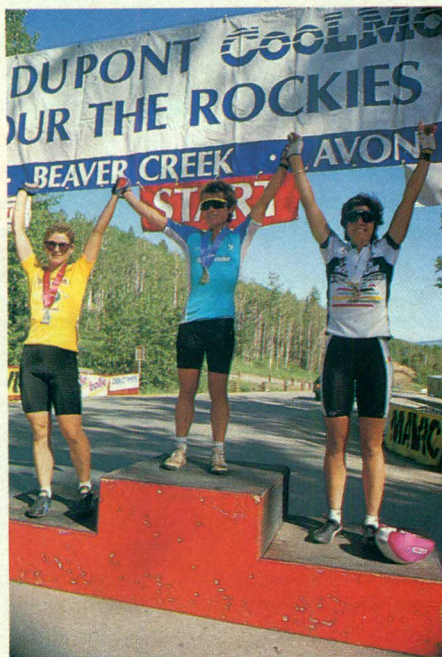


QUICK TRIP TO THE TOP

World Champion Sara Ballantyne is setting the pace in women's off-road competition.

by HEIDI CASTLE



Victory at the Tour of the Rockies: "If someone's going to challenge me to push harder, then I will."

Why start at the bottom when you can go straight to the top? That's what two-time NORBA women's World Champion Sara Ballantyne thought and did in August 1987 when she won her first off-road World's title. Uncertain of her abilities and commitment to the sport, Ballantyne decided to test herself against the world's best. The result? The nimble neophyte pummeled her competition.

Since then the five-foot-two-inch, 110-lb, curly haired redhead has proven that her initial success was more than beginner's luck. By the end of the 1988 season, Ballantyne had racked up the following results: second in the Alaskan Iditabike (a grueling 200 miles in the snow); first in the Tour of the Rockies (winning eight of the 11 stages and capturing the overall title with a 43-minute lead over second-place finisher Martha Kennedy); first in the NORBA national point series finals; first at the *Winning* World Championships in Aminona, Switzerland (a spectacular 20 minutes ahead of the top European women's pro, Sylvia Furster of France); and, finally, coming full circle, first overall at the NORBA World Championships in Mammoth Lakes, Calif.

Touted as John Tomac's female coun-

terpart, Ballantyne has managed to leap from obscurity to center stage, securing her dominance in the growing ranks of women's off-road racing. Specialized rider Cindy Whitehead, 1986 NORBA National Champion, says Ballantyne exudes a natural talent for off-road racing. "I think Sara is a great competitor," Whitehead notes. "She's one of the best whether it's a criterium, a downhill, or a slalom, and

she's clearly established her dominance in the climbing. Sara's a fighter, yet she's good to the competition."

A self-professed tomboy, Ballantyne grew up with two older brothers. The house rule was survival of the fittest. When sister and brothers weren't tangleing, she was off playing sports.

It's no surprise, then, that competition has been a way of life for the 28-year-old Fisher Mountain Bike rider. Before straddling her first off-road bike barely three years ago, Ballantyne was a competitive mountain endurance runner and avid mountaineer. She also dabbled in triathlons before settling on mountain bike racing.

Mountains are her passion. She's been an instructor for Colorado Outward Bound, and during the winter months she is employed with the Breckenridge Ski Area ski patrol. She loves the outdoors and in her spare time likes to climb and "bag" peaks. It's easy to see that mountain bikes were kismet.

As for drawing any similarities with Tomac, Ballantyne has this to say, "That would be OK if I made the money he did."

Winning Why are you so successful at mountain bike racing?

Ballantyne My background in moun-

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Ballantyne won the 1988 Winning World Championships in Aminona, Switzerland — a spectacular 20 minutes ahead of the top European women's pro.

taineering is the main thing. It's not really competitive, but it's physically very demanding. I've gained a lot of strength carrying big packs and climbing at high altitudes. All the peaks I've climbed and chased my boyfriend up and down have helped me get a lot stronger. Also I like competition. If someone's going to challenge me to push harder, then I will.

Winning *Mountaineering is the type of sport in which you are competing against yourself. Is that how you view off-road competition?*

Ballantyne Yes, I do. I approach most races with that attitude. That's why I do so well in time trials. I enjoy seeing how hard I can push myself. It's the same thing when I'm racing. I like to be out front, away from everyone, and then I get into this mode of thinking that I'm in a time trial, and I push as hard as I can. Instead of worrying about the competition, I assume she's right behind me and I keep pushing. The next thing I know, I have a five- or six-minute lead, and that's surprising at the end.

When I started racing I didn't think like that. I wanted to be supportive. I want to see more women out there and I want

them to have a positive experience. So whenever I was passing a woman, I'd encourage her. Most of the time that blew them away, and I didn't mean to do that. Now that we finally have a competitive field, you really need to be more cut-throat, more serious about competing.

Winning *Who is your stiffest competition?*

Ballantyne Throughout the year that seemed to change daily. Cindy Whitehead came back pretty strong after her shoulder injury mid-season. Lisa Muhich revamped her training schedule to come on strong during the NORBA national point series. Plus there are some new faces out there. When Susan De Mattei (Klein) improves her descending, she'll be a big threat to me. Out of the seven or so pro women who were regularly racing any given day, anyone could have won. That's made women's off-road racing very exciting this year, especially for the spectators.

Winning *Was 1988 a year of proving your 1987 NORBA championship win was more than beginner's luck?*

Ballantyne I had that pressure on myself at the beginning of the season. I was very

nervous before the races and then not performing well. And I wasn't in top shape. By the time I get off my skis, the California women have been riding for three months. In the long run, peaking later is better. My enthusiasm for riding is at a higher level and more easily sustained when I take a six-month break from riding. The more I raced, the more my confidence and energy increased and the better I did.

Also, as the season progressed there were more point-to-point races, which I prefer and do well at. Once I started winning, the pressure and anxiety disappeared. I plan on racing for a few years. I don't want people to think I'm a fly-by-night who just happened to get lucky. I think I proved that in 1988.

Winning *If you feel best in point-to-point races, how did you like the Iditabike?*

Ballantyne That was the most frustrating experience of my whole life. The Iditabike is hard to compare to other races because it's so bizarre and so wild. Two hundred miles in the snow is incredibly taxing on your body. To have the big lead that I had... maybe it was thinking I had it in the bag, I don't know. When I took that



A stage win in Colorado: "I like to be out front."

wrong turn, that was that. I was given instructions to hang a right, and I literally took too hard a turn and went into the woods. I thought I saw tracks in front of me the whole time. I was convinced I was on the right trail. After four and a half hours I realized I must be lost, so I backtracked and came out along the Yetna trail. But by this time it was midday; the sun had come out, and the trail was barely rideable. People were looking for me on ham radios, and I was only half an hour behind Martha Kennedy. I sprinted for the

next 20 miles on the snow. I had the fastest time, including the men, between those two checkpoints. At that point I was eight minutes behind her, and I caught up to her at the next checkpoint, said hello, and she was off. I had already hit the wall by then. My only incentive was that I only had another two hours on my battery and I didn't want to spend another night out, so I put the hammer down and got out of there. I'd seen enough moose on my trip. In the end I was hallucinating pretty badly, seeing small bushes as people on bikes

going the wrong way. I thought everyone was lost.

Winning *The Iditabike may be in a league by itself, but it's part of a growing trend to promote "super" events. What direction do you see off-road racing taking?*

Ballantyne Multi-day stage races like the Tour of the Rockies are on the increase. They're the mountain biker's Tour de France equivalent. These races and races like the NORBA point series, which features shorter multi-lap criterium courses, are geared more for the spectator. The Nationals and World's are good examples of spectator-oriented events, with trials and the popular dual slalom. The more spectators there are, the more interested sponsors will become, which means more money for the sport. Maybe in the future racers can choose between which events or series we want to concentrate on.

Winning *How do you see the women's field changing over the next few years?*

Ballantyne I'd like to see more women participating in the pro field. I think women can actually sell mountain bikes more for a company than a male could. Women are more influenced by each other than men are. Hopefully, the companies will realize that and get more sponsorship to enable more women to race in the pro field. Racing is more interesting when there's more competition. Individual competitors gain more credibility when there's more depth to the racing field.

Winning *What advice would you give to women wanting to enter the sport?*

Ballantyne Make it a positive experience for yourself. Start in local fun races and see if you enjoy those. Then keep riding in places you enjoy. Once your confidence is up, then go for bigger races or the World's, where you have the opportunity to show your stuff. Don't let the title of pro-am scare you. Make the commitment and find a sponsor.

Winning *What do you think of the fact that you have come out of nowhere and done so fantastically?*

Ballantyne Hopefully, that's incentive for the people out there reading this — that that could be you. If I can inspire or get any more women out to race, then I'll be happy. I feel fortunate to be in mountain bike racing. Compared to road racing, there's more equality with the men. We race comparable distances, and, especially this year [1988], we're making comparable money and getting more recognition. Because of the Pro Riders Association the women are getting a far better deal. Many promoters are giving us more than we had expected. So if that's incentive for more women to pursue pro racing full-time, then they should do it. **W**