



*John Tomac on his way to a national championship.*

John Tomac is the BMX kid who hit the top mountain bike races on a cheap bike and became US champ. He's the mountain bike star who road raced for training and made the US National road team in a year. He's a trick rider who can keep a crowd enthralled for an hour in the car park. He's only 21. Associate Editor CHARLES KELLY introduces a new kind of cycling star.

*John Tomac*



## The Shape of Stars to Come

John Tomac is the most recognizable cyclist in the United States. His name and face are used to sell all types of products, and his picture appears several places in every issue of every American bicycle publication, advertising tyres, bicycle components, clothing or sunglasses. Even Giro d'Italia winner, Andy Hampsten, or Tour de France winner, Greg Lemond, have failed to capture the attention of the American cycling public like the shy, 21-year old Californian named Tomac.

The reason any athlete takes up a professional sport is to make money, and Tomac makes much more than any of the other professional off-road racers. No one will say exactly how much he makes, but as an example of his income, when he was only 19 he won £10,000 during four days of racing at the New England Stage Race. He was the first mountain bike racer to have an agent to represent him in his dealings with the many companies who want to see their names on Tomac's jersey.

### ALL ROUND SKILL

There are plenty of reasons for Tomac's popularity, and the most important is his skill on a bicycle. John began racing BMX when he was only 10 years old, and he has won national championships in all three major branches of bicycling. BMX, mountain bikes, and even criterium racing on a road racing bicycle. He excels at every phase of bicycling: from BMX he learned sprinting and handling, from mountain bike racing and road racing he has gained endurance. From racing thousands of heats of BMX he learned that you don't win every time, and that you must lose as gracefully as you win.

"In BMX, the races are 30 seconds long, and if you make a small mistake, you're done," he says. "You learn how to lose."

From road racing he learned that strength only wins races when it is

combined with tactical skill.

There is no doubt that Tomac is most comfortable on a bike. Even when he relaxes at a hotel after a race, he is likely to cruise slowly in the parking lot, performing an amazing array of tricks at slow speed: rollbacks, 180 degree spins on either wheel, and "pogo" bounces on the front or rear wheel.

John Tomac won the United States National Championship and the United States Criterium Championship in 1988, and he has been selected to ride on the national road team. Although road racers have become successful mountain bike racers, John is the first rider to go from success off the road to success in road racing.

### PERFECT TEMPERAMENT

In spite of his success at a young age, he is not carried away with himself as are so many young athletes. "I try to remember how much fun it is to ride a bike," he says. He does not show any signs of being temperamental. In a race in California he missed the start because his watch was 20 minutes off. Since he joined the pack after the start and beat them all, it is certain he would have won, and his mistake cost him \$800 in prize money for a one half hour race. After travelling a long distance to race, his trip was wasted, but he made no complaints, and congratulated the winner. More recently, Tomac was leading in the cross country event at the Swatch World Championships held in California, when his chainrings came loose, and he went from first place to third place in one of the biggest races of the year. Even after such a big disappointment, he didn't kick his bike or curse; he started preparing for the other events.

Although he makes no complaint when he loses, Tomac is not a robot, and his desire to win has carried him to his present success. No one tries harder during the race than John, but after the race he is the same person whether he wins or loses.

### MONGOOSE

When he took up mountain bike racing at the age of 18, John fell apart a third of the way through his first race. He kept it at it, though, and entered some of

the toughest races in the United States on an inexpensive bicycle, although the people he raced against were all riding expensive racing machines. He surprised people by doing very well, and the next year he started racing as a sponsored rider wearing the name of his BMX sponsor, Mongoose.

Mongoose had been primarily a manufacturer of BMX bicycles, and the company had little experience with mountain bikes. Like every other U.S. bicycle distributor, they carried a line of average mountain bikes, so Tomac raced his first sponsored season on one of these bikes, which once again put him at a disadvantage. In spite of this, he came very close to winning the U.S. National Mountain Bike Championship in 1986, sharing the lead with eventual winner Ned Overend until one of his rear dropouts broke off the frame. Two weeks before the national championships he had surprised all the experts by dominating one of the toughest races on the schedule, the Ross Stage Race, beating all the top riders with a combination of superior bike handling and sprinting ability.

John was disappointed, but his sponsors were embarrassed that the company's unimpressive equipment had let their star rider down. In 1987 they put together a bike worthy of the rider, and Tomac came back, more determined than ever to beat Overend for the title. In early season races he was all but unbeatable, and the challenge for the national title once again came down to two men, one just out of school, and the other almost old enough to race in the veteran category. After all, Ned was 13 years older than John, and this age difference would have to catch up to him sooner or later.

### YOUNG BULL

Tomac won his share of races in 1987, but when he once more faced Overend at the National Championship he was again disappointed. His bike went the distance and the two riders proved that they are in their own class by riding away from the rest of the field, but in the end he lost to Overend by three minutes.

Tomac remained loyal to his old sponsor even though they hadn't marketed a bike worthy of him. As his successes added up, Mongoose entered the mountain bike market aggressively, and with the help of Tomac's image and advice on bike design, within two years they had gained a share in this competitive market. This may be one of the best examples of the way a racing programme can help the sponsor as well as the rider.

### ROAD RACING

As a means of training for mountain bike racing, John took up road cycling, and began training with some of the best riders in his area. His natural ability enabled him to move up from the lowest categories to the national road team in a single year, without

having the benefit of a strong team to protect him. Along the way he won the national criterium championship with a performance that showed his strength. When the two national team riders broke away near the end of the race, Tomac was the only rider in the pack strong enough to cross the gap and join them. Then, after the effort to catch them, he turned on his BMX sprint and took them at the line.

After this performance Tomac was considered for an Olympic team berth, but his lack of experience and, as an outsider, the absence of any political help in the *United States Cycling Federation*, kept him off the team. Although he is still a little weak on tactical ability, there is no doubt that Tomac has what it takes to be a solid professional road racer if he wants to.

Because of his good looks, his ability, and his marketing agent, John Tomac's face appears in four or five places in every American bicycle magazine, not only in the race results but in ads for everything that goes with cycling. His image has been built up by the advertising people to be rebellious and wild, but this is only an image for marketing, because the real John Tomac is very quiet and shy when he is off the bike.

## US CHAMPION

In 1988 the U.S. Championship format was changed from one race to a series of six races held over the course of the entire season. The last race of the series would carry double the points. This format helped Tomac win his first off-road championship; he had been more consistent during the previous two years, but Overend had peaked perfectly at the end of the season for the single championship race. By the time the last event in the 1988 championship series took place in the mountains near the ski resort of Sun Valley, all Tomac had to do was finish in the top three places to win the championship.

Even with this advantage, he did more than protect his points. He took the lead from the starting gun, and by the time the racers had gone 100 metres, Tomac was clear of the field by 5 metres. His lead on Overend went up to two minutes, and then Tomac relaxed a little and Overend gained all but the last 20 seconds back. John Tomac finished his U.S. championship season with a convincing win that left no doubt as to the new King of the Mountains.

## THE WORLDS

One week later Tomac met all the same riders in California's Mammoth Mountain ski resort, the site of the U.S. version of a "World" Mountain Bike Championship. (The contradiction of two World Championships in the same sport has recently been cleared up by the unification of U.S. mountain bike racing with the UCI.) Although most of the world was not represented at this

race, the best mountain bikers in the U.S. and Canada were assembled to compete in Cross Country, Hillclimb, Dual Slalom and Downhill.

The first race was the hillclimb, which climbs 2000 feet to the 11,000 foot summit of Mammoth Mountain. As he did last year, Overend broke away from the field halfway up the hill. With half a kilometre to go, Tomac started to close the 30-second gap, and came within one second of catching Overend at the top, the closest finish yet in this event.

The next day in the cross-country event Tomac took a commanding lead while Overend suffered a flat in the first of six 10km laps. But bad luck struck Tomac, while Overend turned in the ride of his life. John's chainrings started to work loose, and his chain started to fall off every time he shifted his front derailleur. As he faded, Overend closed the four and a half minute gap and moved up dozens of places to win on the last lap as Tomac dropped to third because of the mechanical problem.

The dual slalom event was designed for spectators, and it was a perfect showcase for Tomac's amazing handling skills. In two days of head-to-head competition Tomac didn't make a

mistake or lose a beat, while one by one his rivals fell, slipped, or rode too slowly to keep up.

The last day of competition was the famous Kamikaze Downhill, four miles and 2000 vertical feet from the top of Mammoth Mountain. In this timed event Tomac was second, behind one of the best downhillers in the world, Jim Deaton. Tomac's placings for the week were one first place, two second places and a third, the best overall performance of the week and an indication of his all-round skills. (Cross country and hillclimb champ, Overend, doesn't compete in dual slalom or downhill.)

One week later, road racing on a rainy day, Tomac crashed into a fallen rider and broke his clavicle, not the best way to end a season, but a well-deserved rest for the wonder boy. His future plans are cloudy since he has received a number of offers to take up road racing. There is no doubt that he would become a solid professional if he were to move to Europe, but that would mean a lonely life for a young man who likes to be with his friends and ride his bike.

*As he reaches down to tighten a toe strap, Tomac has already taken the winning lead over the best mountain bikers in America.*

