



Jamsom Hendler (right) of Grand Rapids does a chin stand as he wipes out during a collision with another rider on the slalom course.

photos by DIAN DEAN/staff photographer

GNARLY RIDE

By Pat Schutte
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Mountain Man: A rugged and intense individual. Uses nothing but his hands and simple tools to survive off the land. Rigid yet resilient, he possesses a husky dominance over the outdoors and its elements.

Mountain Bike: What the Mountain Man rides.

Well, you don't really have to be a "mountain man" to ride a mountain bike. Maybe if you're just a, say, "hilly person" or a "frequent 10-speed rim bender" you can own a mountain bike.

Come to think of it, if you can ride a bike, you can be a mountain bike person.

You've seen them. They look like a 10-speed with pregnant tires and straightened-out handlebars. They work as well on the street as they do in grass, gravel, sand, mud and any other obstacle that Mother Nature can throw in their way. They've been around for years, but more recently, they've developed as a hybrid cross between the 10-speed and BMX bike.

Their origin is arguable . . . as with most sports. The most documented case for the mountain bike's origin is the "re-pack run" story.

Here goes. Back in the 1960s, in Marin County Calif., a handful of bicycle/speed enthusiasts used to truck their old Schwinn "Typhoon" style bikes, the one's with the balloon tires and frames that resembled the skeletal remains of a Humpback whale, up to the top of the local fire roads in the Marin County foothills. Once at the summit, they'd hop on their bikes and turn them loose down the steep and windy gravel roads, reaching speeds in excess of 60 miles per hour.



With the bay as a backdrop, Kamikaze racers head down Sugar Loaf Mountain at break-neck speeds.

THE TERM "re-pack run" came about when the riders got to the end of the steep road. They'd have to re-pack their bicycle hubs (where the axle is housed) with grease . . . the speeds they attained actually liquefied the grease in the hubs.

The mountain bike was born. Now, it is raced. A case in point — the 1990 National Off-Road Bicycle Association Coast Light National Point Series which made a stop at Sugar Loaf Ski Resort on the Leelanau Peninsula outside of Traverse City for a weekend of thrills and spills, the likes of which a tornado rodeo couldn't match for excitement.

The bikes were there. Thousands upon thousands of dollars represented in tubular, two-wheeled fun tickets.

The riders were there. Clad in skin-tight spandex in so many colors that some of haven't been named yet, they stood with their bikes like warriors with their horses preparing for battle.

It was pretty cool. The downhill portion of the races, which drew the most spectators, opened with a bang . . . the "Kamikaze Downhill." Up to automotive type speeds of 45-50 mph, beginning to expert mountain bikers dared the serpentine steeps of Sugar Loaf's back runs.

Some met the finish line with success, while others ended up in the weeds or carrying their bike back down the mountain. But for all, the Kamikaze Downhill was to foreshadow an exciting day of racing to come.

"You just try not to think about it too much," mumbled Brad Stanley, 26, of Clarkston as he climbed aboard the starting ramp, obviously focusing on the hell-ride he was about to endure. "First, you have to finish before you can finish first."

"GET OFF THE brakes, get off the brakes . . . Pedal, pedal, pedal," screamed people lining sides of the course, oblivious to the terror many of the riders were feeling as they sped by.

The knobby tires, which hummed across the sandy portions of the course, sounding like a swarm of bees, were rivaled only by the clanking noise of the chain banging on the bicycle frame.

Next was the Scot Trials, or the obstacle course, a course so treacherous that even a "Weeble" hiker stood a good chance of tipping over.

Although the speeds were not nearly as breakneck as they were in the downhill, the Scot Trials course was much more physically demanding. Riders took on natural items such as logs, rocks, ditches, water, mud, sand and even spectators in a cross-country romp that tested balance and stamina to the hilt.

One log setup in particular, at the base of a steep loose dirt hill, captured riders like a tiger trap. One after another they dropped down the hill, only to dig their front tire into a log and launch over the handlebars and onto their helmeted heads.

The crowd loved it. The riders didn't care . . . unless they were run over by another racer.

Everybody in attendance was pumped for the next and final event . . . the Dual Downhill Slalom. Head to head action. Furious speed. Grinding turns. Dust and dirt. Nano-second margins of victory. And losses that end your weekend.

THE DEEP SAND, gravel, and weeds of the Kamikaze Downhill gave way to burnt grass, ruts and black soil in the Dual Downhill Slalom. Racers biked up the hill with their bikes, scooping out the course, looking for the best lines.

"Start your turns early . . . don't get behind," said one racer to another. "It's just like skiing."

"But I've never raced on skis before," said the other guy. "To bad," the first one said.

With break-away gates (the poles that mark the course), the course did actually act like a downhill skiing slalom course. For many of the racers, this would be their first time through a course like this.

You could tell. In the opening round, every other run show cased some kind of crash, a bevy of body-slams, lip-stands and a couple ugly frame-tangle torture rack dives . . . OUCH! The crowd loved it, the racers were into it, even the announcer was going bananas. And the best thing about it, nobody was seriously hurt.



Rochester High School grad Brad Stanley goes airborne near the start of the Kamikaze downhill course.



Greg Herbold (left) bumps into another biker while topping a small sand obstacle during the Scot Trials.