

Fat Gets Skinny

WE SAMPLE 3 HIGH-END ROAD BIKES FROM MOUNTAIN BIKE BUILDERS

We all know the sad story of the road bike and how it has been subsumed by that industry Goliath, the mountain bike. For the pavement aficionados at *BICYCLING* (and that's all of us), it's a sad story indeed.

But wait— isn't it possible that road bikes have benefited from technical developments in the off-road arena? It only takes a few seconds to list some hot features successfully imported from their fat-tire brethren: clean TIG frame weld-

ing (rather than brazed/lugged construction); light, oversize tubing; weight-saving geometries that include lower top tubes and seat tube extensions; and numerous advances in componentry.

With this in mind, we decided to test 3 new models from framebuilders who made their names in the fat-tire biz: Chris Chance of Fat City Cycles, John Parker of Yeti, and Keith Bontrager.

CHRIS CHANCE: ROAD FRAME

There's a Good Chance You'll Like It By Geoff Drake



"Tokenism" is a word that can be applied to the road-going projects of some mountain bike companies. You know, a bunch of suits get together in a boardroom and say, "Hey, do you think we should have a road bike in our line?" A quick call to Shimano for parts and Tange for tubes gets it done—with the predictable result.

You could never apply this scenario to Chris Chance of Fat City Cycles, the Massachusetts maker of our \$2,450 test bike (including Campagnolo Zonda wheels). The same model with conventional spoke wheels is \$1,995, and a frame and fork is \$995.

Chance cut his teeth on road bikes, producing coveted racing frames from '77 until '82, when he made a wholesale conversion to the dirt. So when it comes to skinny tires, Chance knows whereof he speaks. Even the retro-style graphics on our test bike harken

to his days on tarmac.

Back then Chance used lugged construction (an art he learned while apprenticing at Whitcomb USA in the company of 2 other guys who have earned a place among New England's framebuilding elite: Peter Weigle and Richard Sachs). However, Chance's later involvement with mountain bikes taught him the value of TIG welding as a means to save weight and efficiently mate tubes of differing diameters and shapes. This is how he produced his first re-entry into the road bike scene in '88, dubbed the Slim Chance.



- Lively feel at the bottom bracket
- Elegant, functional fork design



- Ergopower "lockup"

Our test bike, simply called the Chris Chance Road Frame, is also TIG'd. Other mountain bike-like features include a custom mix of True Temper chrome-moly steel tubing, with a mildly oversize (30-mm) down tube to resist the torsional loads of pedaling. The top tube has a 25.4-mm diameter with thin, 0.5-mm walls. This follows Chance's philosophy of placing "lightness on top and performance on the bottom—the chassis of the frame."

All this leads to an unexceptional frame weight of 4.0 pounds. But the ride has the distinct feel of a handbuilt model. Bottom bracket rigidity is the way we like it—more than stiff enough for sprinting, but not immovable. The longish top tube (23 inches on our 58-cm sample) provides a spacious compartment for experienced riders.

But the most prominent feature is the patented Yo Eddy! fork, which uses ovalized struts (instead of a crown) connected to oval, tapering blades. This stout-looking design offers excellent lateral stability without sacrificing compliance—it's easy to see the fork tips moving to absorb road shock on rough descents. Cornering is sure and predictable. Chance even offers the nicely crafted 1.36-pound Yo Eddy! as an after-market item for about \$160.

Other frame details include a separate seat collar to avoid additional heat loads to this high-stress area, and a gusseted head/down-tube junction. The Chance Road also has vertical rear dropouts, 2 water bottle mounts, and a pump peg.

Incidentally, Fat City Cycles recently merged with Serotta Cycles. The 2 brands

will maintain their names and product lines, but manufacturing will all take place at Serotta in South Glens Falls, New York. (Fat City was in Somerville, Massachusetts.)

Our test bike also gave us the opportunity to use Campagnolo's revised Veloce parts (positioned above the 2 lowest-priced groups, Avanti and Mirage, but below Athena and Record). New for '95 are a low-profile crank, a triple chainring option, and Exa-Drive shifting enhancements (ramps in cogs, and pins on rings).

The Ergopower brake/shift levers elicited our usual mixed review. Gear changes were nearly faultless, and we like the fact that the system offers multiple upshifts with one push of a button. On the downside is the *ker-chunk* nature of the shifts. Overall, Ergopower lacks STI's smoothness. And considerable hand pressure is required, despite a change in derailleur springs for '95 that was designed to ease this problem. People with small hands, beware. Also, we

sometimes experienced the dread Ergopower "lockup" in which shifts to smaller cogs suddenly become impossible without first shifting to a bigger one.

Campy also supplied us with a pair of its new Zonda aerodynamic wheels, which use a tall, V-section aluminum rim and a scant 20 spokes front and rear (radial front, with a combination of one-cross and radial in back). At 942 grams, the front is about 100 grams heavier than a conventional 32-spoke wheel. Twenty spokes is scary for a 175-pound guy like me. But after hundreds of miles—some on pothole-riddled streets—they needed only minor truing. A pair costs about \$500. As with most such wheels, a valve extender is required for inflation.

Overall, you have to like what Chance is offering to ante up one large for a frame and fork. (A custom is \$300 more; special parts group prices are also offered.) But if your list of priorities includes an elegant handcrafted frame, one of the nicest fork designs, and the

cachet of having road iron from a premier mountain bike builder, then this is your bike.

Distributed by: Fat City Cycles, Box 1439, South Glens Falls, NY 12803; 617/625-4922

Country of Origin: U.S.

Suggested Retail Price: \$2,450

Sizes Available: 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58 (tested), 59, 60 cm (center to center)

Weight: Frame, 4.0 lbs.; fork, 1.36 lbs.; complete bike 22.2 lbs.

Frame: TIG-welded True Temper chrome-moly steel tubing; Yo Eddy! chrome-moly strut-style road fork
Wheelbase _____ 39.5 in.; 100.3 cm
Seat tube _____ 24 in.; 61.0 cm (center to top of seat tube)
Top tube _____ 23 in.; 58.4 cm (effective)
Head angle _____ 73.5 degrees
Seat angle _____ 73 degrees
Chainstays _____ 16.25 in.; 41.27 cm
Bottom bracket height _____ 10.5 in.; 26.7 cm
Fork rake _____ 1.5 in.; 3.8 cm
Trail _____ 2.39 in.; 6.07 cm

Component Highlights: Campagnolo Veloce with 12-23T 8-speed cassette, 53/39T chainrings, Ergopower brake/shift levers, Zonda aero wheels; Continental Supersport Ultra 700x20C tires; SDG S2000 Ti saddle; Forma SL 42-cm alloy bar.

BONTRAGER: ROAD LITE

An Off-Road Hall-of-Famer Finds His Roadie Roots By Scott Martin



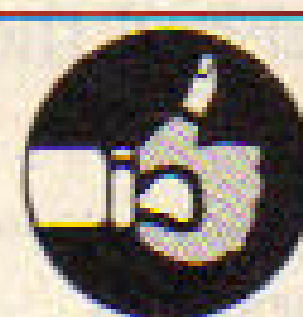
In a sense, the Road Lite represents a return to roots for Keith Bontrager. Although this Santa Cruz, California, frame-builder is best known for his off-road bikes and components, he got his start crafting custom road and cyclocross frames in his garage more than 15 years ago.

But Bontrager made a name for himself in mountain biking with such innovations as triple-clamp forks and cut-down rims. Within the last few years, his company has blossomed from regional cult status to a national presence. In '94, Bontrager himself was inducted into the Mountain Bike Hall of Fame.

This year you'll likely see Bontrager handlebars, stems, and bar-ends spec'd on a healthy number of big-name companies'

mountain bikes. Bontrager frames are surging, too, buoyed by the success of Paul Willerton, the Bontrager-backed pro who took a jaw-dropping 6th (2nd American) in the '94 world cross-country championship. (See "Secrets of My Cycling Success," p. 44.)

No wonder Bontrager's Santa Cruz operation seems to get bigger and busier every time we sneak over there from our



- Stiff and strong
- Potentially a sub-20-pounder
- Better handling than UPS



- Not for retro-grouches
- High front end limits stem adjustment

office a few miles away. Happily, Bontrager's shop still looks as funky and relaxed as ever. No potted ferns or beige office cubicles for this crew.

Still, it's clear the company has more resources now. This, coupled with roadie origins, may explain why Bontrager has decided to produce a road bike at a time when mountain bikes have a stranglehold on the market. Then again, maybe he knows something others in the industry don't. It wouldn't be the first time.

Even so, Bontrager is wading rather than plunging back into roadie waters. The Road Lite is his sole drop-bar model for '95, and it's available only as a frame (\$1,000) or frameset (\$1,125-\$1,250, depending on fork). If sales are sufficient, he says we may see complete bikes next year.

Despite Bontrager's pedigree, the Road Lite clearly has mountain bike bloodlines. It sports a form-over-function look that borders on industrial. Lovers of classic, elegant, sculpted Italian road frames need not apply.

The first tip-off is the Road Lite's sloping top tube. This provides a shorter seat tube for greater rigidity, and a smaller main triangle for reduced weight. It also offers more standover height near the saddle—at least half-an-inch more compared with a standard, similarly sized road frame—which is important for the unexpected stops and dismounts of off-road riding but seems less crucial for pavement pounding.

Sloping-top-tube design also generally means a head tube that's higher than on a standard frame—almost an inch higher in the Road Lite's case. This means you can lower the stem only so far. That's fine for the more-upright riding position of mountain bikes, but it could be a problem for roadies who prefer a lower, more streamlined position. On our "small" test bike (sizes run small, medium, large, and extra large), I put the stem as low as it would go. This gave me a comfortable position, though I wouldn't have minded being a bit lower. A negative-rise stem might do the trick.

The dirthead influence is also evident in frame construction. Built with a special mix of TIG-welded True Temper chrome-moly steel road and mountain bike tubing, the frame boasts Bontrager's signature gussets. Designed to increase stiffness and fatigue strength, these are at the junctions of the top tube and head tube, down tube and head tube, and seat tube and bottom bracket. They're also on the inside of the chainstays at the bottom bracket, eliminating the need for a chainstay bridge.

Adding to the no-nonsense appearance are the stamped 4130 chrome-moly dropouts, said to be lighter and stronger than forged versions. The wishbone seatstays say "mountain bike," too, though their slim, smooth lines bespeak road bike more than anything else on the frame, except possibly the beautifully finished,

bead-free welds. Our test bike features a Tange Silhouette chrome-moly fork, though a Kestrel EMS carbon model is available. One quibble: It'd be nice if the top tube brake-cable stops were slotted for easy maintenance.

Before my first ride I wondered if the gusseted-up Road Lite would feel overbuilt. After all, how often do you slam into a tree while cruising Main Street? A stop at the scales relieved some fear. Our test frame weighs 3.54 pounds and the complete bike is 20.64 pounds, not bad for a steel machine. No doubt this could be even lower with components other than the workhorse Shimano Ultegra group supplied. Substituting a Kestrel fork would shave some grams, too.

The rest of my anxiety vanished soon after I turned the pedals. The Road Lite is a stiff, quick-handling, solid-feeling bike. For my first extended ride I did Santa Cruz's infamous Saturday morning training race and felt immediately at home in the middle of the 60-strong, take-no-prisoners pack.

Aboard the Road Lite, I swept through corners and stomped up climbs with no sign of skittishness or whippiness. And the descents? Normally my downhill attitude ranges from timidity to terror, but on that Saturday I actually rode away from my little group as we fishtailed down newly graveled Hazel Dell, a tricky, twisty road that's become a collarbone graveyard over the years. Although I grew up with tradi-

tional road bikes, I found myself savoring the Road Lite's smaller frame. It feels nimble and maneuverable, like a good, um, mountain bike.

This may be a bike influenced by—and targeted to—the off-road world, but it's clear Bontrager hasn't forgotten where he came from. The Road Lite might look like a mountain bike, but it performs like it was bred for the road.

Distributed by: Bontrager Cycles, Inc., 104 Bronson St. No. 5, Santa Cruz, CA; 408/427-2121

Country of Origin: U.S.

Suggested Retail Price: \$1,000 (frame); \$1,125 with Tange Silhouette fork; \$1,250 with Kestrel EMS fork

Sizes Available: Small (tested), medium, large, and extra large

Weight: Frame, 3.54 lbs.; fork, 1.32 lbs.; complete bike 20.64 lbs.

Frame: TIG-welded, heat-treated True Temper chrome-moly steel tubing; Tange Silhouette chrome-moly fork

Wheelbase _____ 38.625 in.; 98.10 cm

Seat tube _____ 19.68 in.; 50 cm (center to top of seat tube)

Top tube _____ 21.5 in.; 54.61 cm (effective)

Head angle _____ 72.5 degrees

Seat angle _____ 74 degrees

Chainstays _____ 16.25 in.; 41.27 cm

Bottom bracket height _____ 10.625 in.; 26.98 cm

Fork rake _____ 1.7 in.; 4.5 cm

Trail _____ 2.43 in.; 6.17 cm

Component Highlights: Shimano 600 Ultegra STI group with 53/39T alloy chainrings, 170-mm crankarms, 12-23T 8-speed cassette, clipless pedals; Mavic Open 4 CD rims; Wheelsmith stainless spokes; Continental Supersport Ultra 700x23C tires; Bontrager/Selle San Marco M saddle; Bontrager/Titec 350-mm carbon fiber seatpost; Bontrager 11.5-cm chrome-moly stem; TTT Forma 40-cm alloy bar.

YETI: ROAD PROJECT

The One With Purebred Mountain Bike Heritage

By Fred Matheny



This bike is unique among these macadam machines from mountain bike builders because Yeti honcho John Parker has no roadie background. When Chance and Bontrager were building skinny-tire bikes, Parker was still tooling around on his Indian motorcycle.

But Parker is a quick study. Yeti's first attempt at a road bike had several off-road features (e.g., top-tube cable routing) and it didn't sell. "We learned that roadies are traditional," Parker says ruefully. "They didn't want a road bike that looked like a mountain bike." Thus chastened, Parker redesigned the Road Project and came up with a frame even Eddy Merckx could love. With its big caterpillar welds, oversize aluminum tubes, and bent chainstays it sure doesn't look like a '70s Colnago. But it rides that way, and it weighs less than 3 pounds. Merckx should have been so lucky.

Handling first. The main attribute I want

is stability on descents. If a bike doesn't climb or sprint well, you lose. But if it wobbles at high speed, you die.

No problem here. The Yeti has great Colorado manners, running straight and true on double-nickel descents. In corners, handling is predictable and solid. During an unexpectedly wet and graveled 90-degree bend, the rear tire skidded but recovered easily. In fact, it felt like a routine mountain bike skid. Hmmm. I also liked how the rear wheel didn't skip on standing climbs over rough pavement. Credit the short wheelbase and tight rear triangle. This bike feels balanced.

I was concerned that such a light frame would feel mushy around the bottom bracket despite the fat aluminum, but I never heard chain rub during big-ring stomps up steep hills. Still, the bike was reasonably comfortable on frost-buckled pavement. It didn't have the silky ride of my titanium Litespeed Ultimate, but considering its stiffness and lightness, it's a good tradeoff. I certainly wouldn't balk at riding the Road Project in a century, especially if I were gunning for a PR.

In fact, there was hardly anything abominable about this Yeti. An aluminum bike should have a replaceable derailleur hanger, but this one looks stout enough to handle anything the road could throw at it. There's no pump peg, so mounting a full-length inflator under the top tube is difficult. And the rear brake cable rattled on the top tube, so internal routing would have been a better bet. But these are small nits to pick on an otherwise outstanding frame.

We built up the Road Project with the new RSX group, designed (according to Shimano's Bruce Galloway) for bikes in the \$500-\$700 range. That's around half as much as the frame costs, but performance wasn't compromised. In fact, the group's STI shifters worked as smoothly as Dura-Ace, but with a softer feel and quieter click. They also work fine with Dura-Ace 7-speed freewheels, so if you have a garageful of obsolete rear wheels, here's a chance to resurrect them. Galloway says the RSX STI levers will be available separately, though the price hasn't been set.

RSX has a gimmick borrowed from mountain bikes: optical gear displays, in the form of small plastic windows on the cables just inboard of the shifters. They work, but they seem needless on the road, where it's easy to keep track of your gear. RSX is also the only STI group that will shift a triple crankset. The chainrings have 46/36/26 teeth coupled with an 11-24T cassette. Unfortunately, the RSX front derailleur wouldn't fit the Yeti's fat seat tube. We swapped it for a 105 version that could only



- Light yet stiff
- Great handling
- Good looks



- Non-replaceable derailleur hanger
- Aero-wheel inflation a pain

handle 2 chainrings, so I used a 46/36T double instead. The minirings look unusual on a road bike, but I didn't find them disconcerting.

I was nervous about the RSX brakes, because the calipers are nothing to look at. The word "industrial" comes to mind. But they worked as well as my Dura-Ace stoppers. Function trickles down in the Shimano line even when form doesn't.

I had a love/hate relationship with the Hed J2 aero wheels. Sure, they were light and fast. Paired with Continental Triathlon tubulars, they helped this 20-pound bike fly down the road. But the deep V-section rims made the front end wander in stiff sidewinds. Worse, they hid the stem so it was hard to unscrew the valve. Even with the extender, they were so clumsy to inflate they seemed impractical for training. But I'd sure race on them.

I like bikes that perform under pressure, but road tests don't always provide a real gut check. The Yeti's character was tested on a 50-mph decent when a deer ran onto the road and froze in front of me. I eased on the brakes, swerved to the right, and neatly skirted Bambi's butt. Nice bike.

Distributed by: Yeti Cycles, 194 Bodo Dr., Durango, CO 81301; 303/259-1914

Country of Origin: U.S.

Suggested Retail Price: Frame and fork, \$1,550-\$1,750; bike as tested, \$2,850

Sizes Available: 51, 53, 55, 57 (tested), and 59 cm (center to top)

Weight: Frame, 2.86 lbs.; fork, 1.36 lbs.; complete bike, 20.46 lbs.

Frame: TIG-welded Easton Aluminum tubing; Tange Silhouette chrome-moly steel fork

Wheelbase _____ 38.75 in.; 98.42 cm

Seat tube _____ 23.25 in.; 59.05 cm (actual, center to top of seat tube)

Top tube _____ 22.25 in.; 56.51 cm (effective)

Head angle _____ 74 degrees

Seat angle _____ 73.5 degrees

Chainstays _____ 16 in.; 40.64 cm

Bottom bracket height _____ 10.625 in.; 26.98 cm

Fork rake _____ 1.5 in.; 3.81 cm

Trail _____ 2.27 in.; 5.76 cm

Component Highlights: Shimano RSX group with STI Dual Control brake/shift levers, Hyperdrive-C crankset (170-mm crankarms), 46/36T chainrings, 11-24T 7-speed cassette; King Gripnuts headset; Hed J2 wheels with Ringle Roadbubba and Super-Eight hubs; Continental Triathlon tubular tires; Avocet 02 titanium saddle; Ringle Moby 350-mm alloy seatpost; Speedplay clipless pedals; Modolo X-Tenos 12-cm alloy stem, 6X-Tenos 44-cm alloy bar. ■