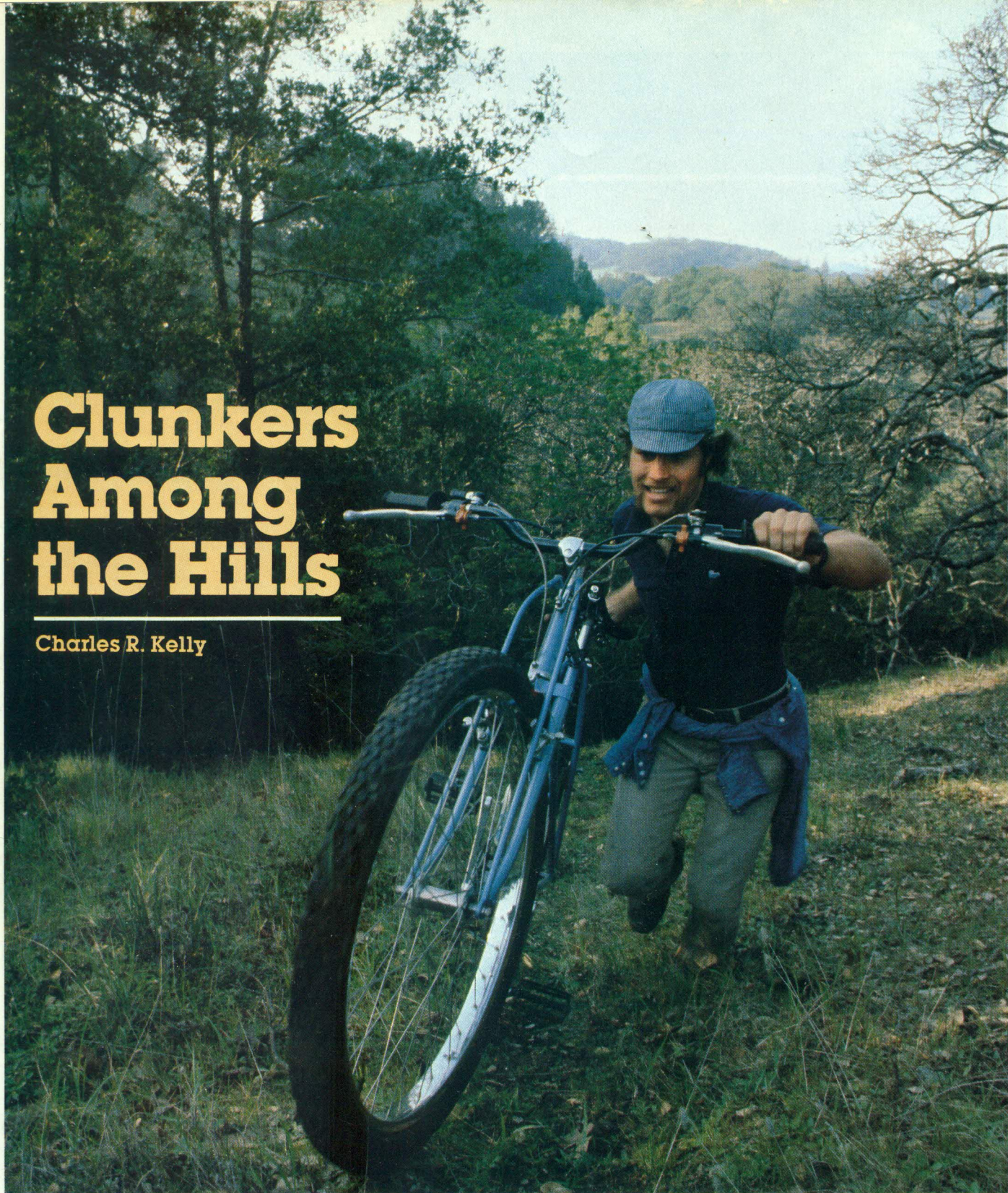


Clunkers Among the Hills

Charles R. Kelly



A New Breed of Bikes and Bikers Attack the Slopes

It is a cool, clear morning in Northern California. Five young men sweat as they push strangely modified bicycles up a steep hill. They are discussing the dirt road surface, which resembles a moonscape more than it does a road.

These men belong to the same breed that ski down cliffs, jump out of airplanes or ride skateboards down Everest; they have developed their own unique athletic challenge, a race

known only to a few dozen locals and referred to as "Repack." The road they are on is the racecourse.

At the top of the hill, where the road intersects another rarely used fire road, the five are met by another 15 riders, including a couple of high-energy women.

Most of the crowd are in their twenties, but there are a few teenagers and one bearded individual who claims to

be 50. No one believes him. All are wearing heavy shirts and pants, and most have leather gloves and Vibram brand soled boots.

There seems to be a little method to this madness, however, as one of the group drags a well-thumbed notebook out of a backpack along with a pair of electronic stopwatches. The notebook is the heart of the race, since it contains all previous race results as well as the phone numbers of the local riders. (Races are not scheduled; they are held only when the cosmic alignment is right.) Names are taken and numbers are assigned according to experience. First time riders and those with slow previous times are numbered first, and the fastest are numbered last; each rider is then assigned a starting time, duly noted. The list is copied and the watches are started simultaneously. A scruffy looking official timer takes a watch and a copy of the list, jumps on his machine and vanishes downhill.

Riders eat oranges, make minor adjustments and talk excitedly among themselves. Finally, the first name is called, and a nervous young man wheels up to the starting line scraped in the dirt. This is his first time down the course; he spends his last few seconds at the top asking questions about the course and not listening to the answers.

"Ten seconds . . . five seconds." The novice is so anxious that he applies full power a little early; however, the starter has a firm grasp on the rear wheel and releases it as he says "Go!" The novice is thrown off balance by his early start and wobbles for the first few yards before finding the throttle and disappearing over the first rise.

An Edge Sport

This sport may never catch on with the American public, but its originators couldn't care less. The bicycles used are as unique as the sport; usually old Schwinns, with a few other rugged species included. Highly modified, most are five- or ten-speeds with front and rear drum brakes, motorcycle brake levers, motocross bars, and the biggest knobby tires available. A few reactionaries still cling to their one- or two-speed coaster brake machines, but drum brakes and ten-speeds seem to be the wave of the future. The machines are called Clunkers, Bombers or Cruisers, depending on the owner's local affiliation, and there are probably not more than a few hundred of the advanced models in Northern California.

Clunking seems to have started with

the invention of the bicycle; certainly people have been riding old bikes on dirt roads as long as there have been old bikes. Recently, though, the old bikes have been successfully crossed with the ten-speed to produce a hybrid perfectly adapted to the fire roads and trails of the Northern California hills. In the process of field testing modifications, the researchers have shattered every part to be found on a bicycle. Rims, hubs, handlebars, cranks, seat-posts, saddles, gears, chains, derailleurs, stems, pedals and frames have all been ground to fragments along with

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the exterior portions of a number of clunking enthusiasts.

Early in the experimental stage, the hill now known as Repack was recognized as the ultimate field test for bike and rider. Repack is a rarely used fire road that loses 1300 feet of elevation in the two miles from top to bottom. In addition to incredible steepness, Repack features off-camber blind corners, deep erosion ruts and a liberal sprinkling of fist-sized rocks. The name "Repack" stems from the coaster brake era; after a trip down the hill, all the grease in the coaster brake turns to smoke, and it is time to repack the unit.

Body Art

While Clunkers somewhat resemble lightweight dirt motorcycles, the similarity is in appearance only, and cornering at high speed is a unique form of body art. A motorcycle has large tires and shock absorbers, but a Clunker does not. It consequently tends to become airborne when it hits even slight projections in the road surface. On a tight corner a Clunker does not have the instant acceleration that a motorcyclist uses to bring the rear end around, and without shock absorbers, it skitters. Nevertheless, expert riders take curves much faster than you could imagine.

Every Repack rider knows the meaning of the word *handcramp* because the handlebars become extremely difficult to grip at high speed when the surface gets rough. The shock is trans-

mitted directly to the hands, making delicate braking operations rather difficult. Coaster brake reactionaries claim superiority here since their brakes are foot operated.

Riding styles vary. One of the fastest riders, Joe, is known as the "Mad Scientist." Joe has drawn up detailed maps of the course, which he studies carefully. On race day he walks up the course to check for new hazards, then he rides with a controlled fury that makes cornering on gravel at 40 mph look easy.

George occupies the other end of the stylistic spectrum. Called the "Mad Bomber" because of his kamikaze approach, George rides an old one-speed coaster brake machine with no front brake. His style is characterized by 75-foot sideway slides going into curves, accompanied by miraculous recoveries from certain doom. On other roads George rides *under* single pipe fire gates at 35 to 40 mph and claims distance jumps of 40 feet or more.

What is it like to ride this course? Racers are sent off at two minute intervals to prevent one rider from catching another, since passing on this course is not easy. Ability grouping prevents a slow rider from being followed by an extremely fast one who might catch up. The fastest riders start last so the others can see the experts finish.

The first 150 yards are level with a soft surface followed by a slight uphill grade. Over the rise and into the first downhill, and you are already gasping from the initial effort. There's no time to let up because this section is straight, and even though it is steep, you are still standing on your highest gear.

A blind left turn onto the steepest section is covered with ruts and loose rocks. Watch that little lump across the road. At this speed it will put you in the air and out of position for the next turn.

Now the road becomes a series of blind corners which all seem to look the same as you approach them. This section favors the experienced Repack rider who can remember which corners to brake for and which ones can be taken wide open. Since Repack is more or less in a straight line at the top, most of the corners can be taken at full speed — a thrilling prospect, as it takes about 200 feet to stop (unless you hit a tree). At no time should you stop pedaling unless you are jamming on the brakes. As you approach some of the more wicked curves, you are conscious of a few 50-foot, side-to-side skid marks; amateur tracks. A definite groove is visible on most of the corners, worn

into the surface by the passage of many knobby tires.

A roller coaster section gives you a new thrill. The bike becomes weightless just when you want the tires on the ground. Into a dip and the bike slides sideways, then corrects itself pointed in exactly the right direction. Cutting all corners as closely as possible, you receive a whack or two from overhanging branches.

As your adrenalin pump goes into overdrive, your reflexes and vision improve. You are aware of every pebble on the road, even though you are whipping past them. You are totally alone; the only spectators are close to the bottom. You dare not lose your concentration for an instant; the danger of that is slight.

Sliding into an off-camber, eroded turn, you miscalculate. Out of control, you must make a rapid decision: off the edge or lay it down. Lay it down . . . damn . . . torn shirt, bloody elbow. No time to mess with that now (the shirt was old, so was the elbow), how's the bike? OK . . . jump on it and feed the chain back on with your hand as you coast the first few yards. Back in gear, you really stand on it to make up time.

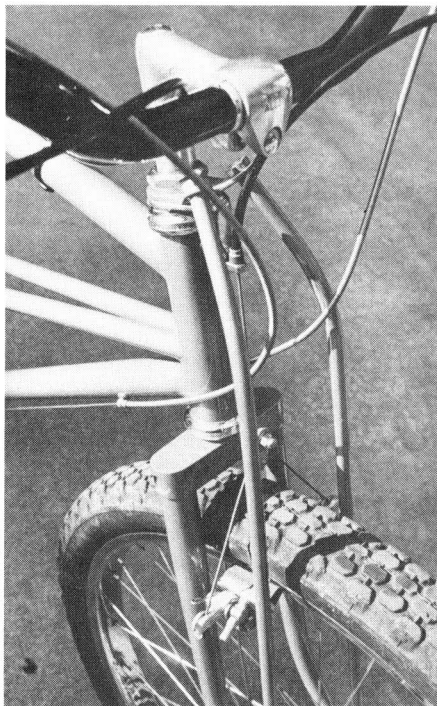
No Fees, Prizes or Cares

Near the bottom of the course there is a series of switchbacks and you are vaguely aware that you are being photographed as you try for maximum cornering speed. Out of the switchbacks in a cloud of dust you head into the final straightaway. Jam on the brakes to keep a lump in the road from

A fully-equipped Clunker ready for action.



launching you off the edge. There are several dozen people along the sides of the course, earlier riders and a few spectators. It's the last corner . . . and roaring past the big rock that marks the finish, you skid 50 feet in the flashiest possible stop, then throw down the bike and run over to the timer, who instantly gives you your time. It is the best so far, but as the last half-dozen riders finish, the times continue to go down. The last finisher records the best



The knobby balloon tires of the Clunker permit more efficient cornering and maneuverability, essential factors in this rugged cycling sport.

time, some 20 seconds better than yours. Any time under five minutes is respectable, but the record stands at 4:22 for the two miles.

The winners are announced. Just as there are no entry fees, there are usually no prizes other than a round of beers, but no one seems to care. The finish area is a hubbub as racers relive their rides. "I would have done better but I crashed . . ." "I crashed twice and still did better than you . . ." "You should have seen it . . ." But no one did.

Backwoods Transportation

While the Repack race seems to define the essence of clunking, it is only one facet of the sport. Most Clunker riders are interested primarily in riding, rather than racing. In Northern California there is ample hill country, laced with fire roads and trails, which are as good as freeways to Clunker riders. This is where the Clunker comes into its own, for these are not just downhill machines. Super-low gears enable a strong rider to climb most hills, and the true enthusiast sees nothing wrong with an hour spent pushing his bike up a steep hill in order to come flying down. The Clunker allows the rider to penetrate deep into the hills, away from cars and even most hikers. The ability to travel at 10 to 15 mph in total silence in rough country makes the Clunker the most effective backwoods transportation yet invented. It can be ridden on the narrowest hiking trails or carried, if necessary, over any obstacle.

As a means of local transportation, the Clunker has a few drawbacks. Weight (about 45 pounds) and high rolling resistance from the balloon tires keep the cruising speed down. But for short distances a Clunker is a perfect vehicle as its lack of speed is offset by incredible braking, cornering and maneuverability. To the experienced rider there are no obstacles, and ditches, curbs, fallen trees — you name it — become part of the enjoyment. One need not worry much about tire damage since there is probably no tougher tire than the 2.125 balloon knobbies in general Clunker use.

Clunker technology is still in its infancy. Plans are being developed for frames of the same lightweight tubing used in racing bicycles. If the weight can be brought down and the frame redesigned for better handling, the machines in use now will become as obsolete as the bikes they were made from. A new generation of Clunkers may well be the bike of the future. □