

STUMP JUMPING

The Methods and the Madness



Handlebars and Stem: One-piece Bull Moose won't get loose on wobbly roads. High and wide for better handling. Foam grips.

Quick-Release Seat Post: Slides up for digging in on hill climbs. Slides down for crotch clearance on bumpy descents.

Frame: Oversize tubing adds weight, sturdiness. Long wheelbase eases road shock. High-clearance bottom bracket is an off-road necessity.

Brakes: Cantilevers designed for tandem bikes. Double stopping power front and rear equals quadruple security on downhill runs.

Gears: Eighteen total. Highs for the highways. Lows for the high points. Makes molehills out of mountains at 100 rpm.

Wheel hubs: Sealed bearings keep the elements at bay. High tech, low maintenance. A must for stream crossings.

Pedals: Serrated bear-trap pedals grip feet and put teeth into pedaling.

Tires: Waffle tread for traction. Plastic-lined for puncture protection. Fat for comfort.

Prices: Good—\$300-\$500; Better—\$500-\$800; Best—\$800-\$2,100.

HERE HE COMES, HURLING OUT OF THE SHADOW of the mountains in perfect control, weighting here, unweighting there, slaloming down the rubble-littered fall line with his blond hair plastered back by the wind. Tom Carter is in his element. A few hours earlier, his companions had pronounced this route impossible. Carter himself had voiced misgivings. But mere misgivings had not stopped him from making the first Nordic ski traverse of New Zealand's Southern Alps or the first ski expedition down the rugged "redline" of the 14,000-foot Sierra Crest. Carter, 32, is a skier and mountain guide. His specialty is what is known as "extreme skiing," a sport defined by the fact that if you fall, you die. What Carter is doing today in the mountains of eastern California deserves the same description; only the equipment has changed.

Carter is riding a bicycle. The vehicle is called a Stumpjumper, and it is a lineal descendant of the Schwinn Aerocycle, the fabulously successful balloon-tire bike introduced by Ignatz Schwinn in 1933. The graceful curves of the original frame have been straightened into a no-nonsense diamond and triangle, and the wide, gull-wing handlebars now sport Harley-Davidson-size brake levers. There is a pair of derailleurs for changing gears, and huge, bear-trap pedals. The only readily apparent similarities to the Aerocycle are the formidable fat tires. But the Stumpjumper's wheelbase and bottom bracket height are very similar to those of the Aerocycle, and the angles at which the frame tubing is joined are virtually identical. It is the relationship of these measurements to one another that governs the way a bicycle handles, and the fact that they are what they are on the Stumpjumper is one reason why Carter is able to ride the bike down Silver Canyon, which drops 4,000 vertical feet in four miles.

Two other reasons are the wheels. The Stumpjumper's knobby tires only look like the Aerocycle's. Today's light-

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Streams? No problem for a mountain bike—the off-road vehicle for purists.



weight, skin-wall balloon tires mounted on aluminum alloy rims are a full six pounds lighter than the sandbag blackwalls and steel rims of 1933. The Stumpjumper weighs just 29 pounds, and what the name Aerocycle only suggested, the Stumpjumper delivers. There is a four-wheel-drive vehicle behind Carter, clocking his descent, and at 40 miles an hour, the driver abandons any hope of keeping up.

The name of the game in mountain biking is momentum. Ride a Stumpjumper safe and slow down Silver Canyon and every piece of debris larger than a pinecone turns you into a human shock absorber. Ride fast and reckless and rocks the size of coconuts spin away unfelt. Mountain bikers call it cruising. Attain sufficient speed and the self-correcting gyroscopic action of the wheels keeps you rolling smoothly over terrain that would turn back the Lunar Rover. That is, if you can stay in control; if you are not afraid to hand over your deliverance to what Carter calls "finesse."

MOUNTAIN BIKING AS IT IS PRACTICED IN CALIFORNIA today dates back to the late 1960s, when Marin County authorities closed the steep fire roads around Mount Tamalpais to motorcyclists. A number of riders, loosely known as the Canyon Gang, turned to vintage fat-tire bicycles like the Aerocycle, which by then had acquired the generic name "clunkers." Clunkers could be purchased at swap meets and garage sales for as little as \$5, and it was a good thing, because the band of young hotshots who drove truckloads of the machines to the top of the mountain and blasted back down to sea level went through a lot of bicycles. Some frames cracked open. Others broke cleanly at the joints. Coaster brakes literally went up in smoke from friction generated on high-speed hairpin turns.

In the early 1970s, mountain biking was strictly a one-way ticket to ride. Except for custom emergency brakes on their front tires, the Canyon Gang's clunkers were unchanged from the halcyon days of the Aerocycle—one speed, sandbag wheels. Not the kind of machine that would ever in anyone's wildest fantasies make it up Mount Tamalpais. Finally in 1975 a Marin bicycle racer named Gary Fisher attached a derailleur and freewheel to his clunker, and the ascendancy of the human-powered all-terrain vehicle began. Ultralow gearing made riding a clunker uphill almost as easy as walking and at least twice as fast. What low gearing didn't do was subtract any weight from the considerable heft of carbon-steel frame tubing, and for cyclists accustomed to 20-pound Cinellis, 50-pound clunkers still felt like battleships. In 1977 another local racer, Joe Breeze, assembled ten frames using lightweight chrome molybdenum alloy steel tubing. Breeze copied the geometry of the tried-and-true Aerocycle, and he sold all ten before they were finished.

Other frame builders followed suit, and the introduction of lightweight wheel rims and tires brought down the weight of custom clunkers even further, to less than 30 pounds. By 1980 "clunker" had become a misnomer. It seemed as though half the population of Marin County either had or wanted one of the fast new cruisers called mountain bikes, and the \$5 garage sale clunkers of a decade before seemed like ancient history. A mountain bike, as conceived and produced in Marin County, cost \$1,500.

Expensive as they were, Marin's mountain bikes were a lot more likely to be loaned out by their owners than, for example, \$1,500 Italian racing bicycles. Consequently, this meant that the machines filtered into the hands of less adventurous riders, who shied away from fire roads but quickly discovered that mountain bikes were far more comfortable

Kief Hillsbery's last feature was about the hot springs dwellers of Saline Valley (September 1983). They still haven't forgiven him.

and controllable than skinny-tire ten-speeds, especially on the post-Proposition 13 pavements of contemporary California. Soon enough, mountain bikes caught the attention of mass-market bicycle manufacturers, whose sales had plummeted from the salad days of gasoline lines. The rest is history, and pretty predictable history at that. By early 1982 the first factory-built mountain bikes were rolling off assembly lines and selling so briskly at \$750 that *Bicycling* magazine predicted they would overtake dropped-handlebar ten-speeds as America's favorite bicycles. A year later, at least a dozen manufacturers were fighting for market share, and the price had dropped as low as \$300.

IF ANY COUNTY IN CALIFORNIA IS THE POLAR OPPOSITE of Marin, it is Inyo, where Carter lives with his wife Kimberlee Walker in the old cow town of Bishop. There is the matter of scale: compact, fifteen-minutes-to-everywhere Marin versus vast, underpopulated Inyo, stretching from the Mojave nearly to Mammoth Lakes. And there is the matter of the mountains, not grassy coastal humps and hummocks but *una gran sierra nevada*, a great snowsaw dropping 10,000 feet down in an unbroken granite front more than 100 miles long. In Bishop, more than anywhere else in the state, mountain bikes are in their element.

Or at least it seemed that way to Carter and his friend Rick Wheeler, a longtime Yosemite climber and proprietor of a mountaineering store on Main Street in Bishop. From the fall of 1982 onward, Carter and Wheeler rode their Stumpjumpers higher into the Sierra every time they went out. By springtime Wheeler was fretting over delays in obtaining the machines for sale at his shop. His motives, he told me, were not entirely capitalistic. "I'd like to get more bikes out here so I'll have more partners to ride with," he said. "We could have a thousand riders in Inyo and it wouldn't get crowded because there are a million places to go."

There were places like Humphreys Basin, Evolution Valley, the John Muir Trail, places where most assuredly no one had ever ridden a bicycle. Carter and wilderness photographer Gordon Wiltzie discussed possible routes into the backcountry with Wheeler and other local riders and together made plans for a ride across the Sierra in October. By then the trails would be free of snow, the aspens would be turning, and the entire backcountry would be bathed in peach-colored sunshine. All three of them had crossed the spine of California on foot and on skis. Why not on bikes?

It was not a rhetorical question, not in a county where government agencies control access to 98 percent of the land, and unbeknownst to Carter, Wheeler, and Wiltzie, it had already been answered negatively by the United States Forest Service. Why not ride a mountain bike across the Sierra? Because a rider could become stranded deep in the backcountry without food or shelter. Because close encounters with fast-moving cyclists might diminish the wilderness experience—not to mention the composure—of slow-moving backpackers. Because, in the words of Bill Bramlette, recreation officer for the Mammoth district of Inyo National Forest, "If a mountain biker spooked a string of pack mules, some of the local packers might take the law into their own hands."

Bramlette knew his beat. At one Sierra pack station, Nordic ski racer Sue Burak had heard a grizzled wrangler vow to "skin alive" the first mountain biker he ran into. "He'd been packing up into the high lakes for 30 years," Burak told me. "In all that time, he'd never seen a machine on the trail."

Nor would he be likely to in the future, unless the Bishop bikers decided to add civil disobedience to their outdoor repertoire. When Wiltzie asked Bramlette about obtaining permits for the trans-Sierra ride, the first thing he learned

was that the bikes were already illegal off roadways in Yosemite, Kings Canyon, and Sequoia national parks. Strike one half the length of the High Sierra. Next he learned that although the Wilderness Act of 1964 did not specifically exclude bicycles from wilderness areas, it was an "oversight" that was expected to be "cleared up." In the meantime, Bramlette said, the bikes were administratively banned from all designated wilderness. Strike the rest of the crest, from north of Yosemite to south of Mount Whitney, save for the long paved highway across Tioga Pass.

Fortunately, the Sierra is only one of the 14,000-foot mountain ranges visible from Bishop. Directly east across the Owens Valley, the broad, bent backs of the White Mountains rise up to two vertical miles from base to summit, from wheat field to snowfield, and spilling out into a bronze alluvial fan within sight of Carter's house is a jagged staircase to the very top called Silver Canyon.

THE WHITES ARE DESERT MOUNTAINS, CUT OFF from Pacific storms by the wall of the Sierra to the west. This is no gentle wilderness of waterfalls and trout streams. It is more along the lines of T.S. Eliot's *Wasteland*—"mountains of rock without water...dead mountain mouth of carious teeth that cannot spit." In winter, temperature readings of 36 degrees below zero are not uncommon at the University of California's Barcroft Research Laboratory, elevation 12,470 feet. The only refuge from stinging winds is in the lee of 4,000-year-old bristlecone pines, gnarled squat caricatures of trees that cling to sterile slopes of shattered limestone like Daliesque bonsai.

The Whites are among Carter's favorite mountains, partly for their isolation, partly for their strange, stark beauty, partly for the bone-dry, powdery snow that sifts down from November to April and accumulates in natural bowls where the skiing stays sensational as late as the Fourth of July. The range rarely receives more than fifteen inches of precipitation in a single year, but the wind shepherds the snow into hollows and the Arctic cold takes care of the rest. It is snow, deep snow, that enables Carter to guide clients on skis to the top of 14,246-foot White Mountain Peak, the third highest summit in California. And it is snow, unexpected snow, that greets Carter, Wheeler, and Wiltzie one late fall morning as they bring their mountain bikes to a halt at 12,000 feet in the Patriarch Grove of ancient bristlecones.

The sky is the color of monzonite granite. Fat white flakes fall hard and fast with the freezing wind. Carter abandons the original plan of a descent from the summit more than 2,000 feet above. A descent from the Patriarch Grove will have to suffice, and they are going to have to get down fast.

In Silver Canyon, speed is guaranteed and is its own reward, even when you eat it hard the way Wheeler does on a hairpin turn more than halfway down. "Left side! Left side!" he yells at the top of his lungs as he passes in a flash of spokes. Then the turn, more gooseneck than hairpin, and Wheeler slamming over the bars in a whirlwind of dust.

"Doesn't seem like a bike ride anymore until I take a fall," he says matter of factly. Blood streams from a gash on his leg. He says it's nothing serious. His handlebars are wildly skewed from the crash, but he has his tools. His eyes are sky bright, his hands rock steady as he sets to work, and I understand what Carter means by the term "adrenaline addict."

Carter is grinning his 32-year-old adolescent's grin as Wheeler gets back on his bike and holds out his palms for a soul slap. Grinning because the first bicycle descent of America's least visited high mountains now seems assured. And when he glides gleefully through the next turn, I am reminded of his favorite aphorism:

Gradient is the elixir of youth. ■