



Bruce Conrad

The Iron Horse Bicycle Classic dropped its criterium and added a mountain bike race to its traditional road race schedule. The new formula was a winner for Ned Overend.

KING OF THE MOUNTAIN

by Jeremiah Kaplan



The United States Cycling Federation (USCF) and the National Off-Road Bicycle Association (NORBA) have had their quarrels. When NORBA formed, the USCF reacted as if it just wished the new

guy on the block would disappear. The USCF did not want its riders participating in NORBA mountain bike races. But in 1984 the Iron Horse Bicycle Classic, a race in Durango, Colorado, in its 13th year, dropped its criterium event and added a mountain bike race to its Memorial Day weekend schedule. Both USCF and NORBA racers would be in the same place at the same time, and many might want to compete with each other.

"We have consistently had 400 to 500 racers in the Iron Horse since 1976," said race organizer John Glover. "Before 1984 it was a three-day stage race with intense USCF competition. We established the mountain bike race to involve more people in the event. Now we still get the 400 to 500 USCF riders, and 200 mountain bike racers also show up."

In 1984 it was risky for a USCF rider to compete in the mountain bike race. Early in the spring there was a verbal agreement between the two organizations, but it fell through. It was threatened that any USCF rider who entered the mountain bike race would be suspended for 30 days.

But in January 1985, Glenn O'Dell, NORBA's president, attended the USCF board meeting and convinced them that NORBA had no intention of infringing on their territory. They were not interested in cyclo-cross or skinny-tire racing. An agreement was signed allowing USCF racers to compete in NORBA events and NORBA racers to compete and go through the USCF classification process.

With the conflict resolved, the Iron Horse Bicycle Classic offered a "King of the Mountain" prizelist for the best combined times in the two races. A rider winning all three prizes would go home with \$1300. The stage was set for a USCF-NORBA showdown.

The Iron Horse Classic began 14 years ago as a race between lungs and steam, muscles and steel. The Durango to Silverton Railroad is the only regularly scheduled narrow gauge steam engine railroad in the United States. It has been running for 105 years. Twice a day it chugs along the 47 miles from Durango to Silverton, following the Animas River, through the gorge the river has carved in the San Juan mountains. The road from Durango (6512 feet elevation) to Silverton (9032 feet), paralleling the train tracks, climbs over two high mountain passes. It rises over 4000 feet from



Durango and descends nearly 2000 feet into Silverton.

Fourteen years ago Jim Mayer of Durango was the train engineer, and his brother Tom was an avid cyclist. Tom challenged his brother to a race. He rode the passes and beat the train. Since then it has developed into a consistently well organized, fun race. It carries national prestige points for senior men in Categories I and II, and world selection status for juniors. It is one of many races looked to by the Coors Classic in selecting teams to invite, which is an added incentive for riders to perform well.

The local people of the small town of Durango have become sophisticated race promoters. The entire town supports the race. The prize money — \$2000 for the NORBA race, \$2000 for the USCF race and \$2000 for the combined King of the Mountain event— is generated locally.

The event has attracted world-class competitors. Last year Alexi Grewal won it (his ninth year in the race) and Doug Shapiro came in second. The present course record was set in 1982 by Jonathan Boyer. This year's race attracted such luminaries as Australian pursuit team Olympic gold medalist Dean Woods. But most past winners have been from Colorado, and the local favorite was Ned Overend, a Durango resident since 1980. As well as being a top competitor in Colorado road racing, Overend is on the Schwinn national mountain bike team and placed second to Fisher's Joe Murray in the NORBA nationals last year.

The race began as the train blew its steam whistle and rolled out of the station in downtown Durango. The riders were paced through town, parallel to the train, by the lead vehicle, and the competition began at the edge of town.

For 15 miles the road was mostly level, and no breaks from the pack occurred. Then began the 20-mile ascent to the top of Coal Bank Pass, the first climb. The main break occurred about halfway up the climb. The lead pack soon dropped the weaker climbers and those not acclimated to the altitude, thinning down to Ned Overend, Doug Smith and Glenn Saunders (both Diacompe/Denver Spoke/SunTour).

The three stayed together to the top of

Uphill sections decided the fate of both stages of the Iron Horse. Overend (in red), Glenn Saunders and Doug Smith were best on Coal Bank Pass (top), while the off-road climbs forced most to shoulder their bikes.

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10,700-foot Coal Bank Pass, down the three-mile descent that followed and up the next four, steep miles through snow flurries to the summit of 10,910-foot Molas Pass. But six miles farther and 2000 feet below, Saunders was first into Silverton, over an hour ahead of the train, with a time of 2:06:45, 11 seconds behind Boyer's 1982 record. Overend was second, nine seconds behind, and Smith was third, at 21 seconds.

"I was a little surprised that I was able to stay with Doug and Ned," said winner Saunders at the finish in front of the rustic American Legion Building in Silverton. "We played it two on one against Ned. Doug is a stronger climber than I am, but I am a better descender and sprinter. He sacrificed himself so that I could win the race."

"I didn't challenge Ned as strongly as I could have," said Smith. "We stayed together to the top of Molas, and then Glenn lost Ned on the descent."

Many of the USCF racers, not aware of the available prize money in the mountain bike race the next day and the King of Mountain combined prize, went on from Silverton to Telluride, Colorado, for a criterium race there. Smith and Saunders, preparing to join the U.S. national team for the amateur Giro d'Italia, went to Telluride, leaving Overend the favorite for King of the Mountain.

Steve Cook, a top NORBA competitor with the Paradise Bike Team from Crested Butte, Colorado, tied for third among the senior Category IIIs with a time of 2:17:53. Other King of the Mountain contenders included USCF riders John Weissenrider of Boulder, 16th among the Seniors I and II, with a time of 2:13:08, and John Frey of Albuquerque, New Mexico, 18th in the Seniors I and II with a time of 2:13:54.

Among the international competitors, Brendan O'Callaghan of the Irish Killian's team was the only finisher in the top 20, with a time of 2:24:24. "It was a very rough race," he said. "The altitude got to us. We couldn't get oxygen. We have been in Boulder training for a few weeks, but you come to a certain point in this race, and wham, your legs just stop. In Ireland you never see climbs like this one."

Ned Overend was involved in setting up the mountain bike course in 1984, although he didn't race it that year because of USCF restrictions. It is an eight-mile loop on Jeep trails and logging roads through national forest land, among ponderosa pine, scrub oak and juniper trees.

The course offered striking views of the Animas Valley and the 14,000-foot peaks of the San Juans. It has one very steep, rough climb, but it is not a pure climber or descender's race. The course elevation varies from about 7000 to 8000 feet, and many of the climbs and descents are gra-

dual. It has rough as well as smooth sections, and mud, sand and a stream crossing, to make it an all-around test of mountain biking skills. The senior men's race completed three laps.

The steep climb comes during the first third of the race and is too steep to ride. Racers have to carry their bikes up 500 feet. In the first lap Overend led to the top of the climb, his bicycle slung over his shoulder, followed closely by Steve Cook, John Frey and Bob Gregorio (another local Durango rider). But by the end of the first lap, Overend had pulled out to a 1:10 lead over Cook.

Overend continued to expand on the lead for the next two laps and finished with a time of 1:46:00. Cook was second, 4:20 behind, and Gregorio was third at 5:27. Frey was disqualified because he switched bikes after breaking a derailleur. The first regular USCF rider to finish was John Weissenrider, in sixth with a time of 1:57:30, putting him third in the King of the Mountain competition.

"This is my type of race," said Overend after his victory. "It's a difficult race. There is no drafting or team strategy—the strongest rider wins. I jammed the whole way. I was disappointed at not winning yesterday [in the road race]. I wanted to win both, but I had to win one."

For the rest of the season Overend will be racing mostly mountain bikes. He plans to do at least 15 races with the Schwinn team. He is riding a brand new custom Schwinn built by Chris Mueller that has a steep seat tube and a laid-back head tube. "For this course the bike was perfect," commented Overend. "It's a rough course, and a flexible bike descends well."

"Chasing Ned is a hard job," said Cook. "I wanted to stay with him at first and gain as much as I could on the other King of the Mountain racers. I haven't been training that much. But I think Ned and I are going to give Joe Murray fits this year."

"The King of the Mountain is a good concept," Cook continued. "It shows who is an all-around rider, who can do it all. I think a lot of USCF people didn't show because they are not good mountain bike riders. Many are strong hill climbers, but in mountain biking you can't focus on the wheel of whoever you are drafting. You get roughed up, and it takes upper body strength. That is where road racers are at a disadvantage."

Many USCF riders might disagree with him, but they weren't there to prove it. Some skipped the mountain bike race because they were not aware of the combined prize. Perhaps they read only the road race part of the brochure. They will have another chance next year. At this point the Iron Horse King of the Mountain challenge is a unique event, but it is an event whose time has come. ■