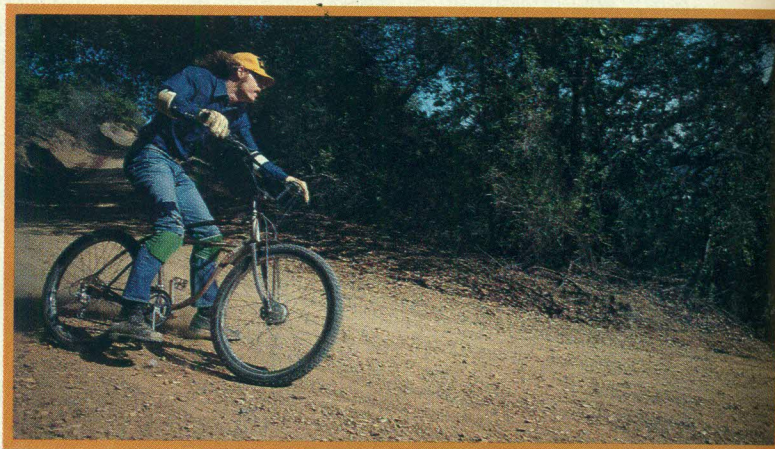


# Jammin' And Cruisin' In the Mecca Of Mountain Biking



# REPACK

# REVIEW

MOSLEMS MAKE PILGRIMAGES TO MECCA, CHRISTIANS VISIT BETHLEHEM, surfers worship Hawaii, and this morning I'm paying homage to Repack. This is mountain biking's original trail—a Marin County, California, fire road located near the sport's first hometown, Fairfax. While Repack is well beyond its glory days, I have vintage company. I'm with technical editor Pat Reddix, who writes the equipment review column for *NORBA News*, and Gary Fisher, who owns a well-known bicycle company and record for descending Repack's 1.8-mile, 1,200-foot drop.

Fisher's 4-minute, 22-second ride yielded an average speed of 24.73 mph. Considering the corners and uphill sections of the course, a rider wanting to duplicate this feat would have to reach speeds of 40 mph on the steep and rutted downhill straightaways. That's fast—and illegal now. So Fisher's record will stand...maybe forever.

Fred Wolf, a Fairfax local, organized the first Repack downhill race in '76, and a decade of cycling Camelot followed. Repack served as one of the first research and development proving grounds for the mountain bike industry. Brakes posed the primary problem. Coaster brakes on the early 50-pound cruisers would get hot enough to boil the grease out of the rear hub. Thus, Repack's moniker. After one run you had to repack the hub.

Times have changed and so have mountain bikes. Today Reddix is riding on a Boulder Gazelle, complete with a top-tube-mounted, oil-damped rear shock absorber. Fisher is on a prototype Gary Fisher Bicycle Co. Montare equipped with a Rock Shox front fork. I'm on a borrowed Bridgestone MB-5 and feeling a little outclassed by my riding companions' impressive hardware and resumes. The MB-5 is a great bike, but I feel like I've arrived to race the Indy 500 in a 4-door Beemer and it's my first time on the track. I know I'll get dusted. I'm not sure I'll survive.

Charlie Kelly, former West Coast editor of *MOUNTAIN BIKE* and long-time chronicler of our sport, drove us from his Fairfax office up the steep paved road to the trailhead leading to Repack. After close scrutiny ("the hairy eyeball" in local parlance) by a ranger passing slowly in a Marin



BY DON CUERDON



High-speed action in '77 on Repack, mountain biking's original test track. Far left, Charlie Kelly, Fairfax tour guide, guitarist, veteran journalist and keeper of the archives. Left, Repack record holder Gary Fisher. Below, Bob Burrowes won the first Repack but not all his runs went so well.

# VISITED





Municipal Water District truck, we rode 15 minutes along a ridgeline fire road to the official Repack starting line. We could see Mount Tamalpais, another fabled Marin County mountain biking location, over our shoulders.

Two things have contributed to the demise of Repack record attempts, official or otherwise. One is a newly erected metal gate part way down the course that requires slowing (and a quick dismount) just when acceleration is critical. Of course, the lock could be opened with a set of 48-inch bolt cutters ("the keys to the Marin Municipal Water District" in Fairfax slang), but almost everyone is too responsible now for such an illegal shenanigan. The other obstacle is a rigidly enforced 15-mph mountain bike speed limit on MMWD fire roads. Faced with that or banishment, Marin County's mountain bikers settled for the speed restriction. In addition, singletrack riding at any speed on MMWD land is strictly forbidden. The Camelot days of mountain biking are over.

But if I'm lucky today, I may catch a glimpse of the way it was in the golden era. It's 10 a.m. Friday and the fire roads are nearly deserted. We pass only 2 walkers near the paved road. The streams are flooded from unusually heavy rains the last 2 weeks, making it nearly impossible, certainly awkward, for the MMWD rangers to drive their trucks up the road to monitor Repack with their radar equipment.

Knowledge is power; ignorance is bliss. The 3 of us are responsible

**The Fairfax crew took their bikes to Crested Butte, Colorado, in '78 and topped 12,705-foot Pearl Pass. (That's Kelly fourth from the left with Breeze to the right; Fisher is fourth from the right.)**

mountain bikers. We wouldn't dream of exceeding the MMWD 15-mph speed limit on Repack—even the deserted Repack. But none of our bikes is equipped with a speedometer, so we'll have to gauge our velocity using our best judgment. I'm just glad the chance of being clocked on radar has been reduced, in case one or more of us should misjudge our speed and momentarily clock 16 or 17 mph. That would be embarrassing and costly. A speeding ticket is \$200.

### REPACK REPACKAGED

The descent starts gradually and we quickly pedal up to our prelegislated top end. The aforementioned gate and uphill slow us, but soon we reach the pure downhill section of the ride, roughly a quarter of the way down. I guess I can't quite reach 15 mph on the steep sections because Pat and Gary quickly pull away, and I know they're doing the speed limit. Within 2 turns they disappear completely. I must be doing only 10 or 11 mph, but it's fun and feels much faster. I guess it's because my bike has no shock absorbers.

Ahead, on a gentle grade, I spot a rider headed *uphill*. She looks very fit and attractive—like a model you'd see in a mountain bike television commercial. But, hey, this is California and you've got to expect such things,

even on an oldtimer's track such as Repack.

Around the next bend, Reddix and Fisher are waiting for me.

"The next section gets rutted, so be careful," says Fisher.

This time I try to maintain that elusive 15 mph and stay with my companions. One bend, 2 bends, then I take what appears to be the obvious line and find an inescapable rut, which causes me to slow because I don't trust my bunny-hopping reflexes at 15 mph. Reddix and Fisher have taken the good line and disappear. I think they've been down this road before. They make 15 mph look so easy.

Except for a few scrub evergreens obstructing the view, the top of Repack is open. Where the road steepens, the flora thickens into what Fisher calls a "vegetable tunnel." About two-thirds of the way down we're spat from the greenery into an open area bordered by a cliff. I don't know how many feet it is to the bottom, but it's hundreds more than I'd care to fall. The road, though, is in good shape so I release the brakes and let my MB-5 roar up to a full 15 mph. Glancing into the abyss at this speed gives me the impression of flight—a deadly option.

From here to the bottom, the turns are tricky and sharp. I have to slow for

all of them. There's also no telling where the good line is until it's too late. Now I know why they call bunny-hopping a "last-ditch effort." Life at 15 mph is life on the edge.

The ride ends too soon, even at the posted speed limit. I've been on steeper, faster, and longer downhills, but I know I've never ridden a more famous descent. Repack was fun and definitely worth the effort. I didn't keep my time, but I assume Reddix and Fisher rode exactly 15 mph the whole way, so their clocking must have been 7 minutes, 12 seconds. I was slower.

### **TOURING THE STARS' HOMES**

After recrossing the swollen rivers, we roll back to town. Repack isn't the only attraction on the full-day Fairfax mountain biking fun ticket.

If not for its cycling legacy, Fairfax might be just another bedroom community on the outskirts of a major metropolitan area—in this case, San Francisco. But Fairfax is more. It's the Hollywood of mountain biking—a place where many of the original stars still reside, including innovator Charlie Cunningham, racing legend Jacques Phelan, and pioneer frame-

builder Joe Breeze. Others, such as Gary Fisher, have moved to nearby San Rafael.

Fairfax also has drawn celebrated musicians such as Jerry Garcia and Bobby Weir of the Grateful Dead and



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Sammy Hagar, the lead singer for Van Halen. Since there isn't much else happening in town, I assume they moved here for the riding.

Spotting these stars, though, might be a problem. The mountain bike celebrities around here look like regular folks, and there's nobody on a street corner selling maps to the rock stars' homes. But I've got the next best thing to a map: Charlie Kelly's Rolodex.

Kelly, known to his friends by his *nom du word processor*, Seekay (C.K.—get it?), is one of the most connected people in mountain biking. He knows a few famous people in Fairfax, too, including Weir, which in some off-road sects is grounds for canonization. Kelly has been gracious enough to arrange audiences for me with several of Fairfax's noblest knobby citizens.

Lunch, as everything, is informal at Offhand Manor, home of Veteran world championship bronze medalist Phelan and her husband, famous framebuilder Cunningham. Their house is a '40s 2-story suburban structure that resembles all others on this street. It's the manner, not the manor, in which they live that's off-hand.

Phelan and I lunch on dark bread, cheese, and local beer on the shore's of Offhand Manor's frog pond, an elevated, in-ground swimming pool that's been unmaintained long enough for nature to move in—lots of green scum, lily pads and, of course, frogs. For security reasons, I'm sworn to secrecy about the Manor's exact layout. But I can tell you that the master

bedroom is 2 flights above the main house and features a removable roof for catching summer breezes and a remote control electric blanket for pre-heating the covers on cool nights.

"Charlie's a real fresh-air freak," says Phelan.

Cunningham isn't home, so Phelan and I share racing gossip. That's a fun thing to do with someone who's been in the sport since its beginning. I'm curious about the particulars of her startling, successful comeback these last 2 years. New diet? A secret coach? Classified Russian training techniques smuggled across the border in fur hats?

"I'm not any faster than I was ten years ago," admits Phelan, "just smarter. I know when to conserve my strength and when to expend it."

Experience has its rewards and Jacquie's reaping the benefits of her racing tenure.

After lunch, Seekay and I take the BICYCLING van over to San Rafael to visit the Gary Fisher Bicycle Co. and its namesake. We spy him in the upstairs window of his 2-story industrial-looking headquarters. In a gray business suit and rep-red tie, he looks quite different than he did this morning in cycling duds on Repack.

Dana, Seekay's infant daughter and quite possibly the cutest child ever born to a mountain biker, distracts the palace guards at the reception desk so Seekay and I can sneak into Fisher's top-secret research-and-development lair. Using the kid as a decoy is low, I admit, but it was her idea.

A polished aluminum technological knobby wonder that's undergoing final assembly adjustments rests in the stand. The front end sports a prototype magnesium-body Rock Shox fork. That's not really news. But the rear end features a hinged trapezoid, rather than a triangle. This allows the rear wheel to travel nearly vertically rather than in an arc, so the wheelbase doesn't change through the range of travel as it does with other rear suspension systems. The assembly is damped with a set of dual bumpers mounted low on the seat tube.

Nobody throws a sheet over the bike, so we assume it's not the original prototype. We're right, says Stephen J.R. Wilde, Fisher's special projects designer.

"Gary's always riding the original, so we had to build another one so the rest of us could have a turn," says Wilde.

As if on cue, Fisher enters with the

2 guys from the meeting. One is mountain bike designer Richard Cunningham (no relation to Charlie, the aluminum wizard) and the other is Mert Lawwill, former top motorcycle road racer and star of the racing movie *On Any Sunday*, featuring Steve McQueen riding his own bike. Although nothing is said, I assume Cunningham and Lawwill are collaborating with Fisher on this new rear-end design. (Indeed they are. As you read this, Fisher's new RS-1 should be arriving at bike shops in the U.S. and Europe.)

## APHIDS IN THE WAREHOUSE

Unfortunately there isn't enough time to dirt test Fisher's new bike. We have to pick up Dana's mom, Mary, from work. Seekay and I don't have adequate plumbing to satisfy Dana's nutritional demands, which can get quite loud in a small metal van. And besides, Seekay has scheduled a studio session with his band, the Aphids (still looking for a lead singer named Rose), this evening. I've been invited to sit in.

The Aphids play the final song ("The Aphid Stomp," an original) on the *Battle at Durango: The First Ever*

*World Mountain Bike Championships* videotape. Fisher's suspension bike will be around awhile. Rock 'n' roll opportunities like this, however, require immediate attention.

We load the Aphids' gear into Seekay's moving van and drive to a warehouse district. One building houses soundproof rehearsal studios that rent for \$10 an hour. Forty bucks keeps the 6 of us amused until midnight.

The reason I'm telling you this is because the Aphids aren't famous yet, but if they hit it big, I want you to know I jammed with them in their early years. Seekay didn't think it was a big deal in the '60s when he delivered a piano to a woman who answered the door in nothing but high heels, red panties, and a smile. And since he didn't document his experience, none of us believes his story that it was Janis Joplin.

I woke up Saturday morning on the apartment floor of Kent, the band's bass player, and almost knocked over his new Muddy Fox mountain bike, which replaced its predecessor, an original Repack cruiser. Rock 'n' roll and mountain bikes are inextricable in Fairfax.

Still feeling fuzzy from last night's

jam, I wander into the Fat Tire Trading Post bike shop across the street from Seekay's office to gawk at the antique bike collection until my head clears. Chris Ioakimedes, the proprietor, gives me a guided tour that in-



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cludes several generations of Repack iron horses, some of which are available for rent.

As we're talking, the stunningly attractive mountain biker I'd seen riding up Repack walks in. She works here. Her name is Sara Ellis and she does, indeed, star in a mountain bike television commercial for Specialized that I'd seen just a few days earlier. She trains on Repack nearly every

day.

The final stop on my 2-day Fairfax tour is Joe Breeze's dining room. Breeze, of course, pushed mountain biking beyond the one-of-a-kind phase when he built off-road bikes for 9 friends in '77. I haven't seen him since we rode together in Moab 3 years ago, so we catch up over coffee. Parked by the serving table is a Breezer with a classic cruiser 2-tone paint job.

Afterward we walk down the street to his real house (the one he's living in is a rental), which has been gutted for renovations and jacked from its foundation for basement excavation. The place looks as if a bomb exploded under it, but Breeze is optimistic. He's moving his shop into the basement so he doesn't have to commute to Mill Valley. For some reason the prodigal son comes to mind.

I'm sure if I hung around long enough I'd get a chance to ride with Jerry, Bobby, and Sammy and to jam with their bands, but it's time for me to head to the other coast. This pilgrimage has been slow on the trail and fast through town; maybe next time it will be the other way around. ●