



John Tomac:
"I intend to win
every race this
year."

TOMAC, WHITEHEAD ROLL AT THE ROCKHOPPER

**Southern California
riders have it their way
at Marin County.**

by HEIDI CASTLE

Los Angeles-based John Tomac (Mongoose) broke tradition and the course record with a masterful victory in the seventh annual Rockhopper Off-Road Classic.

Held in Annadell State Park, Santa Rosa, Calif., 50 miles north of San Francisco, the Rockhopper, sometimes referred to as the "granddaddy" of mountain bike races, has traditionally been dominated by top Marin County riders representing either Fisher or Ritchey.

But it certainly wasn't Rockhopper history that John Tomac was thinking about as he took the lead at the start of the 19-mile loop around the park. The Mongoose star set a blistering pace for the 285-rider field on the cool and cloudy morning as he negotiated the demanding course, which included 2,000 feet of climbing, bumpy descents, some pavement, and an exhilarating five-mile descent to the finish. Clearly the strongest rider on the circuit since the Texas national in early March, Tomac's race strategy was simple: start fast, fry the field, use his superior handling ability through descents and single tracks, and hold the lead from beginning to end.

Only John Murray (Marin) managed to hold Tomac's wheel over the first long climb leading to the bumpy

and brutal downhill known as the "cobble." Twenty seconds back, a strung-out pack consisting of Roy Rivers and Paul Thomasberg (both Wilderness Trail), Casey Kunselman and Mike Jordan (both Ross), Mike Kloser (Fisher), and early season sensation George Theobald (Marin) chased hard. Close behind was Ned Overend (Schwinn), riding in his first Rockhopper, who was picking off riders one by one as he worked his way up to the chase group after a slow start.

Tomac started to pull away from Murray through the cobbles, and he gained more ground on a short paved section and along another fast single track, eventually opening up a 20-second gap. Local Marin favorite Rivers, coming off a slow start in the early season, turned on the jets, caught Murray and stayed with him briefly, while Overend and Theobald worked to maintain their lead on Kunselman

and Thomasberg.

The 20-year-old Tomac looked faster than everyone else, and he was, attacking every uphill and rolling section with seemingly limitless strength. Ever mindful that untimely punctures had cost him the lead on three previous occasions, Tomac rode accordingly on the rocky descents. "After the first descent, I had a good lead, so I rode a little

conservatively, watching for rocks and not going as fast as I could," he explained after the race.

Still, even Tomac's "conservative" approach to descending proved too fast for Murray, who had the misfortune to flat on the final five-mile descent to the finish while holding a solid second place. As the seconds ticked away, Murray discovered that his instant inflation device and air pump were faulty. Two minutes later Overend and Rivers came flying by in what was now a duel for second place. Rivers proved to have the edge on descending speed, and he bested the reigning NORBA champion by 13 seconds to share second place for the third consecutive year. Meanwhile, Kunselman dropped a struggling Thomasberg (eventually sixth) on the final steep uphill single track and slipped by Theobald for fourth place when the latter crashed on the last bridge crossing.



**Roy Rivers
(Wilderness Trail)
got by Ned Overend
on the descents and
finished second.**

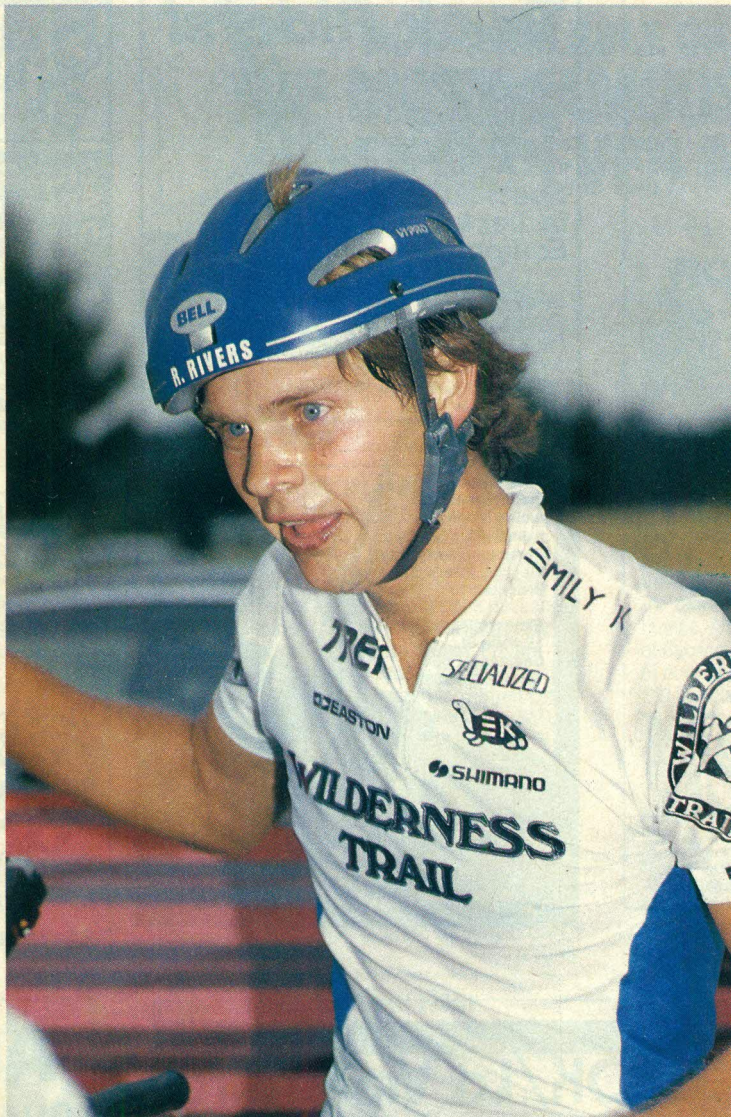
**Left: Cindy
Whitehead
continues to
dominate women's
off-road racing.**

The top five riders all bested Murray's old course record of 1:13:38, with Tomac decimating it by nearly four minutes. The soft-spoken, former BMX racer's clean face and bike were a sharp contrast to the dusty makeup most of his competitors were wearing at the finish.

Tomac's ability to pilot a bicycle over obstacles is unquestionable. His fitness over a longer course may be debatable, but he explained, "Half of my training, and the most intense, has been on the road, to get my aerobic strength up." As for his competitive spirit: "It's my intention to win every race this year," he stated matter-of-factly.

The story in women's racing this season has been all Cindy Whitehead. This small and powerful rider came to prominence in 1986 when she defeated reigning champion Jacquie Phelan at the Sierra 7,500 after riding 49 of 50 miles without a saddle. With Phelan sidelined due to a lingering mystery virus, Whitehead has completely dominated the competition.

At the Rockhopper, she won handily over newcomers Kimberly Caledonia (American Bicycle Manufacturing) and Linda Perez (Fisher), while setting a new course record of 1:29:06. Whitehead's strategy has always been to get out front and ride with the men, but this year her equip-



GARY NEWKIRK

ment has changed. Her familiar red and yellow Klein is now outfitted with an experimental Browning transmission, an electronically controlled front chainwheel shifting device. "In a couple of years, these will be on every bike," she raved.

Whitehead, who now lives in Palm Springs, took her second Rockhopper victory (she also won in 1985) after losing her water bottle at the start, stopping at halfway station, and then having to push her bike up the last hill. Despite these setbacks she still had a generous two-and-a-half minute margin at the finish.

Everyone agrees that women's mountain bike racing needs some new faces, and runnerup Caledonia, a protegee of mountain bike pioneer Joe Breeze, showed promise. She was riding in her third-ever mountain bike race in spite of a cast on her right arm, broken three months earlier at Las Palmas Challenge in Puer-

to Rico. Caledonia, who plans to be at all the major races, is making her entry into mountain bike racing much the same way Whitehead did, from road racing.

Phelan, meanwhile, has been working with a group of riders known as the WOMBATS (Women on Mountain Bikes and Tea Society), five of whom competed in the Rockhopper.

In addition to the pro racers, the ever-popular event (there are actually three Rockhoppers each season: the Rockhopper North, South and East, held in Santa Rosa, Big Bear, Calif., and Simsbury, Conn., respectively) drew hundreds of other riders. Among them were some noted industry leading lights, including Breeze, Gary Fisher, Shimano design head Shinpei Okajima and Specialized President Mike Sinyard, who competed in the veterans category.

Rockhopper North

May 17, 1987

Men's Pro

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|--|---------|
| 1. John Tomac, <i>Mongoose</i> | 1:09:52 |
| 2. Roy Rivers, <i>Wilderness Trail</i> | at 2:01 |
| 3. Ned Overend, <i>Schwinn</i> | 2:14 |
| 4. Casey Kunselman, <i>Ross</i> | 2:57 |
| 5. George Theobald, <i>Marin</i> | 3:11 |

Women's Pro

- | | |
|--|---------|
| 1. Cindy Whitehead, <i>Klein</i> | 1:29:06 |
| 2. Kimberly Caledonia, <i>American</i> | at 2:22 |
| 3. Linda Perez, <i>Fisher</i> | at 5:18 |