



A WILD AND CRAZY LADY

by John W. Ross

It's your basic chicken-and-egg variety question, really. But which did come first — women in off road bicycle racing or the infamous Alice B. Toeclips?

Folks who seem to know don't say much and those prone to say much don't seem to know. The sanest of us — in keeping with recorded chicken/egg history — are content to just accept the current state of affairs. That reality is that Alice B. (ne: Jacquie Phelan) has become synonymous with the women's movement in off-road bicycling.

Phelan, the current National Off-Road Bicycling Association (NORBA) woman's champion, has been riding the range and acting strange since time began — mountain bike time, that is. She has won with a numbing consistency that Seiko watchmakers must envy if they're watching. She has yet to lose on the mountain-bike-racing circuit, finishing first in three Rock-hoppers and two Whiskeytowns enroute to an incredibly noteworthy string of successful challenges. This year, she's won each of the more than 15 events that time and registration dollars have allowed her to enter.

In last year's mud-abbreviated NORBA Nationals, Jacquie finished a race that half of the men dropped out of after the first lap. The intense competitiveness of

the 28-year-old brunette is deeply rooted and draws on feelings she only reluctantly discloses for public consumption.

"Inadequacy — that's why I'm a good competitor," the Fairfax, CA resident offers, wincing as she anguishes over whether she can face the admission in print. "I wouldn't wish (that inadequacy) on my worst enemy."

Supported by her belief that she is not alone — that most of the highly-competitive athletes — especially those in bicycling — are driven by the same basic insecurity.

"One time doesn't do it," Phelan admits to explain her penchant for the rigors of hammering body and bike over rock-carpeted, stream rutted fire roads and backcountry trails. "It has to be constant."

"I'm in it because I want to be somebody," she shrugs. "I love being a memorable person — I love notoriety. I was the eldest of six kids," she continues. "I loved the status and I've been struggling to get back ever since."

Perhaps as a byproduct of that same personality trait, Jacquie has developed — even cultivated — a reputation for colorful language and behavior that frequently tends to polarize new acquaintances.

As the interview turned to another rider we both know, Jacquie volunteered "She doesn't have any jazz in her blood."

"I have jazz in my blood," she says, enjoying her description. "I grew up on jazz. Write that down," she facetiously encourages, mockingly threatening a most horrid revenge if it failed to appear in print.

Evaluating a picture of herself she considers especially flattering, she talks about being a compulsive flirt although compulsive is a concept she wholly dislikes. "All the off-roaders I ride with are looking for the ultimate 'Velo' she laughs, quick to point out that she carefully advertises the fact that she is "taken".

She is also fond of a special brand of self-deprecating humor she tosses off in strings of one-liners shared with riding companions. "The sign says: 'No dogs on the trail.' Here's where I get off."

Her behavior, as much as her candor in conversation attracts or repels, depending on the tolerance or intolerance of her audiences. Her current pet of choice, for example — named Chrome Moly — is a calico-colored rat. Members of the notorious *Rattus* have a tendency to evoke strong sentiment from even the most wishy washy human.

"I've always loved animals," Jacquie offers. "I loved to keep frogs when I was a kid," she says, pointing to a frog cartooned on the front of her T-shirt.

"Frogs are my power animal," she explained.

Although Jacque bemoans the current level of competition among women ("All my victories are kind of empty ones"), she predicts that that will change and works full time to see her prophecy fulfilled.

"People have teased me about being an off-road missionary. That's a position I'm quite comfortable with," Phelan wisecracks, savoring her double entendre.

"Enter", she coaxes an inquisitive waitress who Jacque works to interest in an upcoming race. "I almost guarantee you will win."

Pressing for a commitment from our luncheon hostess, Jacque offers the loan of an aluminum bike for the waitresses' first ride, information on the next race, her phone number and a promise to help her land a sponsor if/when she won the novice division. Anything — just enter!

Later, Phelan said she thinks part of the early hesitancy of women riders to compete off road involves the apparent and inherent potential for injury.

"It's a terrifyingly dangerous sport," she confided. "Yet it's surprising how few serious injuries there really are. I'm more afraid of road races, but (off-road racing) is more dangerous."

Alternately entertaining and thoughtful, Jacque also talked about a special advantage she feels allows women to

seriously compete with the men in off-road riding — climbing ability.

"I'm not a demon downhiller," she offered. "I make it all up on the climbs." She said she feels she is more safety conscious than many of the men she rides with — a tendency she feels is more characteristic of women, whether from cultural or biological origins.

Still, there is more to off road bicycling than feeding a starving self-esteem in Jacque's opinion.

"One of the real neat things about getting into this is riding out to places in half an hour it takes half a day to walk to," she offers. "I've always had a dream of owning as much land as I could walk in a day and what I can ride is so much more."

Her rides into the expanses of Marin County, CA open space countryside out beyond traces of other human existence, Jacque says instill a rush of power — a tremendous sense of wealth.

"I feel like we own it," she explains in describing the charge from ascending ridgetops with riding mate, live-in and sponsor Charlie Cunningham. "I mainline that feeling that not too many people get out where Charlies and I go."

How far out is far out enough for Jacque and Charlie? Well, when you see your first mountain lion, you're close. When you see number two, you're almost there. By your third siting, you have arrived.

"One of the real tests is mountain lions," Jackie proposes in hushed, reverential tones. "There are only six mountain lions in Marin and Charlie and I have spotted three of them."

"One ride I was on by myself," she remembers, obviously still feeding on the juices from that encounter. "I was so slack-jawed, I bottomed out — I pinched the rim."

Judging from her enthusiasm, an occasional pinched rim is a fair tradeoff for the chance to see a mountain lion in the wild.

Formerly a very competitive road racer who placed third in the first Tour of Texas in Austin, Phelan said she was drawn away from a potential "off-dirt" career by the relaxed, casual atmosphere surrounding off-road racing.

"A good off-road race," Jacque tells anyone who will listen, "is like a good party. You're told how to get there, what time to arrive, how to get around the course and then you're handed a beer when you finish. People have a really great time."

"What fun — what complete fun."

Jacque declined to describe differences in technique or tactics as insignificant beside the overall feeling of off-road racing coming out of a road racing background.

"You will learn what you need to know right away," she explained. "You'll either love it or you'll hate it."