

# Mountain Bikers Take on the World

By P. YURI SAMER

Ten years ago, mountain bikes were available as custom-order items made in lots of 1 to 10 by a handful of garage-shop torch bearers in northern California. And mountain biking offered nothing more than pick-up contests with finish lines scratched in the dirt, the refuge of independent wanderers seeking quick relief from car campers and their trailers.

Tomorrow, 1,500 competitors from 20 countries will gather in Durango, Colo., for the weeklong edition of the world mountain bike championships, the first sanctioned by the Union Cycliste Internationale, the world administrative body of the sport. To those bikers who are not yet 50, the first steps of a sport barely older than their children are still a vivid memory.

"Otis Guy and Joe Breeze convinced Gary Fisher and I to take our bikes up the mountain on the trails

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## A sport that once had few devotees now has millions.

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that wound around on their way down," said Charles Kelly, the original sales manager for what would become the first mountain bike company of record (Fisher Mountain-Bikes) and noted chronicler of the nascent sport's activities.

"The bikes were so much poorer performers than road bikes of the time," Kelly said, "It was the woods experience, not the riding experience, that got your attention. But because most of us had good road bikes we had an idea of how good a bike could be."

Breeze, Guy and a couple of other area craftsmen applied the lightweight, multigeared technology of contemporary road bicycles to the sturdy newspaperboy designs they had grown up on. They created a light, comfortable bicycle able to withstand treatment that would make a 4 x 4 pickup truck junkyard fodder.

When mass manufacturers began producing the new bikes in the early 80's, mountain biking grew more quickly than anything since rock and roll. Outdoors people of every stripe

began using mountain bikes for an intense aerobic workout with the intimate access to nature. According to the Bicycle Federation of America, the bikes now account for 50 percent, or 7.5 million, of the bicycles sold annually in the United States.

"We ride straight-in and go beyond the sound range of cars," said Bob Windauer, describing his approach to hunting on wheels. An orthodontist in his mid-40's and the father of four, Windauer developed a preference for hunting on mountain bikes near his home in Columbia Falls, Mont. "Then for say, elk, we stop every 400 to 500 yards, bugle, try to pick up something," he said.

"It's really gratifying to get to the top of a hill and say: 'I made it. Look at the view out there!'" said Peter Prebus, a 16-year-old rider and racer from Eugene, Ore. "On the road, you have to deal with cars, and a lot of car drivers are rude to cyclists to the point of being dangerous."

Under the auspices of the National Off-Road Bicycle Association (Norba), mountain bike racing has grown to include nationally sanctioned competitions in age classes from 14 to 45 and over, with each age class divided into categories of expertise (beginner, sport or intermediate, expert and professional). There are approximately 300 such events in the United States every year.

The most common type of race is the cross-country event, a 15-40 mile mass-start competition over a variety of terrain conditions. But there are also uphill and downhill races, obstacle-course trials — tests of deft bike handling, and ultra-marathon events of between 75 and 200 miles.

Prebus likes the way the terrain handling and power requirements of mountain bike racing splinters race fields into individual efforts against the course instead of encouraging the mass assemble-and-dash of road racing. "In road racing everyone just rolls along in a pack until something happens that presents an opportunity and then someone does something," said Prebus. "I almost fell asleep out there. Mountain biking demands that you go all the time."

Mountain bike racing also differs from road racing by demanding a solid dose of self-reliance from competitors. They cannot accept assistance from nonracers, nor can they exchange bicycles as in road racing. The same bike and racer must complete the course.

According to Norba membership polls, its 5,000 licensed competitors



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Mountain biking attracts more than 5,000 competitors to 300 races held in the United States each year.

are college educated, and largely between the ages of 24 and 28 or 37 and 45, and male (89 percent). But competitive mountain biking also attracts women.

"I got tired of hearing my husband say, 'You have no idea of what it was like out there,'" said Dawn Rose of Seattle. "Now, it's the one thing we have totally in common."

Dawn and her husband, Kevin, a machinist at Boeing, have arranged work schedules so they can train together during the week. Now, Kevin said, they drive home from weekend races sharing and comparing experiences on courses. "We get to say to each other, you remember that spot where . . . that's where I went right over,' and you know what the other one is talking about," he said.



Europe, Japan, and Australia discovered fat-tire bike racing in the 80's as well, and soon there were concur-

rent "world championships" on four continents. The competing claims will be resolved this week in Durango with the awarding of the rainbow jersey, emblematic of the world's best mountain bike racer, in each age and sex class.

Jerseys will be awarded for two events: a three-and-a-half-mile downhill run, which drops 1,200 feet, and the cross-country event.

The American team roster was selected from a field of 100 sponsored professionals and 1,500 expert category amateurs on the basis of performance at the national championships held in Mammoth Lakes, Calif., Aug. 8-12, and in a national points series held at various locations throughout the summer.

For information on mountain bike racing contact the National Off-Road Bicycle Association, 1750 E. Boulder St., Colorado Springs, Colo. 80909 (719-578-4717). For information on this week's world championships, call (303) 259-4621 in Durango.