

WOMAN AGAINST THE MOUNTAIN

Cindy Whitehead's epic victory *sans* saddle.

by OWEN MÜLHOLLAND

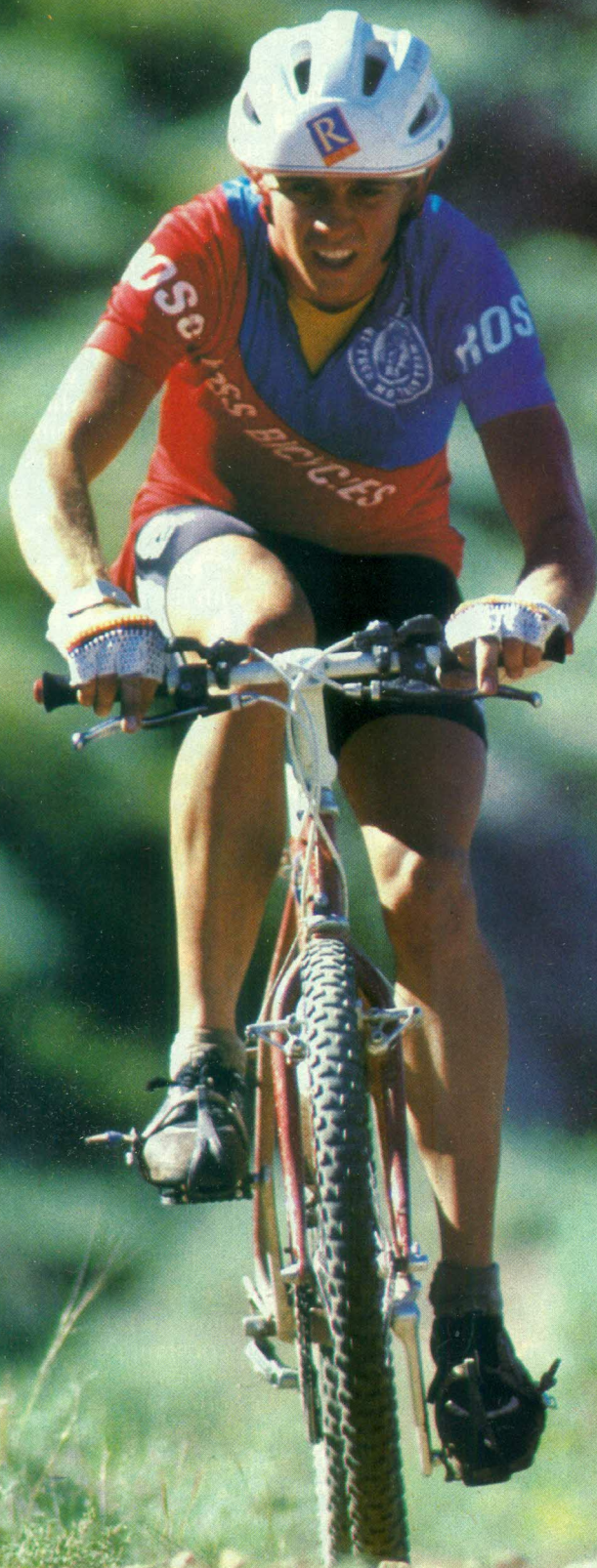
Just reading the statistics of the Plumline Outback weekend makes a mountain biker sweat. Take your pick. First comes god's gift to the gonzos, a near vertical drop of 7000 feet in 15 miles. Actually, make that 13 or so since the first couple of miles are uphill. That's close to a 10 percent average gradient, and you know no knurly jeep track plummeting out of California's White Mountains will remain average for long. Yeah, it's those 30 percent sections that inspired the name, the Ultimate Kamikaze.

On the second day, organizer Don Douglass showed his vision encompassed more than the white-knuckled crowd. It's hard to be humble when your race features 50 miles and 7500 feet of climbing to over 11,000 feet. Quite simply, he calls this the "world's longest, toughest mountain bike race" and no one in the least familiar with the course disputes that claim.

What all this really means in the development of mountain bikes will take some time to determine, but it's fairly certain that these two days in the Owens Valley of eastern California will delineate some outer limits in dirt bike competition. Just as road racing spent considerable time around the turn of the century experimenting with distances and other obstacles to arrive at a balance that would demand speed and endurance, so too are mountain bikes feeling their way along the dark wall of the developmental versus the inadvisable.

Doubtless, events with even bigger numbers could be organized, but the current consensus is that there is a difference between racing and death marches. Unlike road racing, off-road action rarely has any easy bits. Wheel sucking is almost unheard of, and normally the only chance to "coast" is down some rock-studded descent where the constant pounding to arms and legs can hardly be considered a rest. With the winner of this race finishing in four and a half hours, and others up to over twice that time, no complaints were heard about the race being too short!





Ultimate Kamikaze

June 21, 1986

Pro

- | | |
|---|---------|
| 1. Joe Sloup, <i>Ross</i> | |
| 15 miles in 36:46 (24.478 mph) | |
| 2. Joey Peterson, <i>Trek/True Temper</i> | at 2:35 |
| 3. Roy Rivers, <i>Trek/True Temper</i> | 2:36 |
| 4. Max Jones, <i>Ritchey</i> | 3:36 |
| 5. Mike Jordan, <i>Ross</i> | 4:28 |

Women

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|---------|
| 1. Jan Daley, <i>Long Beach</i> | |
| 15 miles in 49:17 (18.261 mph) | |
| 2. Jacquie Phelan, <i>Cunningham</i> | at 1:06 |
| 3. Carmen Carouche, <i>Mantis</i> | 4:15 |

Expert Men

- | | |
|---------------------|-------|
| 1. Mark Anolik | 40:08 |
| 2. Dan Lewbin | 41:39 |
| 3. Richard Sangalli | 42:52 |

Sierra 7500

June 22, 1986

Pro

- | | |
|---|---------|
| 1. Mike Jordan, <i>Ross</i> | |
| 50 miles in 4:35:40 (10.882 mph) | |
| 2. Casey Kunselman, <i>Trek/True Temper</i> | at 1:14 |
| 3. Tracy Smith, <i>Cunningham</i> | 4:03 |
| 4. John Loomis, <i>Ross</i> | 7:26 |
| 5. John Tomac | 7:29 |

Women

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|----------|
| 1. Cindy Whitehead, <i>Ross</i> | |
| 50 miles in 6:01:15 (8.304 mph) | |
| 2. Jacquie Phelan, <i>Cunningham</i> | at 21:22 |
| 3. Carmen Carouche, <i>Mantis</i> | 1:26:43 |

Mike Jordan was jubilant with his Plumline victory.

If Saturday saw the Ultimate Kamikaze, then Sunday's race might be termed the Ultimate Grind. The technical problems and swoopy stuff most races feature were absent from the Sunday promotion. Profile-wise it was simple, *up* and *down*. It could be a deadening format with riders strung out over miles and little wheel-to-wheel competition but so far, so lucky. Last year Roy Rivers just out-sprinted Joe Murray, and this year three men were together within two miles of the finish.

The races themselves are impressive, but another story overshadows all of this. Every sport stresses certain types of expertise, and when these are executed especially well we admire the athletes for their perfection. Occasionally, however, additional adversities are imposed, and when these are overcome we know we have witnessed more than perfection. Time seems to stop as we attempt to comprehend the apparently impossible.

Remember Tazio Nuvolari driving the *Mille Miglia* car race in Italy in a new Ferrari which progressively disintegrated to the point where the Mad Mantuan was reduced to a crate of oranges for a seat? Or Reinhold

Messner's three-day solo climb of Mount Everest without oxygen? Or Shackleton's entrapment in the Antarctic ice? Or Charly Gaul winning the Tour de France on one storm-lashed day? Everyone has his favorite epic. Now the list must be expanded by one.

Her name is Cindy Whitehead and her feat goes beyond merely winning. After all, she had done that much three weeks before at the Whiskeytown Downhill, and in the process terminated Jacquie Phelan's awesome winning streak.

Phelan had wondered aloud, after her defeat, if mountain bike racing really was a sport for women. Sponsorship for them was minimal — not that many competed — and the brute strength needed at times tended to be more in the masculine domain. Given such a perspective, Phelan was understandably pessimistic.

Yet, a mere 21 days later, the finish line spectators kept a bit of reserve in hand when the first racers came in. Not that Mike Jordan of Ross hadn't ridden a great race — the best in his career — but word had come down from the mountain that something more amazing was, literally, afoot.

Cindy Whitehead, 1:20 behind Phe-

lan at the five-mile time check was reported to be well up on her Cunningham rival at the summit of Look-out Mountain. It was good news for the Ross team that was having its best weekend ever; but more incredulous was the information that Whitehead was blasting along on a bike without a saddle!

Yes, it was true. An alloy bolt had sheered in the first mile and from then on she had been *en danseuse*, as the French say. "At first I didn't know what to do," Whitehead admitted. "Then I thought, 'At least I'll get a good training ride out of all this. I've eaten so much I have to do something!'"

Over the next seven miles she pulled back the deficit on Phelan. Once together, Whitehead mused, "Oh no, I have to finish now!" The two began the final five miles to the top side-by-side. Here the sand made riding impossible for all but short stretches, and in the walking duel that ensued the Ross rider steadily pulled away.

If her lead was comfortable when she hit the snow, her troubles weren't over. Sixteen miles of downhill should have given her a break, but this was no ordinary grade. "It might as well have been uphill it was so

hard," Cindy said. "And then I punctured. Of course my spare was back with my saddle, but I was lucky to have a teammate come by. He gave me his tube and we did a two-minute change." (That's some sort of record on a rear wheel with a roller cam!)

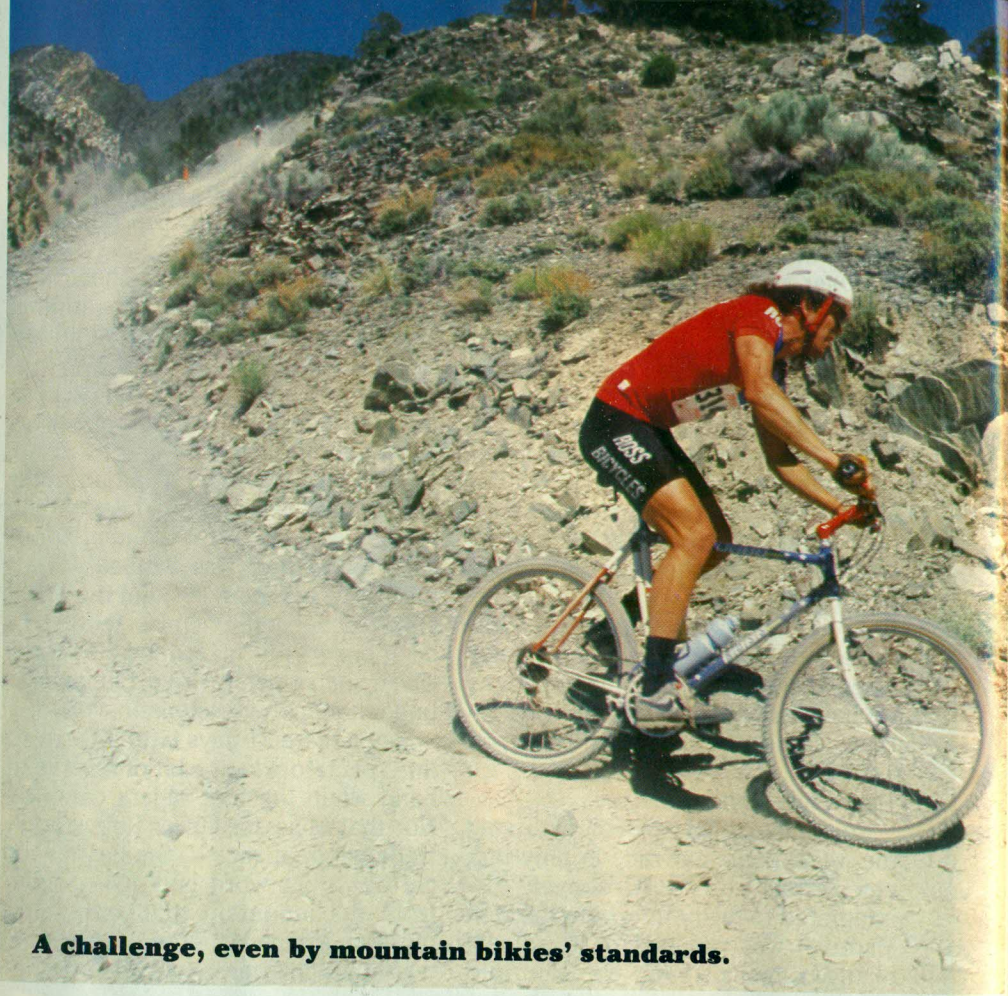
Nothing could stop her now, not even three miles of downhill trudging through sand too deep to ride. From snowbanks and frigid winds to the 100-degree heat of the desert floor, she never faltered. Into the finish chute she had enough left for a sprint, unnecessary, but appreciated by the crowd. Once across the line she dropped her bike, sat down, and gave in to the pleasures of letting others take care of her. She soon had the first layer of dirt off and was able to relax enough to face the hoard of well-wishers who surrounded her. Simply and modestly she answered the common question of how she did it: "There's just something about wanting to win that keeps you going." Yes, and a very rare "something" it is.

Among the men, two absentees were notable. An illness kept Ned Overend at home, and undisclosed reasons kept national champion Joe Murray away as well. With the two hottest racers out of the lineup the

possibilities of who might win were wide open. Many of the top guys avoided the kamikaze event on Saturday. The two days were judged separately so there wasn't much incentive for most of them to take such big risks.

Dire warnings accompanied the course description: *'...If you lose control of your bicycle, you could become airborne with fatal results. Most riders must stop periodically to rest their braking hand and get some blood back into their knuckle. Dismount and walk each switchback, if necessary... There are some seven stream crossings, a foot deep or more... If you take the streams at too high a speed you may come to a sudden and painful stop.'*

It was a challenge that few mountain bikies could resist. The vast majority entered. Each group started together, and only the initial climb separated them. The Ross team's Joe Sloup got a great lead-out from his colleagues. He wanted to put some space between himself and Fisher's "Jammin' Jimmy" Deaton, who is generally acknowledged to be the hottest downhill guy on the circuit and was bummed at finding an uphill in a downhill event. He couldn't stay



A challenge, even by mountain bikies' standards.



with Sloup on the climb, and was forced to play catch-up all the way. This finally resulted in a flat, leaving Sloup an easy winner.

Aside from a little lost skin there were no injuries. NORBA president Glen Odell was relieved. While he understood the attraction of this type of event, and felt bound to follow through on his commitment to the Ultimate Kamikaze once it had been sanctioned, he was, he confessed, "sweating bullets." He is, after all, the one who has to cope with insurance problems and those who accuse mountain cyclists of reckless and destructive riding. He foresees a rule that would mandate at least a 30 percent differential between the up and the down.

Sunday's "serious" racing started at 6:30 a.m. Even then it was plenty warm. After five miles a lead group had formed, consisting of Jim Deaton and George Theobald (Fisher), Roy Rivers, Todd D'Angelless and Casey Kunselman (Trek/True Temper), Mike Jordan and John Loomis (Ross), Max Jones (Ritchey), John Wesenreider (Schwinn) and John Tomac, a BMX pro from Los Angeles.

The climb came in two parts with a short intermediate descent on pavement. Starting that descent Kunselman and Tomac were slightly detached. In full tuck, the more experienced Trek rider noticed a small arrow directing the riders to turn right. Tomac missed it, never heard Kunselman's yell, and descended 1000 feet before noticing he was alone. Needless to say, his final placing was altered by this oversight.

Nevertheless, in a race of these dimensions, such lapses can be very upsetting to competitors. Several riders went off course near the finish and crossed the line from the wrong direction. Probably the most severely affected was Jeff Kauch from Berkeley, California. An official took his number, told him he got 24th place, and not to worry about going off course. Later, Jeff discovered his finish hadn't been officially recognized by Tom Hillard, the man in charge of tabulating results. Hillard promotes the Rockhopper and is very experienced in these matters, so it was surprising to see him turn into a law-and-order type. He repeatedly asked Kauch: "Did you or did you not stay on the course?" Of course the rider admitted that he hadn't and Hillard felt justified in declaring, "Well, until you do you have not finished."

Extenuating circumstances such as

Kauch's not having done this purposely to improve his placing, that his route wasn't a short cut and that no other rider had finished close to him, carried no weight. This is pretty hard to take after five-plus hours of killing work. Odell has been a genius at keeping a human face on the necessarily ever more solidifying NORBA structure. The petty rule-mongering which all too often permeates USCF events has generally been successfully avoided in the fat tire world. Highlighting this incident can perhaps help keep such excesses to a minimum.

Back at the race, Kunselman remained clear to the summit, but not by much. Five riders were within two minutes of him at that point, all in plain view on the last slope. Most surprising was the fifth man, Tracy Smith, who had been 1:45 off the lead group at the first time check. Although originally from southern California, Smith had spent the last couple of seasons in Crested Butte before moving to Marin County, the northern California dirt bike mecca. His tough life of forest living, long training and a part-time bike shop job was showing results.

Very quickly, on the descent, Smith moved past Loomis and Tomac, and hooked up with Jordan and Kunselman. The leader wasn't surprised at being caught. "I was cruising the downhill," Kunselman admitted. "Last year I got two flats, so I wanted to be real sure this year. We stayed together to the bottom. On the fan [as in 'alluvial'] Mike was leading Tracy and then myself along a narrow berm. The rest was 8 inches deep sand. Jordan jumped and Tracy couldn't respond. There was no way to get by, so I had to make this superhuman effort in the sand. The effort just burned out my legs. By the time I got going again Mike was about an eighth of a mile up and there was no way I could catch him. I looked back and Tracy was about the same distance behind, so that's the way we stayed."

Jordan was jubilant, both for himself and his Ross team. Since winning Whiskeytown four years ago he's always been up there, but not a winner. "I have a hard time warming up. By the time I get going, usually, they're gone. The first hour I was just hanging on. Then I started coming on." Besides, he had to win to keep the record straight. In the previous two weeks, at Rockhoppers North and South, he had finished third and second. It was time for a first. **W**