

A Tale of Two Cities

GARY SPRUNG

Mountain bikers are constantly encountering obstacles in their quest for single-tracks. While the 1984 banning of bikes from National Forest Wilderness Areas was the single biggest blow in terms of land area, today's land access battles center on public lands near the urban areas where most mountain bikers live. Today, trail closures seem more the norm than the exception.

One big plus for off-roading is happening in the Santa Cruz Mountains on the lower San Francisco peninsula. A model of club organization, user cooperation, and political action has managed to reopen some trails while preventing others from being closed. The Los Gatos-based organization that's responsible is called ROMP, the Responsible Organized Mountain Pedalers.

In sharp contrast to Los Gatos, a dramatic failure occurred in February, 1987, in Boulder, Colorado. All trails in the Mountain Parks system and most in the Open Space Parks system were closed to bikes. Two attempts to organize bicyclists into an effective group with some modicum of political clout failed totally. Depressingly, the closures were to an extent brought on by the bikers themselves.

In January of '82, the Boulder City Council voted 8-1 to prohibit mountain bikes on all trails and access roads in city parks, though the city manager was also authorized to reopen specific areas at his discretion. Shortly thereafter, the popularity of mountain bikes increased rapidly and, in response, a trails committee consisting of environmentalists, trail users, and city agencies decided the new sport should be accommodated. The committee then convinced the city to open 21 trails.

Park rangers recommended against the opening. They were overruled on the theory that mountain biking was just a fad and the bikes were too expensive for widespread popularity.

The theory was wrong. Mountain bikes now account for 60-70% of Boul-

der bike sales, according to Kevin Dwyer of University Bicycles. He estimated there were 9,000 mountain bikes in Boulder last March, and more than 12,000

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by October. His medium-size shop sold some 500 mountain bikes in that seven-month period, and there are 10 other bike shops in Boulder.

When Boulder trails were legal for bikes in '84, conflicts and problems were minimal. Complaints increased in '85, and by the end of the year rangers had begun documenting complaints and reports of damage. In '86, the three-person park staff (responsible for a 7,000-acre system used at the rate of 1.5 million visitor-days per year) documented 619 "incidents" involving mountain bikes, including 102 citizen complaints, 24 cases of vandalism, 256 warnings, 24 tickets, and 14 cases of cyclists eluding rangers. Mountain bikers received 41% of all tickets written by rangers that year.

At first, rangers only posted signs on trails where bikes were allowed. Riders argued that signs should be posted where bikes were prohibited; signs with a red

slash through a cyclist were promptly erected.

"We couldn't keep the signs up," ranger Jean Scholl reports. "We couldn't even make them fast enough. They were ripped off."

Trail damage began to increase. Most of the trails are surfaced with decomposed granite, a loose and far-from-ideal material for the heavy use the trails were receiving. The trails are also heavily water-barred to minimize run-off damage, but bicyclists, objecting to bouncing over the erosion-controlling bumps, began to ride around them. In the process, they wore paths by which water was able to circumvent the small diversion dams. Trails began to gully. Scholl claims the damage was well documented with photographs, the tire tracks clearly pointing to bicycles as the cause.

By the end of '86, the situation had grown into "the hottest issue in the history of this ranger department," she says. Boulder is home to Olympic marathon champion Frank Shorter and is well known for its running clubs. The runners turned vehemently against bicyclists. Rock climbers and legions of hikers joined in. These groups exerted intense pressure on the city.

As they had done every year, rangers in early '87 recommended closing the trails to mountain bikes. This time they succeeded. On February 23, the city council voted to close the trails.

Where were the mountain bikers when this happened? John Palescandolo tried to organize a mountain biking club in the early 1980s. "We knew Boulder was already crowded, so we respected the rights of the walkers and hikers and simply rode above Boulder," he wrote in a letter to me. "Not so for others I encountered around town. They crashed through campus, crashed through private roads, scared hikers, and maintained a Boulder tradition of personal, righteous indignation for whatever

your cause is. We knew the trails would be closed soon. In fact, just as the club was growing, I called a meeting to say it was finished. We could not responsibly put a group of riders on a Boulder multi-use trail and not spoil something or someone's perception of Nature."

A more political group, the Boulder Mountain Bike Coalition, formed around '83-84 but was short-lived; the few active members left town and the group dissolved. A second effort in '86-87 took on the same name but was unable to counter the anti-bike momentum. The club's present incarnation has, if nothing else, contributed an entertaining name to mountain biking — CRANK, or Concerned Riders Advocating Natural Klunking. Evidently, the club is dormant. And recent reports have a new group forming to focus more on recreation than politics. To date, its visibility is low.

Ranger Scholl, a mountain bike enthusiast herself, is disappointed in the bike groups and speaks rather cynically: "They volunteered to do trail maintenance and made promises, but after 1984 we never heard from them again." When the closures loomed at the end of '86 and cyclists reorganized, "All of a sudden, they were there again, making all these promises."

Cyclist Jim Robb worked on that second organizing effort. He agrees that the groups didn't work.

"Let's face it, mountain bike riders have a free spirit," he explains. "They don't want to get involved in an organization." Nevertheless, he says that government shares the blame. "The city stuck its head in the sand. Boulder has lost its foresight in dealing with this situation."

University Cycles's Dwyer claims the city "really did not look for another option. They went for the easiest way out, total closure." He said the coalition offered several alternatives, including seasonal closures to avoid the wettest weather when trails are more easily harmed, closures of just the high-use trails that create the most conflicts, and better education and enforcement efforts. Dwyer agrees that some trails should be closed to bikes, but he's bitter about the closure of the parks' jeep roads.

Scholl maintains that her agency "really did feel that we did a good job of education for several years." Rangers posted bicycle maps and warnings at every trailhead and regularly fed information to local newspapers and radio stations. They worked with the city bicycle registration program (which has since been eliminated) and with the University of Colorado registration system. They even

posted the NORBA code of ethics. "It just did not work," she says.

The root of Boulder's mountain bike problem, in the opinion of many, is the University of Colorado's student body. In '86, 63% of all summonses issued to off-road riders went to CU students. During the summer vacation months in '87, rangers issued only a dozen warnings to bicyclists violating closures. In September, after the students returned, violations jumped by 300%. Rangers now issue \$100 tickets -- no warnings! Scholl notes that students are transient, hard to reach and educate, and have little attachment to the local land.

That the parks are located just blocks away from campus only compounds the problem. Scholl says the problem is unsolvable, that massive closure is the only

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option. She doubts whether even a highly organized mountain bike club could positively affect the situation.

The Boulder scene isn't entirely bleak, however. Boulder County also operates a park system, and cyclists are permitted on eight of its trails. But only two traverse challenging terrain, and their combined length is just three miles. The other six trails are flat. Kathy Vaughn Grabowski, an administrator, reports few conflicts and erosion problems, citing "great cooperation with the mountain bike people."

County naturalist Jodi Grossman is working to keep these trails open through educational programs. As a mountain biker and a Boulder resident, she has already felt the loss of the Mountain Parks trails. Now the closest open trail is miles from the city. "I can't just leave my house and go for a ride," she notes. "That's really a drag."

California's ROMP supplies an uplifting contrast to Boulder. Monthly organized rides, a regular newsletter, active involvement with influential parks boards, and cooperation with a trail-building cen-

ter have made this Los Gatos club a model for how to run an effective mountain biking organization.

Not that they're winning every battle; they win some and lose some, probably more the latter than the former. But overall there is slow progress and increasing, if grudging, acceptance by equestrians, who for years have dominated mid-peninsula trail usage.

Owning a horse in urban America is almost exclusively an option for the wealthy—the same folks who have great influence over government actions. With the Silicon Valley and Stanford University nearby, the communities perched between San Francisco Bay and the Santa Cruz Mountains enjoy unusually wealthy populations. It's no accident that the trail systems have traditionally been managed for equestrians.

And equestrians fear bikes. On narrow trails twisting through heavy forests, horsemen claim they are encountering increasing numbers of rambo mountain bikers. The result is predictable: spooked horses and pressure to ban bikes.

Jim Bolin, operations supervisor for the Mid-Peninsula Regional Open Space District, says many riders come "screaming down, really flying." Yet the only accidents he knew of were one spooked horse and a couple of bikers involved in solo crashes. Is the equestrian/biker problem real, perceptual, or totally political?

To ROMP president Jim Hunter, it's political.

"Political power is everything," he says. "Mountain bikers complain that it's not fair, that we wear helmets and gloves, that we don't cause much damage, that horses do more damage than we do. Well, I say if we had enough political power it wouldn't matter when or how we rode or even if we tore hell out of the trails. We're going to be treated like a minority until we join the political process."

ROMP has placed volunteer mountain biking advocates at every local government and parks board meeting having anything to do with trails. Its newsletter lists a Mid-Pen activist, a Santa Clara County activist, a San Mateo County activist, a Santa Cruz activist, and a State Parks activist. Committed, dedicated people also produce the newsletter, coordinate membership, arrange social events, and sponsor rides and races. ROMP is ORGANIZED.

There's one man, a lawyer, who is a ROMP member and the president of a Trails Advisory Committee. Hunter says he hasn't met the guy and wonders whether ROMP has a mole in the committee or whether the committee has a mole in ROMP. Either way, communica-