



PHOTOGRAPHY © 1985 GORDON BANBRIDGE

Mountain Racing:

Bombed At Whiskeytown

*Mountain bike races come and go,
but already this infant sport
has its classics, including the Whiskeytown
Downhill. And winners come and go, but
already there's a Merckx named Murray.*

By Jacquie Phelan

I remember my first dirt race the same way I remember my first lover: as a bittersweet lesson in the ways of the world. Sure, there were roses on the pillow, but the guy made off with not only my innocence, but my Springsteen records.

The 1981 Whiskeytown, being my "first time," had its . . . uh . . . ups and downs.

Naturally, I was scared to death of crashing on my friend Fred's prized Breezer—isn't crashing the name of the off-road game?—yet I was drawn to the opportunity of racing with California's best. Judging from the flyer ("6000-foot elevation drop! Cardiac arrest downhill, gnarly uphill!") it was going to be tough. Of course, they neglected to mention the 4000 feet of relentless climbing we'd have to take care of in order to reap the 6000-foot downhill.

Despite my outward insistence that I'd just "tour this one," I went for all I was worth. I only "inspected the bushes" once. As it turned out, the BMXer I was duking it out with on the hills all the way to the finish has since earned the name "Mr. Downhill," Jim Deaton.

And so it went. From that year on, as

At the start you see the rowdy funsters popping the requisite wheelies, and the sponsored riders popping the requisite vitamins.

long as I could pedal a bike, I would return to Whiskeytown.

This year, the trucks piled high with bikes and the cars with eight-pronged racks began to pour into the Oakbottom campground as much as a week early, looking forward to a few days of serious, ah, training.

No one thought to listen to the weatherman. For five successive years it has been unbearably hot (hence the 7:30 a.m. start) and mortally dry; why should this one be any different? After all, we're talking an average three inches of rainfall



©1985 JIM YATES

To win the Bad Breaks trophy this year, you'd have had to beat this guy, who walked the last six miles carrying the remains of his bike.



in the summer months up Redding way.

Imagine the surprise of these hundred-odd revelers along the shores of Whiskeytown Lake, when, on the eve of the race, the need for a tent ("you were right after all, Mary") was manifested in a cold, bag-drenching downpour.

Back in town, those who opted for the neon-and-formica luxury of a motel would, after scanning the town mall and checking out the movie theater, mutate into rolling street gangs. These roving packs ("teams," to their sponsors) occasionally intersected, erupting into jousting matches along the boulevard.

With the threat of rain immanent, some of us headed for the local thrift shop where all garments were on sale at 10 cents each. Hard to go wrong at those prices, especially when all you brought was a lycra body billboard.

Race day comes with no gentle segue into morning, just a rainy, raw blackness that your watch insists on calling 5:00 a.m. Some riders, hoping it would all go away, completely oversleep. Others omit breakfast, shoving in mouthfuls of cold rice pilaf or wet bread—anything to sock away a few calories for the race.

Mercifully, registration takes only five



Whiskeytown

minutes, then it's off to load the bike onto trucks with hundreds of others—300 would register within the hour—and a memorably nauseous 20-mile ride up the mountain in a bus marked "VIP shuttle."

At the start, you see the rowdy funsters popping the requisite wheelies, and the sponsored riders popping the requisite pre-race vitamins. Here and there, a dowdy pink housecoat or a Rotarian blue sportcoat shows up on the riders with an eye for disposable quality.

Somehow, miraculously, the clouds begin to tear apart, exposing blue sky above, and the promise of sun.

The first thing you notice after the "Go!" is that the statistically insignificant little blips in the course profile represent a four-mile climb to 5000 feet, followed by an eight-mile descent in what feels like a foot of sand.

Turns out the stuff isn't sand at all. "It's decomposed granite," curbstone geologist and race sponsor Jeff Lindsay told me afterward, "It's loose and granular like sand, but it has different breakaway characteristics." Which means that your front wheel dives into it in the turns, then



Once again, it was Mr. Consistency, Joe Murray, winning another race. Murray has also won four of the five Pacific States Series races this year, and about everything else in sight.

stops moving at some critical point, leaving an astonished but upright rider still in control of a sideways bike.

That's easy to say if your psychic "power animal" is a mountain goat. Mine being a frog, I chose to jump off, i.e. abandon the bike whenever the going got too tricky.

There are some "minor" off-the-bike pushes for another couple of thousand feet, through creeks and washed-out gullies, dropping you (literally) from fire

road to trail, then down onto a single-track (capacity: one goat, one-half horse, or one bicycle) trail destined to star in every post-race tall tale.

By the time the finish line comes into view, you know that another chapter in your personal history is about to come to an end. A little beer to tamp it down, a few hours in the shade of a nearby *madrone*, and you'll forget about strangling The Chain Gang for calling this a "downhill." As one shade tree racer told his inquiring friend, "I'm alive, aren't I?"

Someone had to win, of course, and once again it was Joe Murray of the Fisher team, with a hefty four-minute lead over Mountain Goat's George Theobald, who came on strong in the last 10 miles of the race, passing early favorite Max Jones (Ritchey) and Gavin Chilcott (Specialized).

Murray later said it was Jones who looked like he could pull away from everyone on the climbs. Nevertheless, Joe slowed a fraction to take in the postcard views of the surrounding peaks. "I had to," Murray recalled. "It was too incredible to not sneak a look. It was worth it. I pulled away from Max in the last half of the race and never saw anyone again. Through the whole thing, I just kept thinking of the hills to come, and praying I wouldn't have any mechanical failures, hoping the bike wouldn't fall apart. By the last checkpoint, I allowed myself to think about winning and how nice it would be." ■

RESULTS:

Pro/Am Men:

| | |
|---------------------------------------|---------|
| 1. Joe Murray (Fisher) | 2:39:28 |
| 2. George Theobald (Mountain Goat) | 2:43:29 |
| 3. Gavin Chilcott (Specialized) | 2:45:33 |
| 4. Max Jones (Ritchey) | 2:47:22 |
| 5. Todd De Angelis (Wilderness Trail) | 2:50:55 |
| 6. Casey Kunselman (Wilderness Trail) | 2:51:57 |
| 7. Jim Deaton (Fisher) | 2:55:52 |
| 8. Joe Sloup (Ross) | 2:57:45 |
| 9. Scot Nicol (Ibis) | 2:59:00 |
| 10. Kye Sharp (Schwinn) | 2:59:33 |

Expert Men:

| | |
|-------------------|---------|
| 1. Chris Mahannah | 2:53:49 |
| 2. Joe Breeze | 3:02:44 |
| 3. Larry Sousa | 3:03:56 |

Pro/Am and Expert Women:

| | |
|--------------------------------------|---------|
| 1. Jacquie Phelan (Wilderness Trail) | 3:20:24 |
| 2. Lynne Morrill | 3:47:19 |
| 3. Tina Barnet | 3:56:15 |

Veteran Combined:

| | |
|-----------------|---------|
| 1. Bill Best | 3:13:57 |
| 2. Rick Keams | 3:31:46 |
| 3. Rob Sangalli | 3:32:15 |

Master Combined:

| | |
|----------------|---------|
| 1. Tom Pickett | 3:24:29 |
| 2. Thomas Reed | 3:54:18 |
| 3. Bob Shaw | 3:56:09 |

| | |
|--|---------|
| Single Speed Combined: 1. Robert Nilsen | 3:23:53 |
| 2. David Gray | 3:31:35 |
| 3. Chester Gourdin | 3:34:02 |

It's a Racer's Race

• **Whiskeytown Downhill** (hwis'keetoun doun' hil) *n* 1. A 35-mile off-road endurance race featuring 4100 feet of climbing and beer at the finish. 2. Any ride purported to lose more elevation than it gains; an exercise in shameless exaggeration.

Most self-respecting fat-tire racers in these parts will circle two critical dates when the new year's calendar goes up on the wall: mom's birthday, and the first weekend in June that means "Whiskeytown." Hell hath no fury like that of the riders who forgot to meet an entry deadline.

The Whiskeytown is one of a rare (and perhaps dwindling) species of event known as a racer's race. In an expanding desert of gnat-sized, multilap BMX courses designed more for media accessibility and spectator convenience than for racer well-being, this point-to-pointer looms like an oasis of deep creek crossings and endless miles of conifers.

Whiskeytown is an honest-to-God, sweat-caked dusty mother of a race; a race into *real* wilderness—the kind you get lost in. It takes anywhere from two and a half to seven hours to finish, depending on the condition of both the rider and the course.

Despite efficiently-run checkpoints sprinkled along the course, you're ba-

sically on your own when you get a flat. Sure, it's brilliantly marked, and there are sag-wagons for the ones who opt out, but little things like a broken frame or sheared-off seatpost only spur the dauntless rider on: to finish on such a wreck entitles the bearer to present his or her queen-for-a-day sob story for the crowd's roaring approval.

Why do they bother? Well, the "bad breaks" trophy rivals even the overall winner's exquisite sculpture. The winners of every category receive scaled-down versions of the hand-brazed wire-and-brass rider gracefully leaning into a turn, cornering a pint-sized little brown jug (it's Whiskeytown, remember?). The "bad breaks" jug has caved in from the impact of a crumpled bike, the rider performing what is widely known as a Flying W.

How did this famous race surface in the not-too-famous town of Redding, California? Why is it the standard by which every other would-be "classic clunker race" is measured? Big-time promo? Huge budget? Nope, it's something as simple as that ineffable commodity called "TLC." Buckets of it. Every year, the planning is thorough, the follow-up is smooth and (seemingly) effortless.

Another reason that Whiskeytown

towers over the other races is that it is not put on for profit. It is one of the remaining good-time events with a competitive twist: it is Everyman racing against himself, with a few clowns out in front trying to win the thing.

Every finisher can expect, for his money, not just the day's festivities (and the epic back-seat mess that follows every rider home), but the results of the day's carnage. Long after the last Whiskeytown grime has swirled down the bathtub drain, after the bike has been scrubbed back to normal, and even the sore arms, bruised shins and scraped elbows are mere memories, a fattish envelope will arrive in the mail. This is a record of your tour of duty, a four-page, single-spaced list of every entrant, his place of origin, category, and time.

Good times, bad times, slow times, fast times, all of them stacked one against the other—in finishing order—the winner in the lead, followed by about 30 guys who kept Joe in sight the whole way, until the last trail section, or the flat, or the crash.

Then, below them, you see little internal races-within-the-race. The time differences shrink and expand to tell of a cluster of guys who, having abandoned any thought of winning, must have summoned their last gasps to pass the first woman; the fellow who clearly underestimated his riding buddy, and gave up all hope of staying with him; the vets who kept careful track of the other blue-tagged race numbers; the women who refused to be dead last; the insane single-speeders, in their perpetual search for coaster-brake martyrdom.

This "little detail" singles out a great event: Whiskeytown is not put on for the glory of just a handful of athletes. Like New York's Apple Lap, the Davis Double Century and the Tecate-Ensenada, every competitor is cheered, each effort a noble one. And what more stirring memento than a finisher's list, with *proof* that one had the guts to do it? Not to mention the eventuality that, some day, some "shade tree racer" will be able to brag about having beaten a future muddy Merckx, owing to the fact that the kid began racing at age 12, in Whiskeytown.

