

A bike and a mountain

Charlie Cunningham's macho mountain bike will take you places

By Kevin Lollar

Independent Journal reporter

CHARLIE Cunningham's workshop seems out of whack.

Adjoining the house, tucked away on a cul-de-sac in Fairfax, it's cluttered, close and unheated.

Tools, safety glasses and old boxes line the walls; aluminum tubing lies in a rack; bicycles hang from the ceiling; spider webs hang on machinery.

This place looks more like Uncle Ned's garage than the home of Cunningham Applied Technology, spawning ground for arguably the best mountain bikes in the world.

Cunningham, 37, fits the environment more than he fits the image of bicycle entrepreneur. He wears a battered green down jacket, patched here and there with electrician's tape, brogans and surgical gloves.

Seldom pausing from work on a bicycle frame, he answers questions with the quiet intensity of a man in touch with his own piece of truth.

"Without getting a big head about it," he says, "these bikes are about the best ones you can get. If you can afford them, they're the best."

Gary Fisher, one of the sport's pioneers and owner of Fisher MountainBikes in San Rafael, a beginner can get a mountain bike for as little as \$200.

"But it's not something you would risk taking away from civilization," he says. "You can get something that works for \$400-\$500. You can get something that works nicely in the \$600-\$800 range. Something fanatics buy will cost \$1,000-\$2,000."

A Cunningham will gnaw into a rider's bank account to a depth of \$3,000-\$4,000.

For the rider who thrives on offroad biking, a Cunningham is a good investment, Fisher says.

"When you buy a bike from Charlie, you buy more than a bike. You buy a bike education; he'll teach you about the forces going on in the bike. A bicycle is a classic engineering problem. A real common exercise in many engineering schools is building a bike."

Cunningham, who studied aeronautical mechanical engineering at College of Marin, the University of California-Berkeley and San Francisco State, got into bike designing as the result of a concatenated series of events rather than a desire to make bicycles for a living.

He had been a jogger for years, and in 1977, he discovered the area around his Terra Linda home unfavorable for runners, so he hunched over a 10 speed and pedaled away.

Finding that populated areas presented problems for bikers, too, Cunningham lit out for the territory.

"I was riding skinny-tire 10 speeds off road long before fat tires came into existence. I wanted to get off road to get away from cars, exhaust and pollution."

Leaving the madding crowd's ignoble strife became a passion for Cunningham. A bicycle was the best way to get away and bicycling assumed almost religious significance.

"The use of a bicycle is a positive thing in my life," he says. "I see a lot of value in bicycles for the needs of society right now. Bicycles do wonders. They put people in touch with their bodies as they've never been before. They can put them in touch with the planet as they've never been driving a car. It takes time, but it changes values."

The problem was that Cunningham couldn't find a bike that would let him get away efficiently and reliably.

Marinites like Fisher and Joe Breeze were experimenting with offroad bikes, but the sport was young, and the bicycles didn't meet Cunningham's needs.

"What was available was totally unacceptable. I could see from an engineering standpoint that there was no solution but to make it myself and make it right. For example, I wanted an efficient frame, so I studied the technology and learned what I needed. The available hubs were not what I wanted, so I made my own."

Cunningham made his first bikes in 1978, saw a market and by 1980 was building mountain bikes for other people.

Breeze, who still builds bicycles in Mill Valley and is a designer for American Bicycle Manufacturing of St. Cloud, Minn., is generally credited with building the first successful offroad bike frames in 1977. He says one of the strengths of Cunningham bikes is Cunningham's low volume — about 20 bicycles a year.

"Charlie spends a lot of time with each bike," Breeze says. "He's meticulous. He makes sure the frame is properly aligned and is as light as possible."

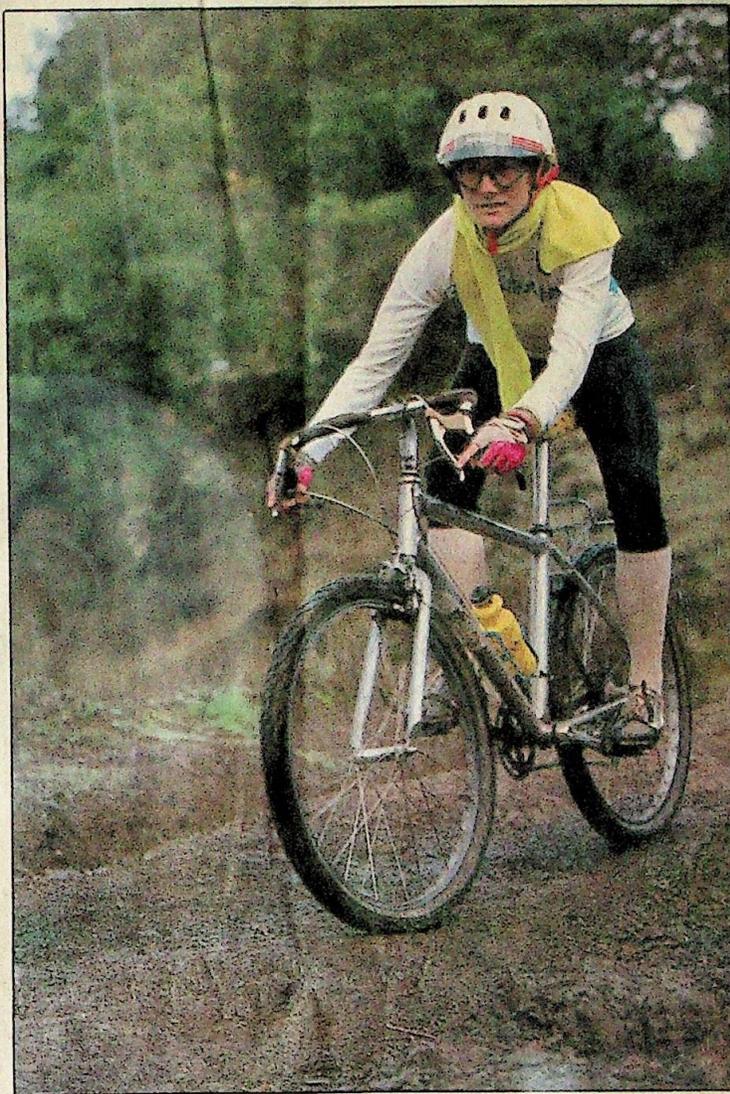
The key to a Cunningham is the heat-treated aluminum frame, which the builder says is 2½ to 3 pounds lighter than a high-quality lugless chromoly frame and twice as strong in a frontal impact.

But a Cunningham is the sum of its parts. Virtually every component has been modified by Cunningham and Steve Potts and Mark Slate, Cunningham's partners in Wilderness Trail Bikes, created in 1982 to develop offroad equipment.

The three have designed high-tech bike stuff like the roller cam brake, gooseneck stem, fixed angle seat post, and an unbreakable laminated plastic toe clip.

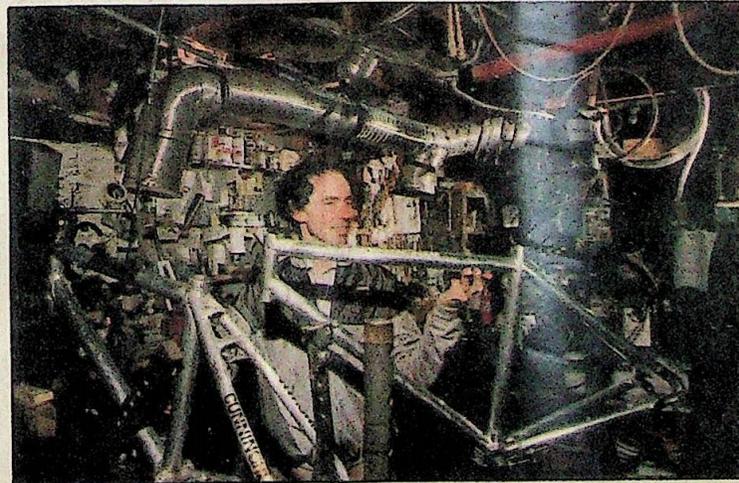
"Everything that goes on the bike is a the spear point of technology in terms of what the sport needs," Cunningham says. "Mass producers don't have the experience in what's needed. That created a golden

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IJ photo/Marian Little

Women's mountain-bike champ Jacquie Phelan riding a Cunningham bike



IJ photo/Bob Hax

Marin's Charlie Cunningham at work on one of his \$3,000-\$4,000 creations

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opportunity for custom builders who are initially involved with the sport, because we know what's needed."

To keep up on what's needed, Cunningham rides at least an hour a day, under all weather conditions. With each ride, he can see frames and components with an engineer's eye as to how they can be improved.

So what do riders get for their \$3,000 or \$4,000? Not a flashy eye-catcher of a bike. The frames are unpainted, polished aluminum on which the welds are clearly visible.

Jacque Phelan, three-time national offroad bicycle champion, rides a Cunningham. She is also Cunningham's girlfriend, but says she can comment objectively on his bikes. When discussing bicycle aesthetics, she takes a page from the Greeks:

"The ideal of Platonic love is that the physical object of the love is irrelevant. The object is the corporeal part; that part will die. No, you fall in love with the

essence. After a while, you don't know what the physical part of the bike looks like to the naked eye, because you're in love with its essence."

The essence of a Cunningham is efficiency.

"To people used to mountain bikes, there's more positive connection to the ground," Phelan says. "All the power is transmitted from the leg to the pedals to forward motion. It's like the difference between biting cooked and uncooked linguine. Instead of pushing all that bike, you and the bike are a light-weight unit."

Mountain biking was born in Marin, and while the sport has spread across the country, the great innovators are still here.

Cunningham, probably the most innovative of the lot, continues to work away in his crowded shop. When he can, he takes off for the mountains of Marin.

He says that, on any given day, 60 percent of the people he sees are on mountain bikes.

"It's neat in a way. But for me to enjoy the total outdoor experience, I have to go farther out to more remote places."