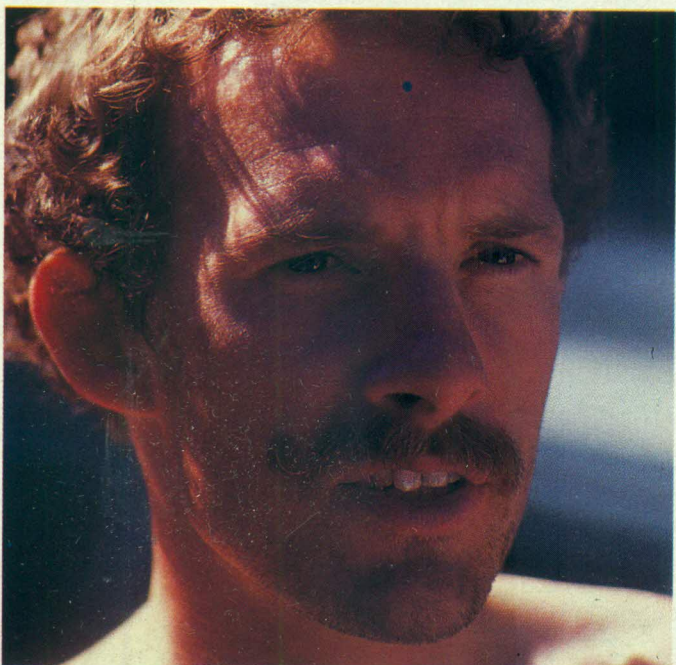
Wendell, Massachusetts,
September 11-14, 1986

Men

1. John Tomack, <i>Mongoose</i>	5:32:44
2. Ned Overend, <i>Schwinn</i>	at 3:04
3. Max Jones, <i>Richie</i>	5:43
4. Roy Rivers, <i>Wilderness Trail</i>	16:05
5. Mike Jordan, <i>Ross</i>	16:39

Women

1. Cindy Whitehead, <i>Klein</i>	4:27:08
2. Jackie Phelan, <i>Cunningham</i>	at 7:39
3. Mary Lee Atkins	22:54
4. Jacqueline Hannon	25:14
5. Susan Diabiase	32:15



Tomack (top left) came looking for a challenge and beat Overend (bottom left) who was hurting from the world's. Among the women, Whitehead's fearlessness paid off.

prizes for the last two days.

Sloop, age 20 and just out of high school, is from Sherman Oaks, California and a close neighbor of Tomack's. They sometimes go training together. Despite problems on the first stages, Sloop was an impressive winner of the Saturday morning's hill-climb. "I was really jamming up the hill in a 38 x 18," he revealed. In contrast, Tomack used a 21 cog and finished 13 seconds behind the Ross Indian. Loomis was third, followed by two other top pros, Max Jones of Ritchey and Roy Rivers of True Temper. Overend was only eighth, losing a further 38 seconds to the yellow-jerseyed Tomack.

The leading women were about three minutes slower on this demanding stage, with Phelan winning from Mary-Lee

Atkins, with Whitehead only third. But Phelan had already lost her chance of overall victory in Friday's circuit race. "I lost a lot of time when I got trapped behind some of the slower men," explained the extrovert Phelan, who seems pleased to have Whitehead as a rival.

A crowd of about 5000 gathered for the final day, cheering the racers on their way as they kicked up a cloud of dust around the first corner. Positioned on a boulder at a tight turn at the foot of the longest, steepest downhill, nine-year-old Jesse Gayette whooped, "Maybe I'll see someone wipe out here!"

Whitehead, 24, said the tricky downhill suited her just fine. "That's where I made most of my time," she explained. "Jacquie was picking up time uphill, but on the

downhill she slows down and tries to dodge all the rocks. I don't dodge them; if I hit one I just go over it and land somewhere, hopefully on the tire." Whitehead's fearlessness gave her a five-minute win over Phelan in the 10-lap race and a commanding overall success.

In the men's race Sloop looked as if he would be an easy winner when he attacked early on and stayed in front for 12 of the 15 laps. He collected \$450 in lap primes, but he tired towards the end and Tomack came through to win a finishing sprint from Jones, Overend and Sloop. "I knew there were two guys [Overend and Jones] who had a shot at beating me," commented the winner, "so I just tried to stay with them the whole time." Spoken like a true pro ... **W**