



It's an uphill struggle, but a few avid bicycle racers are determined to bring their sport to the hills and flatlands of Louisiana, despite the noticeable shortage of bike-racing fans.

It's a curious sight, and it prompts curious stares. A pack of 30 racers buzzes by—mostly men and boys but with a sprinkling of women—all clad in black, skintight, lycra-spandex pants and each one hunched over a bicycle even skinnier than its rider. Tires hum as the almost 30 mph pace is fueled by pairs of sinewy legs driving like the pistons on a finely tuned John Deere.

The clot of racing cyclists is not what the farmers and churchgoers expect to see this damp, breezy Sunday morning in rural Scarsdale. The scene is unusual in Plaquemines Parish...and in America. But that's changing, and bicycle racing is slowly gaining popularity.

Tom Finklea, a 27-year-old cyclist from Baton Rouge, is among the best of the Louisiana crop. A veteran rider and member of the U.S. Olympic Cycling Team (second alternate),

Finklea's achievements have surpassed the "too numerous to mention" mark with his latest being a fourth-place finish in the 1984 national spring championships.

Finklea took to cycling the way many Louisiana boys take to the gridiron. Curly haired and thin, with clean-shaved legs, he has the classic build of a competitive cyclist. The emphasis here isn't on bulk, but on aerobic efficiency tempered with calf and thigh muscles that span the legs and cast shadows across skin as they react to the demands placed upon them.

That body and its ability have carried Finklea to a Louisiana Road Race championship and to the brink of actual Olympic competition. And on this Sunday morning it carries a hunkered down Finklea safely within the pack. The 25-mile race has been under way for just over seven miles, and there's no need, at this point, to

do anything but remain among the leaders.

"If you can't keep up, you just fall back," is Finklea's brief but accurate summation of the facts of bicycling life. His philosophy, however, shows the arrogance of success; there is more to racing than he lets on.

Bicycle racing is an odd sport—one that thrives on the camaraderie of competitors, while demanding a complete breakdown in that relationship in order to win. During 90 to 95 percent of the race, riders maintain that precious balance of power that keeps everyone progressing, but during the final five to 10 percent of the course, priorities change. It's then a matter of first-strike capability, and the relationship becomes one of "every man for himself."

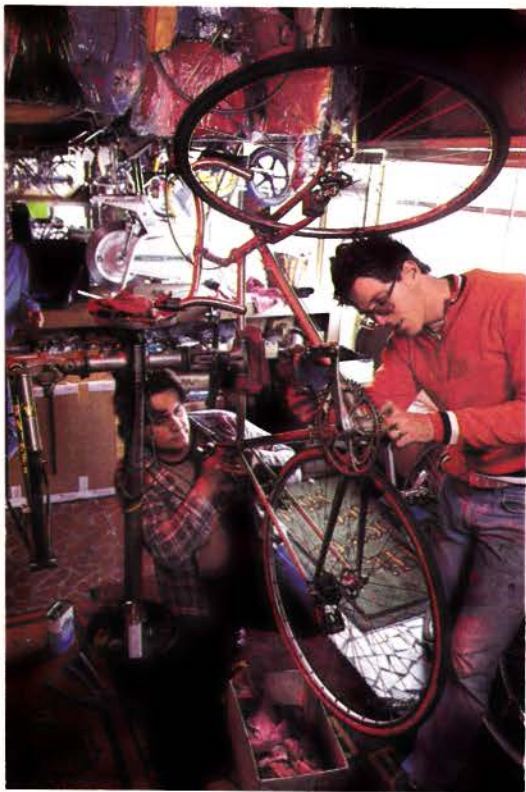
Despite the length of a race, some of which extend 125 miles, the movement from brotherhood to misanthropy is anything but gradual. "It's

The Wind Ahead... The Pack Behind

Text by Patrick Sweeney

Photographs by Greg Greer

Tom Finklea of Baton Rouge gets a new sponsor, and new wheels, from Ira Herman of the Freewheeling bike shop in New Orleans.



instantaneous," says Glenn Gulotta, the 1981 state time trial champion. "If you're not paying attention and a group rolls off the front of the pack—a breakaway—that could mean the difference in the race."

Bicycle racing's demands are physical and mental—extreme in both instances. A serious racer must blend the brute strength of a plow horse with a finely tuned cardiovascular system capable of efficiently supplying muscles with a steady flow of oxygen-rich blood.

Meanwhile, mental demands are legion and sometimes contradictory. Competitors admit that while "thinking riders" win, they can't think too much about themselves lest doubt enter the psyche and begin sapping needed strength. Instead, they think good thoughts while constantly monitoring such things as opponents' pedal strokes per minute and wind direction in order to shield themselves

from the enervating effects of a headwind. In their "spare time" they select efficient gears and rely on their hair-trigger reflexes for steering.

And then there are potholes and the problems they cause—most notably blowouts. As finely tuned a unit as the racer and his bike become, blowouts are an uncontrollable weak spot. They are part of the game, Gullotta says, but if you're good you can change a wheel—even a rear wheel with its filigree of sprockets and gear levers—in 30 seconds or better. Top veterans can make changes in 10 seconds.

Randy Legeai, whose Uptown New Orleans residence is part home, part shrine to bicycle racing, knows all about blowouts by way of 12 years' worth of competitive racing. Louisiana's road race champion in 1981 and second-place finisher (first in his age group) in 1983, Legeai remembers bike racing's rebirth in these parts in great detail. "In the early '70s you couldn't just go out and buy a good 10-speed bike," he says. "You really had to look around." And finding one was something of a mixed blessing socially, since consensus in those days put anyone over 12 who still rode a bicycle in the "somewhat eccentric category," Legeai notes.

But it didn't stop Legeai or Glenn Gulotta, whose family-owned business—Gus Betat and Sons of New Orleans—gave Glenn a better-than-usual introduction into the competitive aspects of bicycling. "Still," Gulotta explains, "you try showing up at high school in 1971 at 15 years old and having shaved legs!"

No doubt the 1979 Oscar-winning film, *Breaking Away*, made bicycle racing more acceptable. Add the real problems created by high gasoline prices and the inflation rate that was jacking up car prices. Finally, a fitness craze swept the country, and suddenly guys like Legeai, Gullotta and Finklea crossed over from the realm of "eccentrics" to the hallowed ground strode by "visionaries." The result was a 1981 study showing more than 100 million Americans were putting their foot to other than the gas pedal.

A new emphasis on the athletic prowess of bicycle racers has spawned a whole subculture of dedicated enthusiasts in Louisiana and the nation—riders who take the sport

seriously. Unfortunately, the nearest bicycle track is in Atlanta, and few Louisiana riders ever use the facility.

That lack of facilities shows to some extent, in this 25-mile race, as do the vast differences in the level of physical conditioning the various riders have managed to achieve this early in the season. By the 10-mile mark the competitors are spread out, and some are trailing badly. It is an unseasonably warm February morning, and the heat is taking its toll as the stragglers pedal past the smiling and earnest faces of Plaquemines' political hopefuls frozen on groves of placards alongside the road. The candidates are bearing up under the demands of their races better than the exhausted cyclists are, and the cool, cardboard faces have long since become a point of mental torment for the peddlers.

It is difficult to continue, for those who've fallen off the pace, and it gets worse as the leaders reach the 12½-mile turnaround point and head back toward the finish line, directly into the faces of those who are bringing up the rear. As the front-runners approach and whiz past, the sequence of expressions on the faces of the slower racers is consistent: first recognition, followed by despair and finally a look of grim resolve to go on anyway. For those with no chance of winning, the decision to finish is a true test of a competitor's heart.

Tom Finklea, meanwhile, is safely near the front and within striking distance. Even though this is the year's first race, he's in good shape. He takes his sport seriously enough to involve himself in weight training as well as the time-consuming but vital distance training. He is in his prime as a competitor. On the average, the maturing bicycle racer is 22, heading toward a prime of 25 to 28. During those years a national competitor will put in 500 miles or more per week.

Louisiana competition is less demanding, says Finklea, whose devotion to the sport borders on worship, but he points out that the level of competition has more to do with the personality of the state than with the capabilities of its riders. Wider acceptance would give road racing the same credibility here that the sport enjoys in more "aware" states such as Colorado, where the Coors Classic—America's premier

Those in training take the weekly time trials at the river front in New Orleans just as seriously as they do the major events.

sport here, unlike Europe where professionals make the kind of living we reserve for baseball, basketball and football players. So now Dave Person has relegated himself to the role of "hearty competitor" rather than "champion."

Tom Finklea, on the other hand,

The distance between the pair and the pack grows almost imperceptibly—but consistently—until it is clear that Finklea and McAllister will battle this one out alone, at the finish.

Meanwhile Finklea settles down to the waiting game, ready to explode in an instantaneous surge of muscle and motion. He "owns" the sprint and has for several years in the state.

Finklea refers to bicycling as "an elegant sport" that first caught his eye by way of a *National Geographic* magazine article. Soon thereafter, in April 1973, he became a serious cyclist, and within two months he had placed second in the state road race championship. "Actually, I was never what you might call a casual biker," he says. "I went right into competition, because I thought I had a good chance to win."

It is clear that this physically demanding sport also makes great mental demands as well. Often the strongest racer finishes well behind the smartest—the one who can think and pedal. There are times when thinking and pedaling seem almost mutually exclusive; the idea is to train to meet that point and defeat it. "I began to see that I was making mistakes," says Finklea. "Sometimes I'd fold in a race because I was unfamiliar with the psychological demands put on you."

Some of those psychological demands can take the form of an opponent's racing tactics. Some are theatrical, but then there is no shortage of theater as a pack nears what Randy Legeai calls "that critical point in a race where something has to happen." Riders try to dishearten the other racers by wearing sunglasses (or at least poker faces) to disguise their fatigue. Other tactics are more orderly, like forcing a sprinter like Finklea into a pace that's too fast too soon.

But for every tactic there is a countervailing force. Finklea can easily stay with most packs, and a smart rider can spot fatigue in others, despite the sunglasses, and make appropriate adjustments in strategies or pace.

Races change depending on their type and on those participating. Finklea's presence, for instance, will increase the pace in an effort to blunt his sprint. Types of races, meanwhile, run from the more ordinary road races of varying lengths to the physi-



road race—is held. That absence of popular support does nothing to encourage participants to endure economic sacrifices and the immense physical demands of the sport.

Dave Person, who rides for the Lafayette Bicycle Club and who won 1983's Shreveport-to-New Orleans "Great Louisiana Road Race," made the commitment... once. It was 1980, and Person spent three months on an offshore oil rig earning the stake he needed to spend the rest of the year training and racing. Person succeeded in landing a spot on the time-trial team that earned a sixth-place finish in national competition that year, and "that," he says matter-of-factly, "was quite an accomplishment."

It was prestigious to finish sixth, and it makes a fond recollection, but not much else, because the monetary rewards for road racing in America are depressingly small. It's an amateur

still thinks "champion," and he's neck-in-neck for the lead at the 17-mile point of the 25-mile Plaquemines Parish round-trip road race. A sprinter primarily, Finklea is not accustomed to leading, but he and John McAllister of New Orleans move away from the pack.

No one attempts to close the gap the pair has opened, so Finklea and McAllister are alone at a point in the race where bicycling is the most schizophrenic. They want to beat each other, yet each needs to lay behind, from time to time, and let the other serve as shelter from the headwind (a tactic that can reduce a rider's energy output by as much as 30 percent). So, for the next six or seven miles Finklea and McAllister will work as a team, because the chances of either man succeeding alone is slim. Working individually, both would most surely be caught and passed by the pack.

Randy Legeai of New Orleans, atop the Mississippi River levee, puts himself and his bicycle through a grueling race against the stopwatch.

cally demanding time-trial races, in which pacing is disallowed and individual competitors race against the clock. The most demanding race from the standpoint of stamina, however, is the "stage race," held over a period of days, which combines time trials, road races and other contests, with a winner determined by overall time.

The personality of a race is also affected by its geography and weather conditions. Louisiana riders, in general, prefer hot, humid conditions that combine to wilt riders from more pleasant climates. The absence of steep hills is not as much of a hindrance to Louisiana riders in training as one might suspect. Finklea, for one, has no trouble competing in hill climbing in national competitions.

"If you want to duplicate hills in Louisiana," according to Finklea, "all you have to do is choose a high gear and turn your bike into the wind. That's very similar to hill climbing."

Legeai, meanwhile, points out the advantage flatlanders encounter. Riders used to riding in hilly terrain are also used to pedaling for a while and then coasting. Louisiana riders seldom get the chance to coast and thus are often in better shape for the constant pedaling of time trial competitions.

By now Finklea and McAllister are nearing the finish line on the old River Road in Plaquemines Parish, and Finklea begins to visualize victory. He needs the win and the high profile more wins will bring. Perhaps it will produce a sponsor to help defray the \$5,000 to \$10,000 it will cost him to compete in the next several races, which he must do to keep his competitive skills sharp.

With just over a mile left, the steady buzz of tire meeting asphalt changes pitch. Now it is a whine followed by a gush of air. McAllister attacks. He knows he is the stronger of the two, but he also knows Finklea is a better sprinter over a short distance.

McAllister rises from his seat, jamming pedals earthward, his cycle lurching from side to side.

Finklea responds well before McAllister can break away. McAllister continues to pump, and the two

men continue to alternate the lead. Now McAllister is staying ahead for longer periods while Finklea catches the slipstream, awaiting his time to slingshot past the younger man.

Finally Finklea makes his move. His methods are the same as McAllister's; his movements are similar, but quicker and more effective. He pulls away by several lengths and approaches the finish line in traditional style, arms raised in victory.

"He was stronger, but I knew I had it at the end," says an only slightly winded Finklea, just minutes after the race. McAllister rests in his van and expands on Finklea's assessment: "It's mental," he says. "I was stronger. I knew that, but I couldn't pull away. I've never beaten him."

In less than 90 minutes the entire race is complete. The stony-faced Plaquemines Parish deputy assigned to the "event" leaves as brusquely as he came, while the cyclists remain for some post-race shoptalk. There will be at least two dozen races held during the year, and most of those here today will compete. Certainly not for the money, nor for the adoration of throngs lining the course, but rather for the challenge of competing in what they believe to be the toughest sport the human body can master. □

