

Winning

BICYCLE RACING ILLUSTRATED

Season wrap-up

GREAT YEAR
FOR U.S.

Cycling's Golden Era
Off Road Madness



LeMond at the top



Americans in Europe





SHOWDOWN AT CRESTED BUTTE

By John Scott

Mister Dale Statina sits quietly in Le Bosquet eating dinner with a woman. Mr. Tom Richie stands alone in the dark watching Main Street from the balcony of the Eldorado Cafe. The Indians, Ross Bicycles' mountain team — put the finishing touches on their machines in their rooms at Rozman's. The Cook brothers and their local boys huddle in a mountain cabin determining strategy. Steve Cook, their leader, has never lost this race. The miniature mountain town twinkles peacefully in the dark lap of rugged 14,000 foot mountain peaks all around. Everything is quiet now; the mountain trails to the top, the town, the riders. Tomorrow the war will begin. For all practical purposes, September 16th in Crested Butte, Colorado is the world championship of mountain bike racing. They're off!

Boom. The gun goes off. A tight pack of 76 jetison down Main Street. Fat tire-motorcycle-handle-barred-quick-release-seat post-bikes — different, but very hi-tech.

The quick start hurts at 8,600 feet. The pack turns east and up across a meadow to Slate River Road.

Crested Butte, Colorado has become the mecca for Mountain Bike enthusiasts.

A few years ago, bicycles with fat tires were for paper boys and old ladies. Today, attached to custom frames and made light for speed, they symbolize a new version of bike racing. And it's anybody's game.

GOING UPHILL FAST



The main pack stays together starting up State River Road.



Dale Stetina, a professional who won the Coors Classic this year, climbed well in his first mountain bike race. Here he leads Steve Cook on the climb to the top of the switchbacks.



In the dirt and the distance the pack looks like a cloud of dust rolling off the rear flank. That pack will not last long. Mountain bike races inevitably turn into a long, strung-out line of riders battling terrain.

Suddenly all hell breaks loose. The middle of the pack crumbles. A crash. Bikes are everywhere. John McCormick of The Indians is down and out. Several good local riders tumble.

A peloton forms. The peloton splits. Twenty-seven riders are in the lead group. Eight riders lie in the dirt. The race is definitely on.

Four-time champion and local hero, Steve Cook, attacks with his down-turned handlebar aluminum Cunningham. Stetina on a Ritchie tracks Cook's break. The remaining peloton does not react.

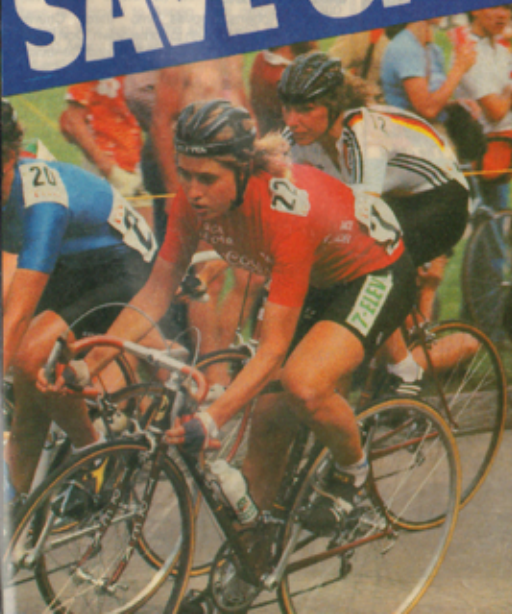
Dust is everywhere and the State River Road has started to climb. Don Cook pulls out of the peloton. He is down on the side of the road getting sick. Crested Butte has just lost its number two man.

Clark Roberts of Ross and Mike Denecke of Moots Cycles break from the remaining 10 man peloton in an attempt to catch Cook and Stetina. At the start of the switchbacks, at the end of the State River Road, after 500 feet of climbing and eight miles out of Crested Butte, the key players and what is to come are fairly clear.

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SAVE UP TO 42%



Winning

Steve Cook, winner of the mountain stage, is considered one of the toughest off-road racers in the country.



MOUNTAIN BIKE RENDEZVOUS



One hundred and fifty years ago, the annual rendezvous for trappers and mountain men brought together a collection of free-spirited, whoop-em-up fur traders and Indian fighters who were scattered all through the Rocky Mountains. The rendezvous was a time for games, shop talk and just plain old foot-stompin'.

In much the same fashion, Crested Butte has become the social gathering of the season for the hearty pioneers of the free-wheeling mountain bike industry. Fat tire bike freaks began pilgrimages to Crested Butte in 1978. In that year, the tour from Crested Butte over Pearle Pass and down to Aspen was the sole event. In 1979 the first race was added. By 1982 the race had eclipsed the tour as the major event. And in '83 one thing was very clear to anyone following the mountain bike phenomenon — Crested Butte has become the annual focal point of all the sporting, social and commercial aspects of anything to do with off-road riding.

This year the entire event was called Fat Tire Bike Week, running from September 12 to 18th. Racers began arriving early to acclimate and by the Wednesday before the big week end,

Mountain bikes could be found everywhere during Fat Tire Bike Week in Crested Butte. The event has become a focal point for the Mountain Bike movement.

sleepy Crested Butte was jammed with mountain machines.

All the top-notch custom mountain bike builders were there: Cunningham, Richie, Potts, Salza, Wieg, Merz, Moots, Flis, Breeze and Mantis. The major mountain bike parts manufacturers were also there: Sunni Surtour, John Little of Shimano, Mike Sinyard of Specialized, Ross Bicycles, with their fully outfitted, color-coordinated, «Indian, Ross Bicycle Hi-Tech Mountain Team» came to help set the trend in the newest branch of the sport.

Every afternoon in front of the Grubstake Bar, mountain bikes stacked up in front of the white picket fence. Inside the patio, the sport was discussed over large quantities of beer. During these historic gatherings, press photographers rolled off film at the Who's Who in Mountain Bikes. The fat tire rendezvous shifted into top gear. Crested Butte has arrived. ■

Chase in the mountains

The switchbacks are five miles of backbreaking climbing up a dirt trail to the 13,000 foot summit. From the top begins the Washington Gulch descent. Now the fun begins.

The Gulch is a waterless, steep, winding descent over five miles of boulders the size of bowling balls. The danger factor is 10 out of 10. The good descenders, riders like Jim Harlow of Ross, Tom Ritchie, Charlie Cunningham and Steve Cook, will spend most of their time airborne in this most curious dance with danger.

At the top of the switchbacks it's Stetina followed by Cook and Wes Williams, a local rider and brilliant descender. Clark Roberts, Mike Denecke, Charlie Cunningham and Don Davis of Ross follow. Close behind are Tom Ritchie and Jim Harlow, Robert Stewart, John Holcomb and Tracy Smith of Crested Butte and Steven Makintosh of Ross.

At the bottom of the gulch, Cook has taken 30 seconds out of Stetina. He adds another 30 on the steep four mile climb up Smith Hill.

The descent down Smith Hill is a harrowing drop across a ridge on a narrow mining road. Once again the danger factor is 10 and the pace flat out. At the bottom of Smith Hill, and back out onto Slate River Road for the final pull around the lower loop into Crested Butte, Steve Cook is two minutes and 45 seconds up on Stetina.

Wes Williams punctures at the bottom of Smith Hill. In mountain bike racing, no one can assist you. Williams sits dejected in the dirt. His brilliant descent has come to nothing but a flat-tired, flat-tired bike sprawled out in the dirt.

Back to town

Clark Roberts moves into third, Charlie Cunningham is the fourth to come down. Don Davis is next, followed by Richie, Harlow and Denecke. The remaining seven miles back into town is a fairly clean series of stream crossings and cattle trails. With the distances between each rider solid, the finishing positions are clear. Only Davis and Richie are left together to battle it out in a sprint down Main Street. Davis wins, taking fifth. Richie is sixth.

As Steve Cook rolls into town, arms held high, the town erupts in cheer. Thirty miles through the mountains. Four thousand feet of climbing. One hour and 49 minutes later, Stetina, on a Richie, is second. Clark Roberts of the Ross Indians, is third, followed by builder Charlie Cunningham and Don Davis of the Indians.

For the fifth year in a row, Steve Cook has demonstrated he is still the finest mountain bike racer in America.

Pro's revenge

But the story does not end here. The Criterium and Stage II begins in three hours. Dale Stetina is the obvious favorite. As a former Olympic cyclist and seasoned professional, he should be. His adventure with fat-tired mountain bikes has just begun but his experience in flat-out, tight criteriums spans nearly two decades. This one should be a piece of cake.

The Criterium is a 25 lap, mile-and-a-half course around gravel streets and down dirt alleys. Only half the field of 76 riders remains after the mountain stage. Crashes, one serious injury on the

Washington Gulch descent, sickness, fatigue — they had all taken their toll.

Stetina breaks away in the fourth lap on the windy stretch up Main Street. Steve Cook latches on, but not for long. A secondary peloton has formed with Clark Roberts, Don Davis, Tom Ritchie, Mike Denecke, Steve Makintosh of Ross and Gary Fisher of Richie. In the eighth lap, Makintosh punctures, exchanges wheels, and is disqualified.

In the 10th lap, Stetina drops Cook and by the 22nd, he has lapped the entire field, less Cook. The final results are as suspected: Stetina, Cook, Roberts, Denecke and Davis — all good road riders on mountain bikes.

Stetina's devastating victory created a good deal of tension and question about the validity of criteriums in the world of mountain bike racing. Certainly no one intends to take anything away from Mr. Stetina, he is a superb professional athlete. But mountain bike racing is an event centering around one's ability to climb the unclimbable and descend the undescendable without destroying body or bike. Bike handling becomes an art; danger, your constant companion. A flat criterium, even on gravel streets and through dirt alleys is still, essentially, an on-road event.

In overall standings, Steve Cook on a Cunningham and Dale Stetina riding for Richie Mountain Bikes tied for first, followed by Clark Roberts, third, of Ross. Don Davis of Ross and Mike Denecke of Moots Cycles tied for fourth.

Change of pace

On Saturday and Sunday, the 300 mountain enthusiasts, gathered from all over the world for the race, began a two-day tour up and over Pearle Pass and down to Aspen. The peloton of 300 weaving their way up the steep pass through the turning Aspen trees was truly a magnificent sight.

It was a brilliant mountain race and a lovely tour in a wonderful place — truly a unique two-wheeled experience. At the Jerome bar down in Aspen, the beer flowed. Mountain bikes were everywhere and everyone agreed on one thing — mountain bike riding has arrived. ■



Overall Results

- 1st: Steve Cook, Crested Butte
- Dale Stetina, Richie Mountain Bikes (tie)
- 3rd: Clark Roberts, Ross
- 4th: Don Davis, Ross
- Mike Denecke, Moots (tie)
- 6th: Tom Ritchie, Richie Mountain Bikes
- 7th: Tracy Smith, Crested Butte
- 8th: Jim Harlow, Ross



The mountains and the thin air took their toll on more than one rider.



Clark Roberts worked hard for third overall.

Steve Cook, a fearless descender, took time out of Stetina on the wild downhill runs.

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE MOUNTAIN

As he cruises Southern California's back country, he looks like the last survivor of a forgotten tribe of mountain men or a leftover from the hippy movement.

But Victor Vincente of America was once one of this country's top cyclists and a young man determined to become the first American to race as a pro in Italy.

By Owen Mulholland

The year was 1961, a significant one for American cycling. On June 26th, in Lakewood, California, a child named Greg LeMond was born. Three months earlier, a 20-year-old Californian named Mike Hiltner became the first American in 90 years to win a bicycle road race in Italy. Now, 22 years later, LeMond has

beaten the Italians and everyone else to become World Champion, and Mike Hiltner is known as Victor Vincente of America, the "Dirt Guru" — his professional racing ambitions forgotten a long time ago.

But Hiltner, like LeMond, was truly a talented champion who, as the old cliché goes, was way ahead of his time. What happened to Hiltner's ambitions is the story of American cycling's Dark Ages.

Mike didn't grow up wanting to be a racing cyclist. The general public had never heard of the sport. Like almost everyone who was in bike racing in the '50's, Mike sort of fell into it.

Dave Waco, a popular Southern California rider, remembers that spring day in 1957. "I was returning from a training ride when I saw this kid up ahead. I was surprised how hard I had to go to

catch him. We talked about racing which he didn't know anything about. He was real interested though. Sometimes I regret that day. After his first two races, I don't think I ever beat him again."

Unquestionably, 16-year-old Mike Hiltner was a natural. "I was kind of a shy, aimless teenager," Victor recalls. "I found something I really loved. I was just happy to ride all day."

In those days of hot rods and little surfer girls, a teenager guy who wanted to ride his bicycle all day just didn't fit in, especially in Southern California's San Fernando Valley, where teenagers were expected to spend every moment drag racing, surfing or chugging beer. The fact that Mike was first chair flute in the high school orchestra didn't do much for his social status, either.

But for him, escaping on his bicycle was what he really wanted to do. The excitement of racing lured him like a magnet. He was certainly different from his peers, a characteristic that would stay with him throughout his life.

In those days there was very little systematic development for young racers. Beginners would read bits in European magazines about how the pros trained, or talk to older riders and otherwise do whatever their intuition and energy dictated. There were no American cycling magazines, no coaching, no stage races, no nothing.

For American racing, young Mike didn't need much refinement. "I was so full of energy," he said. "Before a race I would almost shake." Dave Staub, a Pan Am and Olympic Games cyclist of the era still says that Mike was the strongest rider he'd ever ridden against. "He could drop you anywhere, anytime. On the flat, up hills, even in the sprint, he was incredible."

At 18, Hiltner became the youngest winner of the biggest stage race in North America, Canada's Tour de St. Laurent. In those days, the large Italian and French Canadian communities provided most of the riders. And they were good, many of them even ex-pros from Europe. Amazingly, Hiltner won four out of ten stages.

In that same year, 1959, he won the Tour of Sonoma classic in record time and made the Pan American Games team. But Mike knew that a more regular approach was needed if he was going to progress further. His goal was to get to the Rome Olympics, and from there — full time in Europe.

To get ready, he hooked up with Lars Zebrowski, a northern California legend who was known for his disciplined training methods. Lars was so systematic, so the legend goes, that when he burned his ankle on a floor heater, he turned around and put a matching brand on the other ankle. The legs must always be in perfect balance, you know.

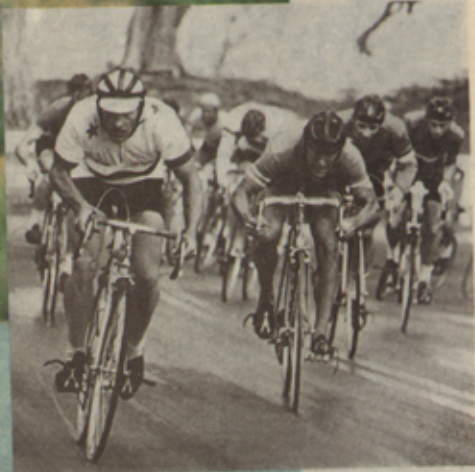
The two holed up in a cabin on Tunitas Creek, a redwood canyon 25 miles up the rugged California coast from San Francisco. Four times a week they went on 80 to 100 mile training rides, coming down to civilization only to ride whatever races were around.

By the time the Olympic Trials came around, they were in a class by themselves. They rode a two man 100 kilometer trial in two hours and 35 minutes to easily qualify for the team.

To make the Olympic team was then the highest aspiration of every American cyclist. Very few gave any thought what lay beyond. That beyond was Europe. Everyone knew that there they raised a subspecies of Homo Sapiens especially evolved for



Mike Piper photo



Mike Hiltner was perhaps the best American racer of the early 60's. But he suffered from the lack of structure that existed then in American cycling.

Fisher photo



bike racing — they were tough, fast and untouchable. Americans who had tried to make it in Europe came back crushed, confirming everyone's worst fears.

Hiltner had to find out for himself. After the Rome Olympics — the U.S. 100 kilometer team finished 11th, still the best U.S. Olympic performance in that event — he moved to Florence for the winter. He was practically broke. The language was a constant struggle. The apartment was more a refrigerator. And, worst of all, his Italian racing license got snarled in red tape. Without that license, he couldn't race.

Just days before the first race, Mike's license came. All his training and privations hadn't been in vain. He won that race, establishing a new high water mark for American cycling. He won four more races that year, riding for one of the many small teams in Italy.

It was that first year in Italy that also exposed Hiltner to a system that was steering the sport towards disaster.

"Everybody was doping," Victor relates. "The team trainer was the one who gave you the stuff. They usually said it was 'the latest thing from Switzerland.' We would put it in our water bottles for a bit near the end of the race. Everybody called it 'la bomba.'"

Until he'd come to Italy, Hiltner had never taken anything. But he went along with what his trainer told him to do, figuring it was all part of the game. In one race that year, Hiltner was so charged up that he came around a turn and crashed into a wall. "They carried me away, whistling," Victor recalls.

In 1962, Hiltner switched teams. His new Toscano/Atala squad was backed by a consortium of doctors. They allowed no doping. That year Hiltner didn't win any races. He came back — tired and blown out — to ride the Tour de St. Laurent, the big Canadian stage race he had so brilliantly won in 1959. He did poorly.

"1962 was a disaster," Victor recalls. "I think all that dope I'd taken had blown my body."

In 1963 he returned to the front line. He made the Pan Am team. But in Sao Paulo, he was "derouted," as the French say.

"Up to this my romantic life was pretty much non-existent, or fantasized. I hoped some woman would drive by and take me home." At the Games village there was a telephone operator. "One day we waved at her as we rode by, and she waved back. That did it, although it took six months for us to get married."

They returned to the U.S. that winter and for the next two years, Hiltner took the high road of American cycling by making the '64 Olympic team and winning the first ever United States Road Championship the following year.

But the ultimate challenge, landing that pro contract in Europe, still burned in his heart. After the 1965 World Championships in Spain, he stayed on for the winter track season in Germany. He became a decent indoor track rider and even won the Muenster City Championship against some of Germany's best track specialists.

By the spring he was back in Italy riding with the strong Alpha-Cure club in Florence, determined to ride well enough to be offered a pro contract. He won two races and rode a magnificent World Championship on the diabolical Nurburgring course in Germany. He faded only after leading the



In 1966, Mike had an excellent year in Europe, winning two races and riding a magnificent world championship. But he was disappointed when nobody offered him a pro contract.

Fisher photo

After the Rome Olympics in 1960, Mike Hiltner settled in Italy. That season, he became the first American to win an Italian race in 90 years.

Fisher photo



Victor Vincente of America can identify with Greg LeMond: "I feel I know his intensity," he says.

Mike Piper photo

field into the last lap. His performance that day was the best by an American at world level up to that time.

Hiltner went back to Italy to sell himself as pro material. There were no buyers. Discouraged and accompanied by a wife who was burned out on leading the life of an itinerant bike racer, Hiltner returned to Brazil and confronted the exit sign over bike rider's career. "Get a job."

Victor Vincente of America is an artist. He lives in a little house in the bustling San Fernando Valley with his second wife, Helga. The small lot is covered with plants and trees, nearly obscuring the rather typical dwelling. In the garage, Victor occasionally designs and builds mountain bike frames. He writes poetry and sometimes plays the flute.

His goal now is not so much to succeed with his small graphic design business — by all accounts he has real talent in the field — but to find the same intensity for it that Mike Hiltner once has as a single-minded bike racer.

"I'm still somewhat puzzled," he admits, "that I haven't found the way to redirect that energy that I still have. I do often think that bike racing was the only thing that was right for me... all my energy went into it."

Back in Brazil in 1967, Mike Hiltner soon found he couldn't adjust to a domestic life that pointed toward routine, extended families and domestication. By 1970, he had saved up enough money to fly home... alone.

His racing career was over. His marriage had not worked out. The public recognition that he had struggled so hard for as a racer had not materialized. Partly out of rejection, of his failed expectations, and partly out of the still strong need to make his mark in the sport, Hiltner came up with the biggest challenge he could tackle — and win.

It was in the form of a 36 day and 6 hour ride from Santa Monica to Atlantic City and back in 1975, by

many accounts, the first real double transcontinental record. During that ride, Mike Hiltner was laid to rest for good. As a personal reward to himself for the metamorphosis, Hiltner legally changed his name to Victor Vincente of America, the "vincente" from the Italian word for speed.

Today, at a balding 42, Victor Vincente appears to be as far from Mike Hiltner as two lives would allow. That brings him peace-of-mind. It also allows him to live in a world where his former single-mindedness never quite paid off. Sure he still loves to race a bike, but in local mountain bike races with no structure, no rules, no keeping score. And he wants to go in other directions. He needs to go in other directions.

But Victor Vincente of America will never be able to totally rid himself of the body-and-soul athlete that he has always been. If it were today, he might easily be riding shoulder-to-shoulder with Greg LeMond, a suggestion that ignites a spark in him.

"I sure do admire and envy LeMond," Victor admits. "He's exactly what I had always hoped to be. I identify with his spirit. I feel I know his intensity, his feelings for riding."

No doubt he does. The difference is that LeMond's personal and competitive world has helped him mesh with the sport's current structure.

Two decades ago, Mike Hiltner's personal and competitive world put him too far out of sync — a situation that by now has become part of his lifestyle.

As Victor Vincente says in one of his poems:

I will be seen
standing free against the sky
I will be loved
floating light in life
I will be remembered
when you pass by and feel...



Mike Hiltner photo

THE WISDOM OF GONZO ENGINEERING:

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