

WHO REALLY INVENTED THE MOUNTAIN BIKE?

Charles Kelly reveals the true roots of the sport

By John Ker

■ If we said that mountain bikes have really taken off in popularity over the last few years, it would be an incredible understatement. Mike Sinyard, the founder of Specialized, introduced the first production mountain bike in '82. Sinyard's "Stumpjumper" met with such success that other bike companies around the world quickly started making their own mountain bikes. Now, not quite ten years later, mountain bikes are far and away the most popular bikes in America and appear well on their way to taking over the world.

Of course, people in the bicycle industry know that there were other mountain bikes before the Stumpjumper. A number of small-time bike builders were making their own mountain bikes before Specialized. The question of who built the first mountain bike is likely to generate debate whenever it's raised. There is one man, however, who has come to be recognized as a veritable oracle of early-day mountain bike lore. The man's name is Charles Kelly.

When the first mountain bike races were being organized on Mount Tamalpais in Marin County, California, Charles Kelly was there. He rode. He raced. He observed—and he wrote. Kelly was the man who started the first mountain bike publication in America, the legendary *Fat Tire Flyer*, a counter-culture-inspired magazine that he began in '81 and ended in '87.

We called on Kelly to find out what he has to say about who invented the mountain bike.

THE KELLY VERSION

"My opinion is only my opinion," Kelly assured us when we told him why we were calling. "Probably wherever in the world there is a supply of one-speeds, somebody invented the mountain bike," he went on. He then explained that the things that make a mountain bike different from a normal bike are not a big deal and that it would be natural for anybody involved with bikes to make the changes that would turn a regular cruiser-style bike into a mountain bike. The main points are the use of wide tires for riding in dirt, multiple gearing for climbing



A good rider, too: Mountain bike journalist/historian Charles Kelly was among the first bike riders to take on Marin County's famed Repack Downhill (so named because it was usually necessary to repack the grease in the wheel bearings after a fast run).

Still a legend: Joe Breeze is the man who gets the credit for building and selling the first mountain bikes. ▶

hills, high bottom brackets for clearing obstacles, cantilever brakes for high-efficiency stopping, and relatively straight handlebars for maximum control.

The first person to build such a bike, to Kelly's knowledge, was a college student

named John Finley Scott, who built one in 1953 to help him explore abandoned roads in the forests of California (where he lived) and Oregon (where he attended college). Now a sociology professor at the University of California at Davis, Dr. Scott confirmed



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vinced whether Gary or Joe really deserves the record).

Most of the guys were riding old clunker-style, one-speed, cruiser-frame bikes that weighed about 50 pounds and used drum brakes, Kelly recalls, but they were all interested in improving their bikes to help them win the weekly races. Joe Breeze had taken a class in bicycle building and knew how to make a bike if he wanted to. "I gave Joe a lot of money, I think it was \$750, to build me a bike, and he built it," Kelly says. "It's now in the Mountain Bike Hall of Fame in Crested Butte, Colorado, restored to its original condition. It's the 'Number 2' Breezer. The first one he built for himself; that's in the Oakland Museum in the California Dreamin' exhibit."

As it turned out, Joe Breeze went on to build quite a few mountain bikes for the riders in the area, and now, 15 years later, for riders all over the world.

So who built the first popular mountain bike? Well, for historical purposes, we'd have to agree with Charles Kelly that the guy who deserves the credit is Joe Breeze. Unless somebody else rewrites the books on mountain biking, only the mountain bike trivia kings will need to remember the name of Professor John Finley Scott and the year 1953.

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that he did build himself what would pass as a mountain bike when he was 19 and still in college. However, Prof. Scott's bike was never put on the market, as he went on to graduate school and teaching. As a result, the evolution of the modern-day mountain bike is generally traced back to the collective efforts of a large group of friends who used to get together and ride their bikes down Mt. Tamalpais in the hills of Marin County.

THE FIRST RACE

One particular day back in '76, the riders agreed to get together and settle their arguments about who was fastest by timing each other's descents on a 1200-foot-elevation-change, 1.8-mile stretch of Mt. Tam. The riders present that day were Charles Kelly, Fred Wolf, Alan Bonds, Bob Peterson, Wendy Cragg and Bob Burrowes. It was Burrowes who won, as Kelly recalls.

As it turned out, a few of the other Mt. Tam regulars who had missed those first time trials wanted to get their shot at the record the following week, and the time trials quickly became a regular event. A regular by the name of Joe Breeze won the most races, Kelly remembers, but Gary Fisher got the record for the fastest time (although Kelly points out that someone else did the timing that day, and it's clear that he's not con-

THE FIRST MOUNTAIN BIKES THE NAME GAME

• Did you ever wonder why nobody tried to start a company called Mountain Bikes? Well, as a matter of fact, somebody did. Back in the early days of the sport, Gary Fisher and Charles Kelly were roommates who started buying bike parts from a lot of different manufacturers and putting them together to build bikes under the name "MountainBikes." They even opened a checking account with that as the name of their business, Kelly recalls.

However, when they hired a lawyer to help them file the papers for their business, the lawyer asked them if the "Mountain Bikes" they were building were designed only to be ridden in the mountains. They said, "Yes," thinking that was probably the "right" answer, and settled the matter for good. Their application for a copyright protection on the name "MountainBikes" was denied, because mountain bikes were, by the laws governing such things, now identified by Fisher and Kelley as a generic type of bike designed for use in the mountains, and so they could not copyright the name.

Gary Fisher now builds Gary Fisher Bicycles. Charles Kelly splits his time between his career as a bicycle journalist and his sideline as the owner of a piano-moving business—and nobody builds "MountainBikes" anymore. □