

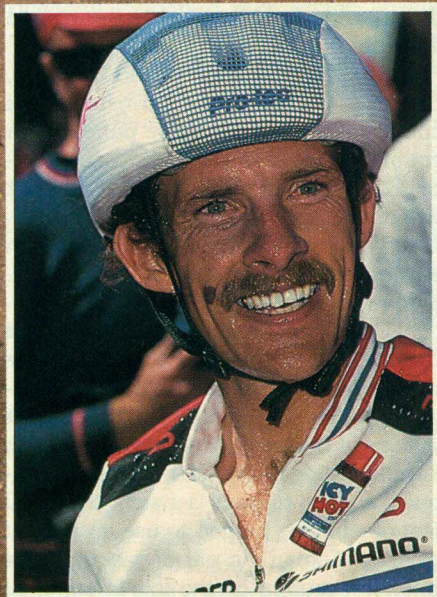


by CHARLES R. KELLY

THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

Ned Overend romps to victory at Mammoth.

Overend leads Tomac in the cross-country race.



Ned Overend left no doubt that he is the best in the world.

With not one but two world mountain bike championships being held this year, Ned Overend eliminated any argument about which was the "real" one by going out and winning both. After riding away with the European version held in France in mid-August, Overend returned to the United States to capture the Raleigh Technium World Championships held a week later at Mammoth Mountain, Calif.

In the women's division at Mammoth, Sara Ballentyne came out of nowhere to win the hillclimb and shock reigning national champion Cindy Whitehead in the cross-country. Later, an aroused Whitehead showed that she was still the fastest female downhill on the planet, destroying the nearest competition by over half a minute in less than four miles. Joe Sloup defended his downhill win on the same course a week earlier with a big repeat to assure his own planetary descending title.

During the weekend a couple of newcomers turned in impressive performances perfectly timed to earn them sponsorships offered on the spot. Raleigh is obviously ready to make a move into the ranks of sponsored and serious off-road race teams, snagging a jubilant Margaret Day, silver medalist in everything and obviously a top female prospect. Carrying-strap inventor "Jungle" Jon Poschman also got the nod from Raleigh; his finishes were respectable, although not nearly as good as Day's. Still, he is one of the better mountain bike mechanics and equipment testers among the racers, so it couldn't hurt to have him around.

On the disappointment end was John Tomac, off-road racing's wunderkind and heir apparent whenever Overend decides to stop acting like a kid and slows down a little. Tomac was shut out of the gold medal column and had to settle for a silver, a bronze, and a DNF in his favorite discipline, the downhill.

Day one at the championships featured the mass-start hillclimb, which ran nearly four miles and 2,000 vertical feet from the staging area near the ski area headquarters to the top of Mammoth Mountain. Starting elevation was already 9,000 feet, which favored riders like Overend, Max Jones, and John Weissenrider, all of whom live in higher elevations.

Typically, Overend waited until the group faced the first serious pitch and then turned on the afterburners. His time of 32:04 up the mountain took more than a minute and a half out of Tomac and nearly three minutes out of bronze medalist and Schwinn teammate Weissenrider.

In the women's hillclimb, Whitehead arrived at the starting line too late to do anything but watch the race start without



Tomac, Overend and Murray await the start of the men's cross-country event.

her. Ballentyne, riding for Fisher, completed the shorter women's course in 31:09 to beat rookie Day by only 25 seconds, while third-place finisher Lisa Muhich finished a minute down on the leader.

The women's hillclimb was a good indication of the considerable new depth and enthusiasm in women's mountain bike racing this year. Any lingering doubts about this phenomenon were quickly dispelled the next day in the women's cross-country event. Ballentyne continued her winning ways, finishing four minutes in front of Day over the 14-mile course, which included 3,000 feet of climbing. Third place went to Muhich, who was recently signed to a racing contract by Specialized. Crowd favorite Whitehead finished nine minutes off the pace in seventh place, possibly her most disappointing showing all season.

After the race, Whitehead admitted that the women's field has developed rapidly this season, perhaps more rapidly than she had realized. She said she was pleased in some respects, but less pleased in others. "It's changed the quality of women's racing, and that's really good," she commented, adding, "I

obviously underestimated them; it's been so easy [for me] all year that I know my personal fitness level has gone down. You can't get that back in just a week, but I'll be around. I'm 25 years old, and I have a few more good years left."

The men's pro-am cross-country race was four laps of the 7.2-mile course, which included 1,500 feet of climbing per lap. Most of the pre-race speculation was about who might take third place, since it was already assumed that Tomac and Overend would shoot it out for the win. Murray, certainly a contender, was a mystery. Practicing the no-acclimation theory of arriving at altitude just before the race, he had passed on the hillclimb and arrived the night before the cross country. Meanwhile, Weissenrider's hillclimbing made him a good candidate, and Mike Kloser was considered a strong dark-horse.

During the first two laps, Tomac and Overend lived up to the expectations regarding their strategy and their strengths. Overend kept pulling away on the climbs, and Tomac kept reeling him in on the extremely difficult descents. Third place belonged to Ross rider Casey Kunselman, who looked strong and managed to stay

within a minute of the leaders as they approached the halfway point. By this time, some contenders were either already out of the picture or about to be. Murray went so far into oxygen debt that he was forced to retire on the second lap, while Sloup disappeared from the field before the end of the first lap. And Kunselman was forced out when he broke the stem on his bike during the rugged descent.

Just before the start of the third lap, Overend went into overdrive and took command of the race as he pulled out a couple of minutes on Tomac and continued stretching his lead during the last half of the race. It was a thoroughly dominant performance that left little doubt in anyone's mind as to who the world champion mountain biker is.

Back in second position, Tomac had only to hang on in order to take a silver medal, but he couldn't do it. The Mon-goose rider fell victim to the oldest malady in the book, "the bonk." Although 29 miles didn't seem far enough to require a rider to pack a lunch, the 6,000 feet of climbing helped to use up a lot of calories. Tomac ran out of gas and went into slow motion on the fourth and final



HARALD JOHNSON

Sara Ballentyne won the women's world championship at Mammoth.

lap. This development gave Kloser the opportunity to move up from third place during the final two miles, and he blasted by the not-quite-golden boy Tomac and pulled ahead by 45 seconds at the finish.

The third day of racing featured a time trial down the course used for the hill-climb. From a philosophical standpoint, downhill mountain bike racing is controversial. This gonzo event is unique to mountain bikes; where else in cycle sport is there a coasting championship? Conservative elements feel that this "no guts, no glory" type of racing is detrimental to the image of the sport and that it emphasizes the sort of riding that mountain bike opponents point to as the ultimate irresponsibility. But philosophical questions aside, world championship jackets hung near the finish line for the fastest man and woman of the day, and there was no shortage of contestants for the title.

Because there are few rules regarding equipment for mountain bike racing, secret weapons were the order of the day for the downhill. Aerodynamic fairings, disc wheels, and suspension systems were all in use, but the race came down to pure ability and a little luck, and none of

the top-placed bikes were equipped with anything more secret than a good rider.

Once again, Tomac was a big favorite and was given the honor of starting first. Actually, Sloup deserved the honor, since he had won the downhill on the same course only a week earlier. His teammate, Kunselman, along with Jim Deaton and Mike Bell, also looked fast enough to take the title, though it would have taken a perfect run, so the downhill event seemed to be the least predictable of the races.

In a race as intense as the Mammoth downhill run, bike damage is one of the significant factors. Usually one or several of the top competitors will help decide the issues by falling victim to a flat tire or having problems with keeping the chain on. Before Tomac stepped up on the launching platform, a bystander mentioned that he would have to ride fast enough to win, and conservatively enough to arrive at the bottom on something that still worked. Tomac thought for a second, then answered, "No, you have to ride fast enough to win, and get lucky enough to have your bike work all the way."

This time Tomac wasn't lucky enough; he flatted almost immediately after leav-



CHARLES W. KELLY

The pro men's field starts the climb.

ing the starting line. Sloup lived up to his reputation and his record of winning the big downhill races by setting a new course record of 5:38, but he didn't win by much. Second place rider Kunselman fell only three seconds short, and bronze medalist Bell was only 10 seconds off the winning pace. Indeed, the first six finishers were all within 20 seconds of each other. Ace descender Deaton was not among them, however. After dropping his chain four times, he finished well out of the money in ninth place.

Whitehead has no equal among women descenders, and after a non-start and a poor finish on the first two days, she had something to prove. Like Overend on the cross-country course the day before, her 6:32 downhill performance eliminated any shadow of a doubt as to her ability. She crushed her closest opposition by over 30 seconds and established herself as the only woman to ride top to bottom at Mammoth in less than seven minutes. (Had any of the men's veteran and men's sport racers been able to match her time, they would have won their respective events.) Day picked up her third silver medal with a clocking of 7:09, one second ahead of Linda Perez. **W**

Scoreboard



Ned Overend and John Tomac are way out in front at the NORBA nationals in Durango, Colorado.

It's Overend again

The NORBA National mountain bike championships in Durango, Colorado produced one surprise and one repeat champion in the professional ranks. Ned Overend and John Tomac rode away from the rest of the field convincingly, and for the second time in two weeks, Ned put the whammy on Tomac when the latter ran out of gas in the thin air.

The women's title changed hands after a one-year reign by Cindy Whitehead. New champion Lisa Muhich rides for Specialized and typifies the new breed of tough and aggressive women riders. Suddenly the women's fields are getting larger, and none of the riders can take any contest for granted.

— Charles Kelly