





**A visit to Crested Butte's
Fat Tire Week is worth waiting for.**

MOUNTAIN MADNESS

by Owen Mulholland

When exactly does patience become a virtue? Being patient usually means being bored, and so it was a great relief when one of my longest periods of patience came to an end last year. I finally got to go to Crested Butte, Colorado, after eight years of listening to my mountain bike buddies rave about the rides there, eight years of watching their slide shows, eight years of hearing the "who's who" in attendance, eight years of patient jealousy. At last, I got to go to Fat Tire Week.

My introduction to the special character of Crested Butte came during a conversation with the local travel agent. She concluded with, "... and when you arrive, just go in the condo and you'll find the key on the coffee table."

The next surprise, not so pleasant, was trying to find this condominium at 4:00 a.m. The southeast corner of Seventh and Gothic streets sounded simple enough to find, but the good lady forgot to tell us that Crested Butte has no street signs. We canvassed the town's 30 intersections at least twice before working up enough courage to tiptoe up a dark staircase to the suspected apartment. The door was unlocked, the key on the table and the sheets were ours.

By 10:00 a.m., we had located the reputed hot spot for breakfast — the Forest Queen Café — and joined the lazy, morning crowd. About \$20,000 worth of fat tire iron lay piled out front — another reminder that we were far from inner city *anywhere*.

Walking into the Forest Queen was like walking into a bike café back home in

California. I recognized every third person. The overnight fatigue soon faded. News of the week's events intermixed with jokes and mouthfuls of blueberry pancakes got me jacked in a hurry. I had arrived.

Big race action for the day was a double time trial — four miles and an altitude difference of 2000 feet — one up and one down. Crested Butte, the 11,500-foot mountain, dominates its inhabited namesake down below at 9000 feet. In winter its near perpendicular slopes give hot dog skiers plenty of places to show off and maim themselves; but for mountain bikers, the principal interest is the service road to the top of the ski lift.

I rode up to get a feel for the course and talk to some of the riders, but mostly just to catch the view. Each hairpin revealed more of the kaleidoscopic landscape. The bite of winter had come early this year, and the aspens were out to prove that New England isn't the only place where hillsides can change from monochromatic green to spectral diversity. Bands of firs kept their emerald hues, of course, and above and beyond all lay the never-ending teeth of mountains etched on a painfully blue diorama.

Down below, the town shrank to a jumble of structures almost lost in the sheer expanse. The West comes in myriad moods and forms, but always there is that clarity of air that lets one feel the immensity of the landscape and the insignificance of oneself. Every canyon and riverbed, mountain crest and pass begged for closer inspection. Locals and experienced visitors pointed out innumerable loop options. Some, such as "The Ride to Die," have become classic rides.

On foot, the enormity of such a project would be overwhelming, unless your

*The going gets tough above
Cumberland Basin in the
Rockies.*

Allen Carrasco





Fat Tire Week combines serious mountain bike races at Crested Butte (top, opposite), with convivial get-togethers...

name happens to be Lewis or Clark. But on my poor old, much-abused Fuji there was hope. Maybe not this time — four days would hardly make a dent in that virgin country. But there was hope that with careful planning, repeated visits and a good mount I could someday be intimate with all that lay before my eyes.

Right now, though, it was time to get intimate with the race. Although the road was never baby ring steep, keeping a good tempo at this altitude took more than strong legs. It took the lungs of an Inca. Ned Overend showed he possessed strong legs and good lungs.

A mere win wouldn't do. Overend wanted to make a statement. Winner of most of the 1985 Rocky Mountain dirt bike events, he wanted to demonstrate that he could do better than just win in the absence of reigning national champion Joe Murray.

Overend was denied a fair chance against Murray at the Ross New England Three Day when his first-lap flat netted him only the plaudits of a heroic chase. He got some revenge on the way home from New England when he finally managed to beat Murray at a Wisconsin event. But it was on his home turf — with all the top teams represented and knowledgeable fans in abundance — that the Durango, Colorado, resident wanted to clearly establish a new order.

His four-minute victory margin spoke for itself. Well, almost. Unfortunately for Ned, his one-man effort at revolution was not all it appeared to be. No doubt the altitude, frequent races, and travel fatigue left many top contenders at less than their best; but what really stuck the pin in the balloon of inspiration was the poor level of race organization.

A few years ago Neil Murdoch took over direction of Fat Tire Week after

some internecine warfare with the local Cook brothers. Enthusiastic Murdoch and his staff may be, but experts at race organization they are not. For example, times for the second half of the downhill were highly suspect. Gaps in the lineup were treated in an irregular manner, and roadside impressions of descenders' speeds often didn't jibe with the published results. It was a shame for all concerned. Tom Ritchey is a superb bike handler by any standard and if he did win there shouldn't be a hint of suspicion. Through no fault of his own, there was.

Comic relief was provided by Rich Cast, the perennial crowd-pleasing stunt rider. As riders and fans waited into the second hour for the awards presentation to begin, Cast did his patented over-the-picnic-table, end-to-end trick. Then he hopped over it sideways.

There comes a time for every serious cyclist when frivolity is not enough. The escalator of effort lets off on the top floor of "ultimate test." For Fat Tire Week this has always been Pearl Pass.

At 12,700 feet above sea level, Pearl is one of the highest true passes in the U.S. It was established nearly a century ago to permit silver ore mined in Aspen to be taken to the rail head at Crested Butte. It simultaneously testifies to the richness of the ore and the madness of men. Every wagon load must have endured an epic journey. The history books show pictures of long teams of mules hitched to the ore wagons, but frankly, I still find it hard to believe they actually did it.

The passage of a century hasn't altered the "road" over Pearl Pass. It is as gnarly, boulder strewn and windswept as ever. What has changed is the mentality of the respective towns. When the silver ore, in commercial quantities, became worked out, both towns almost

...and a mass ride up Pearl Pass (left) to what in 1985 was a summit covered in deep snow.

Allen Carrasco

died, until skiing and other resort activities saved them. Even the recent discovery of molybdenum near Crested Butte couldn't get the locals to pick up their shovels — they voted to ban all such mining in the region. The indigenes think things are pretty well perfect as they are.

The Pearl Pass ride starts with a mass roll-out down Elk street, Crested Butte's main drag. There was not a cop in sight. Mountain bikes *über alles!*

In biology class we discover the paramecium, a tiny creature that fills its environment by dividing and multiplying — something like mountain bikers. Every so often the paramecia take a breather and hold a conference called conjugation. It's a short but poignant time in which they exchange the best of themselves. Rejuvenated, they go their separate ways.

The knobby-tired peloton contains a complete cross section of the off-road community. One couple tows their baby through the early morning chill. The baby is fascinated by the scintillating flash of whirling wheels and bubbling bike babble around him. For this threesome an assault on the lower slopes will suffice. Others know that climbing to Cumberland Basin campground, the former overnight stop, will tax everything they've got. But do it they must.

Roy Rivers and Mark Horowitz — a former Northern California junior champion

who rode mostly dirt from Idaho to Crested Butte just to prepare for this ride — are in the vanguard of the summitteers on a mountain bike tandem. As though this climb weren't hard enough...

The big choice confronting those who make the top is whether to continue. It's about a 50-50 split: 40 or so go on, the rest return. The decision is more related to Sunday's flight time out of Denver than to the ability to bang back over the pass the next day.

In years past bus transportation returning to Crested Butte from Aspen was provided, but this year everyone who dropped off the west side knew he or she would have to muscle his or her way over one of the several possible return routes.

One brave pair from Maryland had flown in on a charter plane Friday night. Obviously into their "golden" years, they had every intention of enjoying them. Just because their definition of enjoyment happened to be the norm of a group 30 years younger didn't mean they were to be deprived of the thrills of Pearl Pass.

Gray hair flying, they clambered over the desolate upper slopes and made the pogo stick ride into Aspen long before dark and well ahead of the last person. Their satisfaction glowed.

Nature had her own private program last year, however: pass sealant in the form of a foot of overnight snow. Six a.m. Aspen departees returned to town, de-

feated by impenetrable drifts. My hope of getting through to Crested Butte via the longer but lower Taylor Pass disappeared in the flurry of reports drifting through Aspen Valley.

Cheryl Lindstrom, a noted sports reporter for the Boulder *Daily Camera*, and a friend had done Taylor two days earlier. They had missed the west side shortcut to Pearl Pass, and nighttime found them 20 miles out of Crested Butte in a judge's ranch house pleading for a ride from an acquaintance in town. If that happened to me I would miss my flight out of Denver, with another unexcused day from work and other nasty repercussions.

The Cook brothers held a war council over coffee. "Wait 'til eleven and blast," I heard. Well, okay, if one, you're strong, and two, you know the way. Maps appeared, others consulted. The Maryland couple arranged a ride back in the baggage truck. Some took a taxi. Two chose the short but intense Scofield Pass. A few opted to stay over. It was every group for itself.

Sad to say, your *Winning* team beat a retreat in the jeep rented for the photographer. The temptation to beg the consequences and set off on uncharted courses was almost overwhelming. But then I remembered how persistent our revered editor can be in pursuing a story — and the guy he's assigned to do it. Oh well, there's always next year. ■