



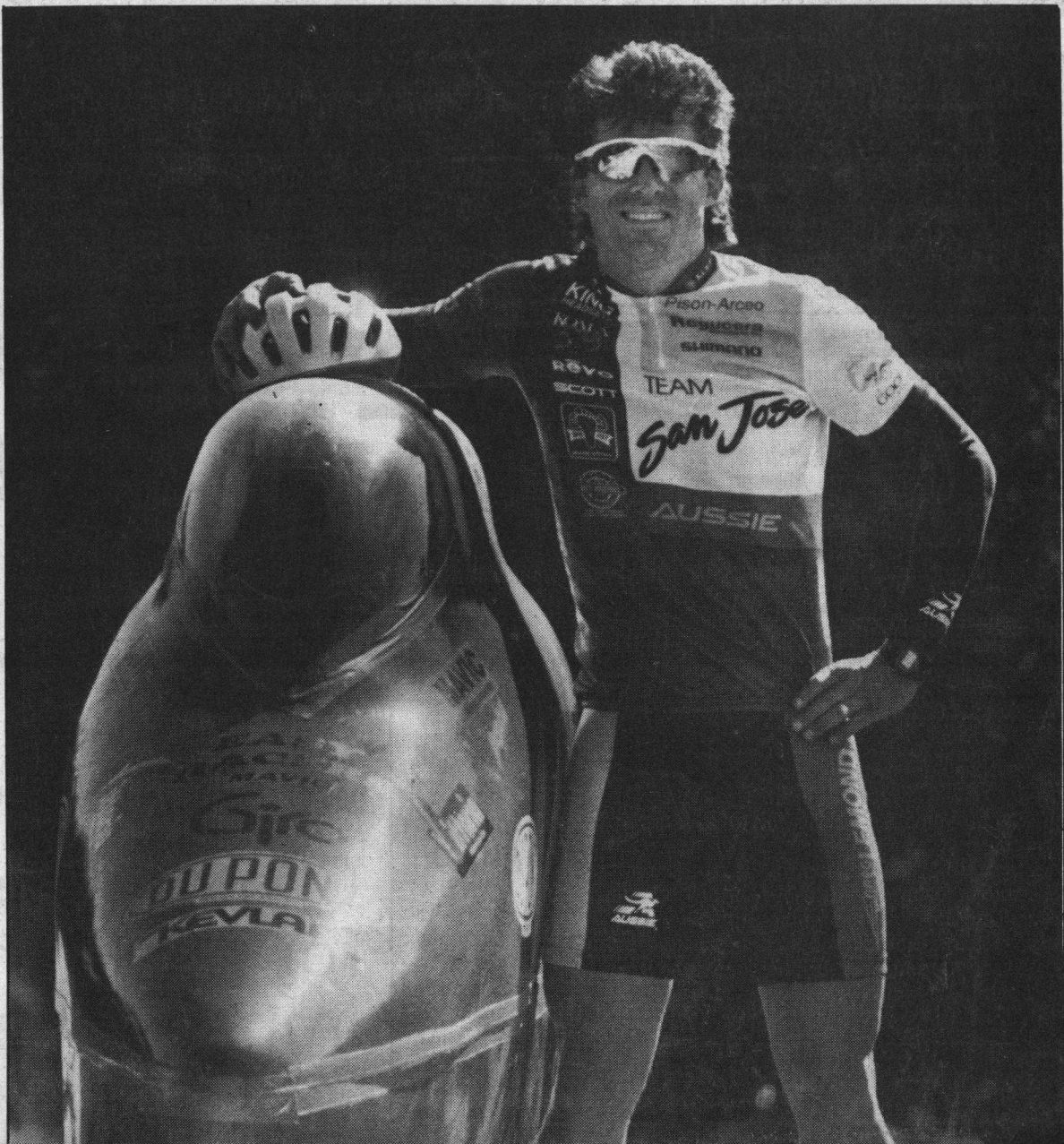
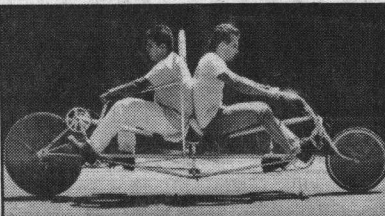
'Fast Freddy' turns it up

Local team sets bicycle speed record

By ETHAN BARON
STAFF WRITER

AT NEARLY 8,000 feet in the Colorado mountains, bike racer Fred "Fast Freddy" Markham prepared to beat the world record for human-

On the wall of a small shop in Freedom, where Easy Racers Inc. produces human-powered vehicles, hangs the Kevlar shell of a single-person bike that Markham crashed at 62 mph. Clearly visible on the gold-colored shell is an outline of



Markham prepared to beat the world record for human-powered vehicles, racing in the tandem class with a young Canadian cyclist.

The wind had dropped to an occasional gust, but the road was not certain to be clear: Buffalo range through the area around the course, and often lumber onto the road to lick the goo used to fill the cracks.

As the racers waited for the wind to die away and for wandering bison to clear the road, the afternoon slipped into twilight. Looking out of his tiny window, Markham watched the course grow darker. Then the racers took off.

"It was one of the sketchier things I've done in a long time," said the 36-year-old former Olympic bike racer from Soquel.

"I'm looking down the road and I'm going 'holy smokes,'" he said. "I could see the yellow lines coming by, and that's about it. My cautious side was saying 'this is completely out of line.'"

In spite of the darkness, some bursts of wind, and the threat of wayward buffalo, Markham and Sam Whittingham hit 65 miles per hour on the 2.8-mile course in the international human-powered vehicle competition last week, setting a new world record.

Attempts at speed records for human-powered vehicles are usually made at high altitudes where air is thinner and provides less resistance. Courses are essentially flat, with a maximum up- or down-hill grade of two-thirds of 1 percent.

Clearly visible in the gold-colored shell is an outline of "Fast Freddy," where his body pressed the Kevlar against the ground during the 200-foot spinning slide that followed his initial impact. Friction heat burned several holes through the Kevlar — the same material used in bullet-proof vests — and into Markham.

The strong shell that encloses the pilot makes the vehicles fairly safe, Markham said, "as long as you don't smack something solid." He has gotten worse injuries crashing a regular road bike at 20 mph than in either of his accidents at more than 60 mph, he added.

The human-powered vehicle Markham races, called the "Gold Rush," consists of an aerodynamic shell fastened over a chopped-down version of the laid-back, low-profile bicycles that Easy Racers makes for recreational riders. The pilot looks through a small window and steers with a short, straight handlebar, feet locked onto the pedals by a mechanism similar to a ski binding, six gears at his disposal.

For the 14-speed tandem vehicle, Easy Racers president Gardner Martin welded two of his bikes back to back and built a longer shell, Martin said. Small windows in the back let in a little light, but the racer in the rear cannot see outside. In the competition last week, Markham's partner toiled in pitch-darkness, and passed out from his efforts while still on the course, Markham said.

In 1986 Markham set the

world record for single human-powered vehicles, rocketing to 65.5 mph on a desert highway near Mono Lake. The bike he used is on permanent display in the Smithsonian Institution.

"Fast Freddy's" speed record has since fallen, but the Easy Racers team has disputed the current mark of 68.7 mph set by Chris Huber, of Campbell, a year ago. Huber's best times previous to hitting 68.7 mph were around 65 mph.

Markham thinks a three-mile-per-hour jump is not possible, especially since Huber had to "spit a lung up" to beat Markham's previous record of 65.5 mph by one-tenth of a mile per hour.

The "Cheetah" team Huber races for did not show up at the race where Markham set the tandem record, strengthening doubts about their mark which are further reinforced by a video tape showing a timing assistant picking up timing tape while Huber was still on the course, Markham said.

Another bike racer, however, who competed last week in the Colorado speed tests, said he thinks Huber's mark of 68.7 mph is valid. "(Huber) definitely has the horsepower to do it," Jeff Solt, of Los Altos, said. He added that warm air temperature and an absence of wind can add substantially to a racer's speed.

Growing up in Los Gatos, "Fast Freddy" Markham wanted to race cars and motorcycles,



Photos by Mike McCollum

'Fast Freddy' Markham, above, with the two-man racer that set a world record in Colorado this month. Markham, and his teammate Sam Whittingham, hit a top speed of 65 mph on the 2.8-mile course.

but his parents — a doctor and a nurse — wouldn't let him.

Instead, his mother got him a racing bicycle when he was 13, and it wasn't long before young Freddy had his older brother's friends driving him and his bike up to the tops of the highest hills around.

"I used to just *scream* down those hills," he said. "Years away from getting my driver's license and I'm already going down those hills faster than cars. I still like my descents. There's very few people who can stay with me descending mountain roads."

At age 16, Markham took third in his first bike race. Two years later he made the Olympic team and competed in the 1976 Olympics in Montreal, Can-

ada. Although he and his teammates didn't do very well there, Markham remained with the United States national cycling team for the next five years, traveling all over the world to race.

He continued to compete after leaving the U.S. team, racing often at the San Jose Velodrome.

It was there that Gardner Martin found him. Martin had been modifying his recreational bikes into speed machines and letting his friends test them out. But he soon realized that he needed more power on the pedals. Martin started looking around for "a bigger engine," Markham says, and he ended up at the Velodrome. "Someone told him that's where the hot

shots hang out," Markham said.

Keeping himself "hot" enough to stay competitive as a human-powered vehicle pilot demands long hours of exhausting training, Markham said. He rides 300 to 400 miles every week, taking perhaps two days off per month.

He usually rides hilly terrain, sometimes taking a "hop" over the hill to Los Gatos, then riding out to Palo Alto, back over the coast mountains to the ocean, and south along the coast until he gets back home.

Markham's two daughters keep him busy when he's not training or welding at the Easy Racers shop. He has a few years left as a bicycle and human-powered vehicle racer, but his wife, he said, is wondering when he's going to quit.