

# NOT JUST ANOTHER PRETTY FACE

**Cindy Whitehead shows a natural feeling for mountains and bikes.**

**by CHARLES R. KELLY**

**F**or three years women's mountain bike racing has been dominated by Jacquie Phelan, who is often referred to as the Queen of the Mountains. But there are princesses waiting in the wings who are starting to make serious threats to Queen Jacquie's previously secure throne. Now one of the princesses has kicked the castle door open, and this year's national off-road championship could see the coronation of a new queen.

Cindy Whitehead doesn't look like a bike racer; she looks like the person who would play the bike racer in the movie about her life. She says she has lost more than 10 pounds this season, but she is not yet a whippet-lean natural climber like Phelan. Whether or not she is a "natural" climber is academic however, because the fact remains that she is a good one, having beaten Phelan already this year on two tough climbing courses that rank among the hardest mountain bike races in the country, Whiskeytown and the Sierra 7500. One of these victories, at the Sierra 7500, was a ride which left no doubt about her power and determination. Her seatpost broke only a mile from the start and she rode the rest of the six-hour race without a saddle over a course that climbed and descended 7500 feet and reached a high point of 11,000 feet elevation.

If any aspect of her cycling is natural, it may be her descending ability. She is probably the best woman descender on the mountain bike circuit, and when she combines this with her new-found ability to get up the hills in a hurry, the result is a racer with all-around skills and no obvious weaknesses. If Whitehead can take a lead over the top — and she has been doing it consistently in 1986 — she is just about unbeatable.

"I think I'm one of the best descenders around," she admitted. "It started when I was road racing in Santa Barbara and riding in the hills with a lot of good descenders. I would train on San Marcos Pass,

doing hill repeats, riding up and down it. You learn after a while that you can't brake in the middle of a turn, because it throws everything off."

Whitehead is 24 years old, a blonde Southern Californian from San Marino. (She is no relation to road racer Mark Whitehead). In addition to mountain bike racing, she has competed in road racing, swimming, tennis, triathlon and basketball. On the road, her credits include 10th at the nationals, three consecutive wins in the Santa Barbara Grand Prix from 1983 to 1985, and winning the 1983 Western States Intercollegiate Championship.

"I began riding bicycles just to tour in the Santa Barbara Mountains while I was going to school there in 1982. I started out by riding a few century rides, and because I was the first finisher all the time, I was encouraged by friends to join the college bicycle racing club. I started out at intercollegiate racing, which I did for two years, 1982 and 1983. In 1982 I had no wins to my name, although I won a triathlon, and then in 1983 I was virtually undefeated in the college league," she said.

In her graduation year Whitehead was the Western States Intercollegiate champion, then she took the rest of the year off and went to Europe to broaden her horizons. "I came back not really knowing what I wanted to do, but the only thing I really liked and wanted to do was race bicycles," she emphasized. "I put all my efforts toward that, focussed on the Tour of Texas in 1984. I went to the Tour of Texas, racing for the Santa Barbara Bicycle Club. I did quite well there and I was noticed by a number of people, in particular the Schwinn National Racing Team." After the tour, the Schwinn team picked her up to race the rest of the season.

"That was the Olympic year and I might have made the team, but I had some problems right before the trials." Her problem was that she had broken her clavicle in a bike accident. "I wasn't going to let that get me down. I was off the bike only one

day, then I got back on it and kept riding. A chance for the Olympics is a once in a lifetime thing. You've got to go."

Riding with the broken bone Cindy says she could make the top 15, but not the top 10 at the Olympic trials in Spokane. "With the bad arm I couldn't get out of the saddle to climb," she says, as though a broken bone by itself is not a sufficient excuse for losing a race.

As the 1984 road season was winding to a close, Clark Roberts, a member of the Ross Indians off-road team and a fellow resident of San Marino, mentioned to Whitehead that the team was going out to Crested Butte and suggested that she try off-road racing. She has been a member of the Ross team ever since. Ineligible for the 1984 NORBA Nationals because she hadn't qualified early enough in the year, she raced the citizen's race held at the same time and won that, beating in the process women's Tour de France Féminin winner Marianne Martin, who was also trying out mountain bike racing.

During the off-season Whitehead started working for Ross as a sales representative, and although she still wanted to race on the road, Schwinn had stopped sponsoring its women's team. Working full time for Ross it was only natural that she continue racing under company colors. "Last year was a tough one for me," she said. "It was a really transitional year. For one thing, I'd never had a career before, and I had to figure out what it took to be professional person."

Without a major sponsor, she still raced on the road, winning the Santa Barbara Grand Prix for the third straight time. At the 1985 NORBA Nationals she was third behind Jacquie Phelan and Mary Lee Atkins.

As the 1986 off-road season was struggling with insurance problems and riders waited impatiently for the season to get started, Whitehead participated in somewhat informal racing in the hills around Los Angeles. In April she turned in an im-



pressive performance by starting with a women's field two minutes behind the men, and passing all but six of 50 men.

She chose not to race the Santa Barbara Grand Prix this year, and decided to take her chances off-road at the first big race of the 1986 season and one of the biggest races in California, the Whiskeytown Downhill, which, contrary to its name includes plenty of hard climbing. This turned out to be the right decision for her, although Jacquie Phelan might have regretted it as the Ross rider handed the national champion a four-minute

—beating the first one she had suffered.

A week later Phelan evened the score with a win at the Rockhopper, but there the margin was only ten seconds, and more important, Whitehead had been chasing throughout the race because of a minor mechanical problem and had gained 20 seconds in the last mile.

At the Sierra 7500 two weeks later Whitehead turned in the ride that will be one of the legends of mountain bike racing for many years. "When I broke the saddle off, I decided that I would ride at least 25 miles and get in a training ride,"

she said. Since at first she didn't expect to go the distance, she forced the pace on Phelan and the two exchanged leads twice before starting the longest climb.

By the halfway point in the race Whitehead was doing too well to quit, and when Phelan lost contact on the last climb, the rest, as they say, is herstory. In spite of a fall and a flat tire on the long descent, she won by 20 minutes as Phelan was having troubles of her own, spraining an ankle when she fell during her unsuccessful downhill chase.

Cindy Whitehead's training routine includes a lot of road riding. "I think road training should not be neglected by any means. In addition to off-road riding where I develop my handling skills, I go out and do road rides on my mountain bike, always on my mountain bike. I rarely ride my road bike these days, because I think the positioning is really important, the specific training of the muscles you use in races. I ride with roadies, but I do it on my mountain bike. I have two sets of wheels, one with high-pressure tires for road riding. The road people love it," she commented.

Because Whitehead is also a sales representative she has to get her training in around her job, but the constant travel has its advantages. She explained, "I'm on the road a lot, visiting bike shops, and I meet a lot of people to ride with who know the area I'm visiting."

Speculating about her immediate future, Cindy Whitehead said, "I want to stay in this sport for a while. I've always enjoyed being in the mountains; during my senior year in college I was in the Outdoor Recreation Group, and I led backpacking trips, canoeing trips and other weekend trips in the mountains. Then the road racing came into my life, and it was tearing me apart, 'What do I do? Do I spend time in the mountains, or do I get out on the road for training?' Now I get to do both."  
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