

"Awesome," said Matthew McCue, 23, who then tried to go Hackett one better by standing on the crossbar while maintaining his grip on the handlebars. But McCue is 6 foot 4, and height is a genetic disadvantage in bike ballet. He managed to get his legs tangled in the frame and barely avoided a crash. It was probably a good thing we were closing in on Rochester, home of the Mayo Clinic.

wanted to reach out to Americans for financial support. The first year, 83 cyclists covered five cross-country routes; on this 1989 ride, 63 bikers are traveling four routes, starting in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle (my group), and Austin, Texas. The groups are scheduled to meet in Washington, D.C., at the end of the summer.

The trip is a great way to see America, but, as a Bike-Aid pamphlet notes, THIS IS NO JOYRIDE. No, indeed. The group emphasizes the "aid" as much as the "bike." Each rider tries to raise at least \$3,600 in pledges (\$1 per mile) before departing; the money funds ODN projects like a poultry farm in South Africa, a fishery in Zimbabwe, and a survival center for coal miners in Kentucky. To date, Bike-Aid has collected more than a half-million dollars toward these efforts.

According to the pamphlet, the riders also have a higher and more daunting goal: "To raise the consciousness of every cyclist and then . . . the entire country!" With evangelistic zeal, they meet the press and talk with people in the communities they're passing through about global poverty and hunger. And they also learn about local issues from the church groups and Lions clubs that feed them. On their rare days off from cycling, Bike-Aiders perform service projects such as moving furniture for a battered-women's shelter or rehabbing inner-city housing. At night, the group sleeps on floors in churches, community centers, private homes, high school gyms—any place with space for 14 sleeping bags and their exhausted owners.

The Seattle group includes six college students and four '89 grads, as well as a medical student, an advocate for the homeless, a nursery-school teacher, and a ski instructor. Some members are interested in social work as a profession; others have volunteered in soup kitchens or teaching programs. But though their backgrounds are varied, their motive is the same. They want to learn, and they want to help. They want to get their hands dirty. To see America. To perform wacky stunts on bicycles.

It's going to be a long 63 days.

When the riders leave Seattle, the going is slow at first, as unskilled bikers become accustomed to their machines. Many



Ben Peck after a run-in with a Doberman: "He didn't bite me, he just knocked me over."

DAVID MILLER



Bike-Aid '89:

The 63 cyclists participating in the cross-country ride traveled four routes. The author joined the group on the northernmost one.

Later, Hackett and McCue tried to explain bicycle ballet. As the "founding mother" of the sport ("I was moved to create"), Hackett called it "an important release."

McCue agreed: "Bike ballet comes from riding across Montana and North Dakota, when you need to do something to maintain sanity."

Having spent a week riding with this coast-to-coast caravan called Bike-Aid, I understood. Sanity is a precious commodity when you're waking up at six every morning and riding your bike 40 to 100 miles before nightfall. And when you're trying to save the world at the same time—well, under those circumstances, who couldn't use a little fun?

The journey begins at dawn on June 16, 1989. Fourteen people, 14 bicycles, and one SAC (support-and-gear) van—crammed with duffel bags, spare bike parts, comic books, and cartons of bread and spaghetti—assemble in a downtown Seattle park. As a ceremonial gesture, the cyclists dip the back wheels of their bikes into Puget Sound, an inlet of the Pacific Ocean. And then, off they ride. And ride. Destination: Washington, D.C., which is separated from Seattle by 3,600 miles, a couple of major mountain ranges, a network of exhaust-choked freeways, and an infinite number of really mean dogs.

Bike-Aid started in 1986 as a means of spreading the word of its sponsor, the Overseas Development Network (ODN), an organization that promotes student involvement in third-world growth. ODN