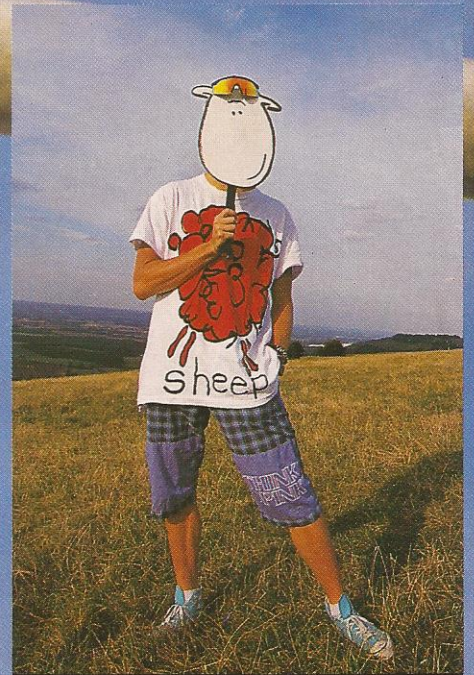
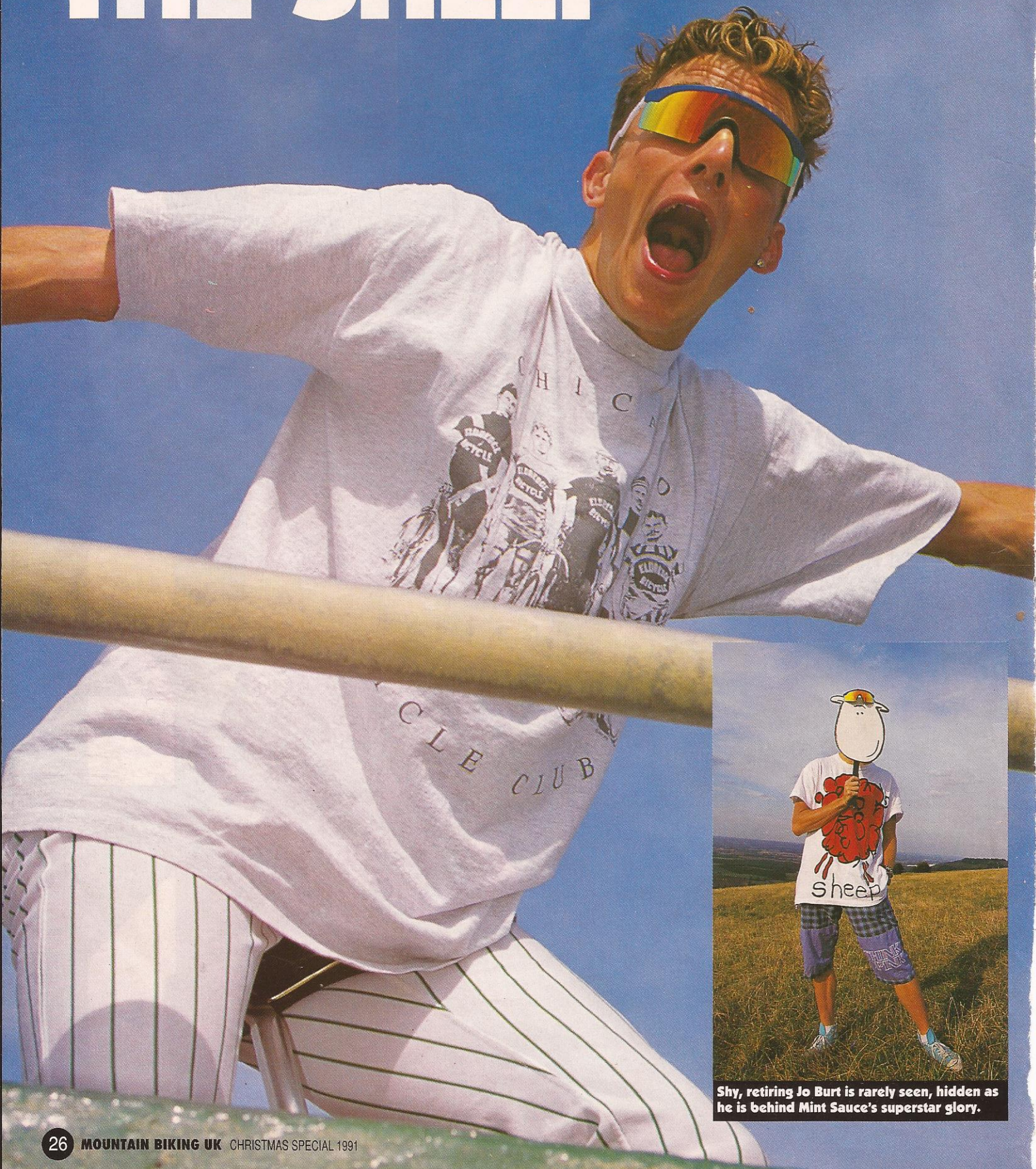


# THE MAN BEHIND THE SHEEP



Shy, retiring Jo Burt is rarely seen, hidden as he is behind Mint Sauce's superstar glory.

**Who is Jo Burt? Well, it's no good asking him, so we begged ace mountain biker and superstar MINT SAUCE to take a day out of his busy schedule to interview the man behind the sheep. Mr Sauce, kindly, and rather patronisingly we felt, agreed. Pictures by Steven Baah (aka STEVE BEHR).**

**T**he first time we went to Brighton to interview Jo Burt, he wasn't in. So we went home to watch Wheel of Fortune. The next time we hit the seaside he wasn't in again, but there was only Strike It Lucky on the telly, so we decided to hang around and wait. Something of an honour really, as waiting for our fans is something neither I, Mint Sauce, sheep and superstar, nor Steve 'I've got some Patagonian underpants' Behr are used to.

A round of cappuccinos and several 99s later we returned to find Jo Burt in, and in a whirlwind.

He'd only just got his Zinn bike back from its summer vacation at the paint-sprayers and was in a panic to chuck it all together. He'd just spent the morning running round the local bike shops, bribing them to stick bits on to his frame. Rayments gave in to persuasion and skilfully hammered the headset into place. Onward to Bike UK, who let him into the workshop and locked the soundproof door. Luckily the mechanic was on holi-

day, as he has been known to weep openly as Jo thrashes around with his unorthodox spanner-and-hacksaw-abuse technique.

We had a cup of tea and watched the best legs in the cartooning business run around in a hyper fit, hyperfitting, bolting and gluing bits of his bike together. I've known Jo for too long now – about four years – and this is his permanent state of being: hyperbiker. It's frightening at first, but you get used to it because he's frantic in a laid-back kind of way, which is cool. Just don't give him any orange Smarties – that's when he implodes.

We thought he was going to do just that when the doorbell rang. It was the courier hamster with some special delivery white onZa Porcupines from Cycle-land, just for the photos. Jo was smiling from Bromley to Brighton – his eyes popped out and the top of his head flew off, executed a quick 180 and plopped back on, not a hair out of place. Cartoonists have an unnerving habit of doing things like that.

## CHOCOLATE CHIPPED

While the best bike drawer this side of Whitby was forcing the Persil-white tyres on with levers, spoons and HB pencils, the photographer and I went round the corner and held up the bakery for assorted confectionery.

We all met up by the sea for tea, cakes and an ego photo shoot. He seemed more relaxed now, so I kicked off the interview with a subject of the greatest importance to all real mountain bikers.

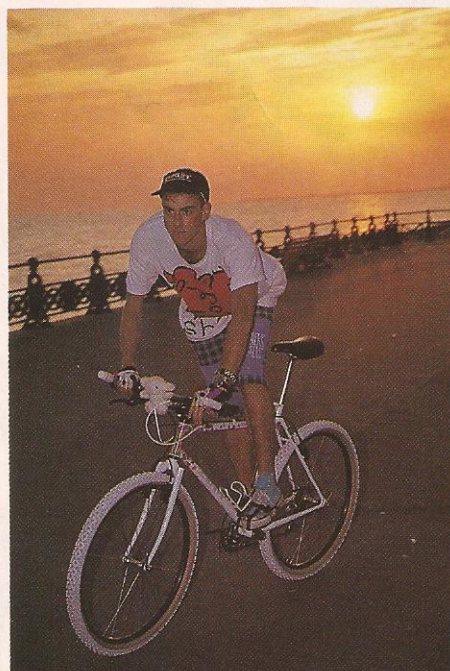
**MINT:** So, Jo, who does the best chocolate-chip muffin?

**JO:** Tough one! I could tell you the worst, but the best? Those ones you get from the bakers round the corner are pretty darn good. When you break it open, because you should never, never, cut open a muffin, there's a really satisfying mottled chocolate texture inside. Sort of organic and natural, like a leopard's spots. Safeway does a good one too, a robustly-sized muffin with not many chocolate chips yet a beautifully-perfumed vanilla aftertaste that tantalises the tongue.

The guy knows his cakes!

**JO:** My mum does a hefty double-choc-chip muffin, but they're a different category because you have to make sure that the chocolate in the dough doesn't overpower the chocolate of the chippings.

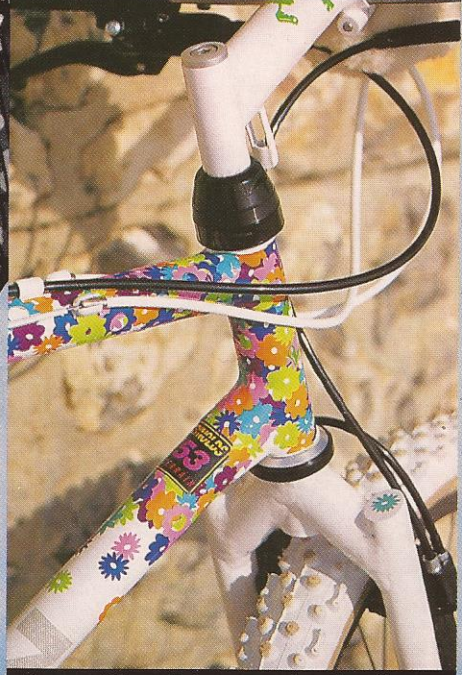
It's difficult to pick out the best one because the environment in which you eat your muffin – or any cake for that matter – is so important. There's a cafe in town that does a mediocre muffin, but the pleasantness of the surroundings elevates it to a great pastry. By the same token, a good muffin can be ruined by cheap, tacky presentation and poor surroundings – Dunkin' Donuts, for example. So we usually take ours to somewhere exquisite, don't we



Lovely legs, gorgeous onZas.



The meaning of life? Donuts.



It was at the paint sprayers how long?

Mint, to enjoy them to the full.  
**MINT:** Like the South Downs?

**JO:** Yeah – you know, that place where you and your muffin can enter a trance-like state.

**MINT:** Yup, surreal – even when it's been in your back pocket all day. Take it there and your plain simple muffin becomes haute cuisine.

**JO:** And your waterbottle fills with wine, and the flowers come alive and sing Abba songs!

Sometimes me and Jo, the sweetest sheep-scribbler in Sussex, get on real fine. This was one of those times, and we were all ready to hike up to the South Downs when Steve wanted some more pictures. We could go there later.

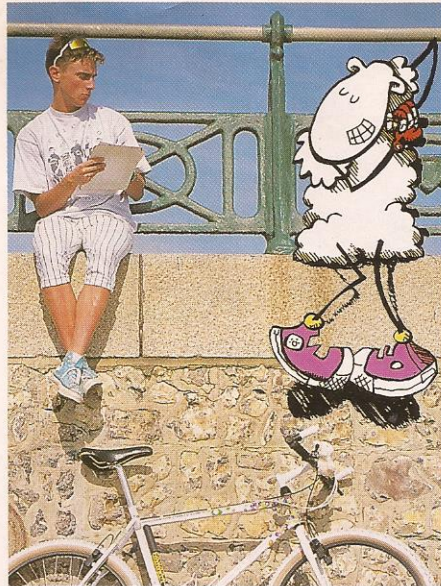
**TIFF TIME**

**MINT:** You and I have been friends for almost five years now, Jo. When we met you were working in a chicken factory in Norfolk and I didn't know an orange from an aubergine. Now times have changed and I've become a cult hero, superstar and style guru – while you're still grovelling around the menial jobs. Apart from getting on everyone's nerves, being big-headed and basking in my reflected glory, how are you handling my success?

**JO:** It's a bit strange, funny even. But at least I don't smell of sheep dip, disinfectant and garlic. And OK, maybe I don't get to open bike shops and garden centres, but at least I haven't been banned from the underwear department of Marks and Spencer.

**MINT:** You promised you wouldn't mention that! Anyhow, moving on, a lot of people I've spoken to, particularly Malcolm, want to know what you're on.

**JO:** What do you mean?



**Superstar Mint holds a natural pose for the latest episode of his MBUK series.**

**MINT:** I suppose they want to know why it's all so strange.

**JO:** It's not strange at all, it's all true. I've heard that rumour too – that it's all made up. Let's set the record straight: every panel of your strip is the real thing. Would these battle-scarred hands lie? I'm out there all weathers with you guys, doing sketches and taking reference photographs where necessary. And then I'm up all hours of the night and early morning with nothing but a cup of coffee and a Blue Nile tape for company, trying to sort it out into some sort of coherent mess. While you lot are out doing the funky chicken in the nightclubs.

Sometimes me and Jo, the best apple-crumble-making cartoonist in Sussex, have the odd little artist/egotist tiff. This was one of those times. I knew I was get-

ting close to the real Jo Burt.

**MINT:** Meanwhile I, the handsome sheep, get all the glory. Sad life, eh Jo? You're in the wrong job.

**JO:** Pity is, I wouldn't change it for the world.

**MINT:** So what would you be if you couldn't do your cartoons?

**JO:** Bored.

**MINT:** No – what would you like to be if you couldn't be a cartoonist?

**JO:** Cathy Dennis's toothbrush.

**MINT:** What colour?

**JO:** Pink.

**MINT:** What colour toothbrush have you got?

**JO:** It used to be a sort of lavender colour, but I just bought a new red one.

**MINT:** Couldn't you get one that matched your bike?

**JO:** I thought that as I wasn't considering entering any Trials With Toothbrushing competitions (a new sport where trials techniques are combined with proper tooth-decay-prevention measures and points are calculated by the number of dabs and fillings – Ed), the colour wasn't an issue. Anyway, my toothpaste matches my bike, which is OK.

**MINT:** Why did you get a white bike? Doesn't it show the dirt?

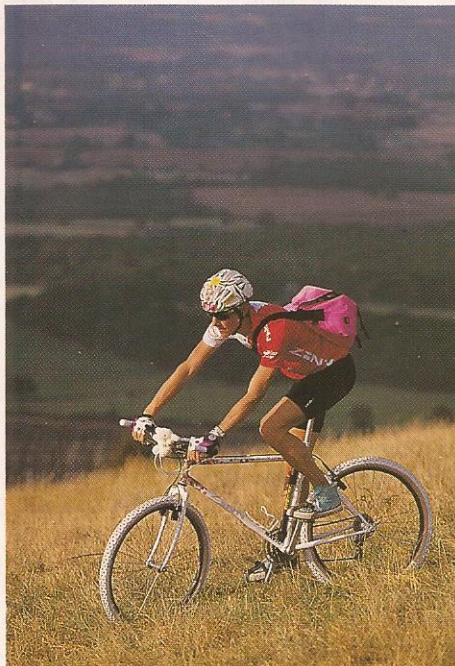
**JO:** Not if you ride on chalk and keep it clean.

I lifted up Jo's bike. It could have been lighter for a 753 machine. Jo explained.

**JO:** I'm not too concerned with weight. What's important is the ego-to-weight coefficient, which is pretty good on this bike.

**MINT:** How good?

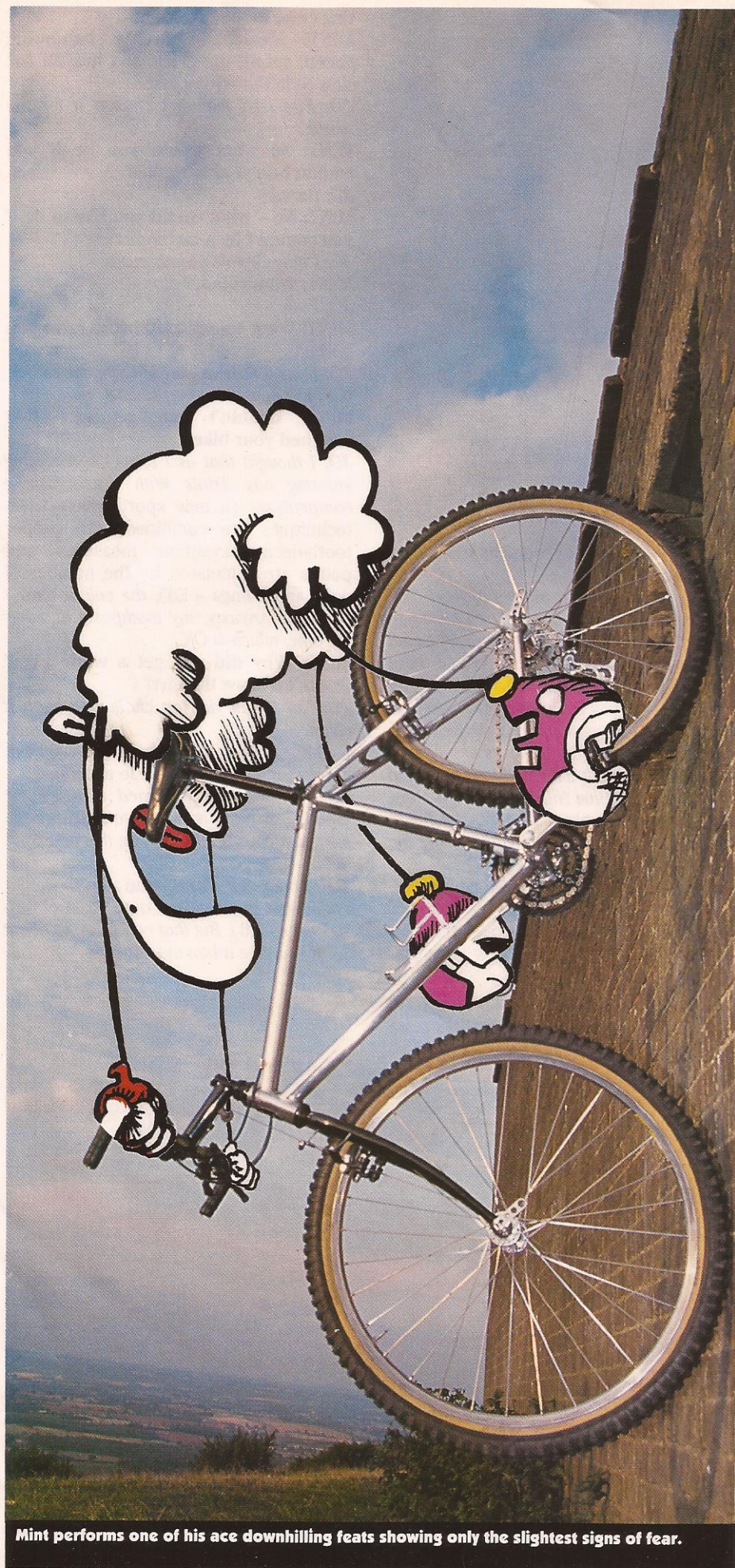
**JO:** About 8.2 Peggs (the ego-to-weight coefficient is measured on a scale of 0 to 10 Peggs – Ed). But that can go up to about 8.7 if you take a banana with you.



**Just to prove those legs really do work.**



**One of those special donut times between Mint and Jo.**



Mint performs one of his ace downhill feats showing only the slightest signs of fear.

I was puzzled.

**JO:** Bananas have a pretty good ego factor – closely followed by plums and glacé cherries but not as good as pears, particularly if they're out of season. You see, I know my fruit, it's not just bikes I'm obsessed with. I have a keen interest in soft fruits. I collect supermarket receipts and have a varied selection of cardboard.

**MINT:** So where does the best cardboard come from, then?

**JO:** Bradford, which is also where the best elastic bands come from. You want to know a cheap suspension system? Take the ball bearings out of your headset and replace them with elastic bands. You can alter the degree of springiness by tightening or loosening the locknut a bit.

**MINT:** So what do you think of suspension, then?

**JO:** I think it's for poufs... that is, until someone gives me some Rock Shox or a titanium Flexstem, when it will become the best thing since practising the Heimlich manoeuvre with a friend.

**MINT:** But suspension helps on downhills.

I could feel a tiff coming on.

**JO:** Nallocks. Anyone can go downhill fast. Really good mountain bikers know how to go uphill fast – that's the tricky bit. But no one ever takes pictures of people going uphill because it looks boring.

**MINT:** This wouldn't have anything to do with the fact that you're only any good at going uphill and are blindingly pathetic at doing anything else on a bike?

**JO:** No, cos I'm ace at everything!

#### TIFF TIME AGAIN

**MINT:** Yeah! In your dreams!

**JO:** Well then, I suppose I'd better tell everyone that you give me loads of money to doctor the pictures so you look like you're doing ace tricks and dudey descents.

**MINT:** Liar, liar, shorts on fire!

**JO:** Ha!

**MINT:** Well, I thought you went down hills slow enough to start with, and then off you go and buy some hydraulic brakes. Now, if it weren't for gravity you wouldn't even start to go downhill.

**JO:** Yeah, well, you cycle so slowly that your computer goes by the movement of the sun and moon rather than the movement of your wheel, and you think that the big ring is an elephant's bottom.

**MINT:** Well, at least I ride my bike. I don't shave my legs, paint them with mahogany stain, put on white Porcupines and go cruise the seafront bars.

**JO:** Well, I need all the help I can get, because it isn't easy explaining that you draw sheep for a living. See how far that gets you to impressing the gurlies.

**MINT:** Oh my heart bleeds. That's just because you're ugly.

**JO:** And you smell of herring.

**MINT:** Oh yeah? The only reason you're

a cartoonist is that you're so ugly you're not allowed to work in a shop. You'd scare the customers away. So you're padlocked behind a drawing board in a damp, dark room - Mr Elephant Man Burt. By the way, how's the cartoon business going?

**JO:** Not bad. Plenty of varied work at the moment. Drawing bikes for 26 hours a day gets pretty boring. Even when you're as good as me. So at the moment I'm doing some work for the *Hairdressers and Mousse Users Gazette*, *Valve Monthly* and several liver publications.

**MINT:** So you're too busy to worry about the Mint Sauce Race and Flowers Team, it seems?

Jo shuffled uneasily.

**MINT:** You've been working on it for a year and what have we got - now! Fine team manager you are.

**JO:** We've got some nice stickers.

**MINT:** Fine job that is - that's not going to pay our way to races.

**JO:** Up yours, scrapie-for-brains... You try doing it. It's a dashed hard business. I'm working on some sponsorship deals at the moment. We got some Etto helmets.

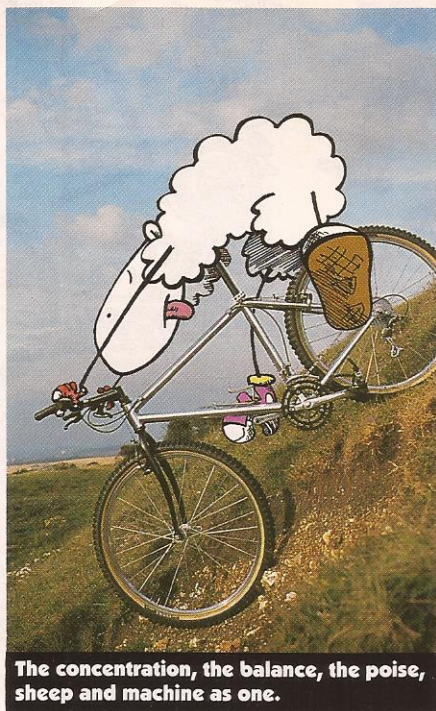
**MINT:** I've never seen any!

**JO:** Oh.

**MINT:** So you're taking all the sponsorship money, are you, eh? Eh? So that's where that new villa in Worthing came from, is it, eh? Eh?

**UP TO THE DOWNS**

At this point Steve the 35mm intervened and suggested we calm down, go up to the Downs and take some pictures. My own beloved Captain Shotgun was suffering a double pneumonia - it had a ripple in the down tube, and its handlebars, stem and everything attached to them were nicked. (We know who you are, so



**The concentration, the balance, the poise, sheep and machine as one.**

look out, sunshine.) I borrowed Russell's bike, though not without a £2,000 deposit.

Never ever go for a ride with Jo 'point me uphill' Burt. He teeters, wobbles, falls off, mucks up his gear changes, stalls, wobbles again, screams and falls off. All this accompanied by a Disney shed full of sound-effects: squeaks, whoops, gulps and squawks. So I do the ace camera-grabbing tricks while he pretends to do his shoelace up for the 83rd time.

**MINT:** Is there anything you're more scared of than going downhill at faster than 3mph?

**JO:** Erm... having to explain to my kids, if I have any, about all the mess the world's in. And running out of milk.

**MINT:** So it doesn't scare you that you've

been in mountain biking for more than six years and in that time you've never had your bike working 100 per cent?

**JO:** My bike's been at the sprayers for three of those years - not the same one, you understand. I got fed up waiting and bought a whole new bike once. So no, it doesn't worry me much. Since I've started giving a bit of my muffin to the Earth I've got about a 98 per cent working rate. All we've got now is a slightly frayed toe strap.

Unfortunately, Jo forgot to give a little bit to the land today, and for no apparent reason he fell off. He said a few words you only find in Anglo-Saxon dictionaries and went into a sulk. We were friends again, so I suggested we go to where the flowers sing Abba medleys and chill out.

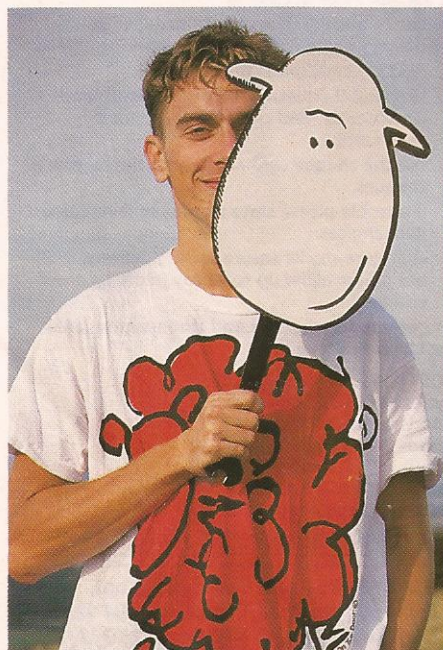
This seemed to be a good time to get something worthwhile out of him, as we listened to *Knowing Me, Knowing You*.

**MINT:** All things considered, Jo, we're a pretty cool pair and we've got - sorry, I've got - a plump little following. What advice could you give to any of them that want to follow your example and be an ace artist and hopeless bike rider - or follow my example and be King Bike Dude and heart-breaker?

Jo 'I couldn't have nicer calves if I'd drawn them myself' Burt pondered over half a squashed muffin...

**JO:** Enjoy your frottage while you can, steer clear of celery, make your own decisions, don't take anyone's word for it, take care of what you cycle over, and always run in zigzag lines if you're being chased by an alligator.

There you go. You just have to catch him at the right time. We were cold, we were mellow, we were hungry, but the chip shop would have to wait: the flowers were doing a pretty funky version of *Dancing Queen*. ■



**At the end of the minterview, a tiny glimpse of Jo Burt has been revealed. Donut time!**