

TWO by TWO

The Riders

Richard
BALLANTINE

Glenn
THOMPSON

The Bikes

The handbuilt mountainbike from
RALEIGH £425

The Explorer from
HARO £423

With a topline mountainbike from the lightweight division at Raleigh and an interesting-looking entry from one of America's leading BMX manufacturers, this was no time for half measures. BAs experts seized the gleaming prey and headed for the country.

MOST PEOPLE must imagine that bike testing is the life of Riley, with fine machines at beck and call whenever desired. It's like that every once in a great while, but in real life, bike testing is mostly a lot of mechanical grime.

Setting up a bike for riding is on average, about a two hour job. Nothing can be left to chance. Every single bolt, screw, fastening and adjustment has to be checked. This is a prime function of a bike shop as opposed to a discount outlet, and is frequently the difference between a useless conglomeration of bits, and a bike that works. Particularly with performance machines, riding skills and mechanical skills go hand in hand. Which is why our test opens with Ballantine and Thompson spending an evening together, preparing the bikes and nattering to each other as they compare notes on this and that.

'Freak'n headset on this Explorer is loose.'

'Yeah, it's cheap. The Tange on the Raleigh is OK though. Shame about the Explorer. Headset is important. Most people don't know, if it goes slack on a mountainbike, just one hard ride will bust it up.'

'These brakes driving me crazy.'

'Dia-Compe?'

'Yeah, on both bikes. But the Explorer's got some kind of solo version, shorter length arms and blocks. Pity it don't have the regular tandem model, like on the Raleigh.'

'I hate any kind Dia-Compe. They take about 40,000 years to get working right.'

'Yeah, well, they cheap. Cheap is problems. Hard to work with. You get that with bikes like this. Good some places, bad in others. Component-wise they're of a muchness, if you shuffled them together, you'd probably be OK.'

'You mean like the Raleigh headset and brakes, the Explorer bars and wheels, and so on?'

'Yeah.'

'I guess so. Transmissions sure are the same. That Sugino PX chainset, it looks TA-compatible, I don't really see the point.'

'Fiddly.'

'Yeah, all kinds of bolts and washers and whatnot. A mountainbike don't have to have all kinds of rings, something simpler would do, then they might have the loot for Shimano brakes, hey look, gotta remount this front changer.'

'Yeah, then help me cut the cable housing on this one. It's too long.'

'You sure particular.'

'Oh yeah? Then what is you doing rebuilding those wheels?'

'They out. You want they should fwang tomorrow, in the middle of the forest?'

'Shouldn't have to redo the wheels.'

'They ain't as bad as these stinking Raleigh bars. There's just no way I can get them right. D'you think they might be upside down?'

'Naw, they no freak'n good, that's that. Put on your own.'

'I can't. This is a test, remember?'

'Yeah, give me a hand with these gears - hey Jeez, look at that!'

Item: Rear Mech. The housing has a deep gouge where the adjusting screw is supposed to touch. The adjusting screw itself is cockeyed and points at the stars.

'Must have had a dreadful bash in transit, what d'we do, bend it?'

'Gimme that hammer.'

BLAM!

'Right, anything you want to do about the tyres?'

'Just have to live with them. Those lbex Panaracers on the Explorer are very good. Slightly lighter and thinner than a full knobbly, but still a proper gnarly. These dual purpose things on the Raleigh, whatever they are, are worthless. We'll have to switch the wheels back and forth. Tyres are important, they can make all the difference, and we've got to give the Raleigh an even break.'

'One thing you should mention, the Explorer has vertical drop-outs, and that's nice some ways, but if the frame is out of track, you can't wiggle the wheel into line.'

'Right, we do the geometry after we do the rides.'

The Ride

A bright, sunny Sunday in Epping Forest, North London. A battered

Peugeot Estate jounces into a clearing and stops, swaying with the weight of innumerable bikes and things attached to the roof rack. A momentary pause as the doors are battered open, and out tumble RB and GT, RB's three kids and Fleck the Wonder Dog. It is time for....HAD!

On mountainbikes, Had, or Tag, is a devastating game that stretches riders and bikes to the limit. One person is 'on it' and has to catch and touch the body or bike of one of the other players, who then in turn is 'on it'. The kids have their own off-road bikes, but this time they play on foot, with every advantage in agility, and ability to slip through impenetrable thorns, leap ditches, and so on. RB and GT ride the bikes, circling warily here and there before pouncing and dashing for a HAD! A pattern quickly emerges.

The Raleigh is very light at the front. Pulling wheelies is a snap. So is lifting the front wheel up onto a stump or log, and levering the bike across or over. But it doesn't corner worth anything. In fact, it's downright skittish.

GT is race fit and also much the better rider. But on the Raleigh he simply can't catch the Explorer through the corners, and wipes out when RB pulls a fast hook on a steep slope. It's obvious that the Explorer is miles away the better handling bike and sure enough, when the riders switch machines, RB on the Raleigh can't get anywhere near the Explorer.

Substituting cunning for performance, RB ambushes GT, exploding out from thick bushes with an ear-splitting HAD! that is supposed to freeze GT in his tracks. It doesn't. GT sprints away over rough, tussocky ground, gaining speed with every stroke of the cranks, and RB goes for it in hot pursuit, hammer full on; the bike is supposed to fly, whizzing and snaking over the ground with the sheer elemental flying energy of a sprint. It doesn't. In fact, the front snatches away and RB goes backside over teakettle in a sharp forward fall, grinding in a generous ration of authentic dirt and gravel.

The riders switch machines back and forth through the afternoon. The kids have an easy escape route, leaping from side to side across a large stream/ditch. The Explorer can be blasted into the ditch and clambered out the opposite side. It's lbex Panaracers give extremely good grip, even in deep mud. The anonymous, thin universal pattern tyres on the Raleigh however, spin out in mud, or for that matter, on loose, dry gravel and bits.

Nevertheless, the Raleigh is fun to ride. It's sprightly, and nice for little tricks and stunts. But nothing RB and GT try to put more weight at the front really helps.

The final test is of outright climbing and descending ability on steep slopes strewn with protruding roots and stumps. Climbing, the Raleigh is a nose-popper; you have to get over the bars and hold down the front. Move too far forward, and the rear wheel loses traction and spins out. Switching to the lbex Panarac-



THE RALEIGH: A topline hand-built mountainbike based on an O'Donovan design

er gnarly tyres improves matters only very slightly.

The Explorer climbs well, and switching to the smoother universal pattern tyres doesn't make much difference. It goes up every time.

Going down the steep, RB is delighted to find that the Explorer is very stable, and utterly precise; it holds tenaciously, and picking a path around or over obstacles is easy. Just the thing for the kind of cliff hanger descents found on rides like the annual Hay Bluff classic. GT has different priorities: like cannonballing down the slopes bouncing from one thing to the next, and simply flattening anything - including small trees - in the way. The Explorer, it seems, will do as the rider wants. The Raleigh is a less happy story. The rear brake is spongy and weak. Steep descents are semi-controlled plunges, and the bike's tricky handling, and the

weak lateral grip of the tyres, often puts things uncomfortably close to the limit. No way as a wilderness machine. The testers are soon happy to call it a day, and climb up a tree to keep the kids company while talking matters over.

The Sting

'RB, I measured the chainstays, they're both about 18 inches.'

'Yes.'

'The Explorer has a 44 inch wheelbase, but the Raleigh is only about 42 inches.'

'Yup.'

'So the Raleigh top tube is about 2 inches shorter?'

'You got it all.'

'So they both drive fast, with a lot of quick power from the rear, but the Explorer is longer and balances better out front?'



THE HARO: The Explorer comes from one of America's best-known BMX specialists

'In a nutshell, yes. There's more to it than that, of course. The various frame angles are all slightly different, particularly with the seat tube. I mean, the 44 inches on the Explorer is long, and makes the bike stable, but it could still try on a race.'

'Well, for hot competition I'd want nearer 17 inches at the back, and about 41 inches on the wheelbase.'

'That's you. And that's against Cunninghams and all kinds of pure racing iron. The Explorer would do for entry level competition. It's a really quite brilliant combination of take-care-of-you and lively performance.'

'And the Raleigh?'

'It's not skittish like a competition mountainbike that is a constant handful but that can be made to really go. It's just skittish. The Explorer, not many people could get it past the limit, but the Raleigh, almost anyone could push it over the edge.'

'What about price? The Rockhopper at £395 has a better specification. It's very good value. Or how about the Saracen Conquest, with Bio-Pace rings, at £440? There's still lots of those around.'

'You're mixing things up. The Saracen is a get-you-home bike. Both it, and the Overbury's Cross Fell at £425, are nice, well hung machines, but they're classic mountainbikes with full size knobby tyres - great off-road when the going is tough, but slow for racing or riding on tarmac. The Explorer and the Rockhopper are middleweights designed tight enough for road use, but plenty able to plug through the wilderness. The Americans call them sport tourers and they make a lot of sense for people who need a bike for commuting and general use as well as off road bashing. Personally, I prefer the Explorer to the Rockhopper, but anyone looking for that kind of bike should try both.'

'Hey, that oval down tube on the Explorer. It should make the bike stronger. What d'you make of that?'

'If they've finally found a use for aerodynamic tubing, great - and it does allow a bigger sign. ☺'

RALEIGH SUPER MAVERICK: Price: £425

Frame: Reynolds 531 AT. Lugged.

Wheels: Maillard hubs; Weinmann 525, 26 X 1.75 rims; CST 'Universal' 26 X 1.75 tyres.

Transmission: Sugino PX chainset; Suntour 6 speed block 14 - 28T; Sun Tour Mountech derailleurs front and rear; Sun Tour XC shifters; Sun Tour XC II pedals.

Brakes: Dia Compe 'Mountain' c/levers.

Handlebars: Unspecified 'cowhorn'; four bolt stem.

NB: Specification subject to change.

HARO EXPLORER: Price: £423

Frame: Cr-Mo; TIG welded; oval d. tube. Chromed, rounded forks.

Wheels: Suzue hubs; Ukai 26 X 1.50 rims; Panaracer 'Ibex', 26 X 2 in. tyres.

Transmission: SR Aero chainset; Suntour 6 speed block 14 - 28T; Sun Tour Mountech derailleurs front and rear; Sun Tour XC shifters; Sun Tour XC II pedals.

Brakes: Dia Compe 'Solo' quick release c/levers.

Handlebars: Unspecified 'buzzard'; four-bolt stem.



•NO, it isn't a disc wheel designed to reduce aerodynamic drag. Instead it's yet another step in what sometimes looks like the Muddy Fox plan for world domination. Designed by Simon Muir it's a plastic disc in tasteful yellow and black that clips on the rear wheel and is guaranteed to give your sponsor maximum publicity. They'll also keep loose twigs and branches from tangling up in the wheel and jamming up the rear mech - fairly useful now that winter's here. This one was spotted on one of the Muddy Fox trick team bikes, and as yet they're not on sale, though if you really want to be a moving billboard and pester them hard enough they may consider putting them into production.

•GEOFF APPS, inventor of the extraordinary Cleland (cousin to the Range Rider and once described as like riding a giraffe) is poised to make the 'next step in off road evolution' with the Dingbat, a 24" wheel bike that Apps claims will be more manoeuvrable and give better traction than conventional 26" wheels. Built from very heavy duty 531 with an asymmetrical rear end (quite why we've yet to find out) it's designed as a day bike/racer rather than a full blown off road tourer. The prototype's on an extended testing mission 'somewhere in Devon' at the moment, but Apps is hoping to bring the Dingbat into full production by the spring, at around £500, depending on spec. Full details, inventor and weather permitting, in the next issue.

•IT had to happen, and now it has. There must be something about the British that first makes them band into clubs and then tell the world that they're members of it. And now it's happened to NORBA. Yes you can get a 'tastefully designed' Tee or sweat shirt emblazoned with the NORBA logo in red on a choice of either white or green polyester cotton. Sizes go from small to extra large and they're £4.50 and £7.50 respectively, including post and packing, from Nick Taylor, 21 Stephendale Road, Farnham, Surrey.

•LEADING US mountainbike racer Joe Murray has had an uneven end of season, coming way down the rankings at Crested Butte but winning the NORBA Nationals by a handsome

margin a week later. Schwinn's Ned Overend dominated the earlier event, leaving Murray sucking air in the high altitude. The Nationals at Santa Barbara, a few hours along the coast from Los Angeles, were going to be Murray's revenge.

His plan was to stay comfortable for the first eight laps of the course and then hammer through the last two with everything he had left. Spectators wondered whether he would pull it off when they saw Murray pushing his bike up part of a steep section of the course on the second lap. But Murray was one of the few competitors able to ride it at all, as rider after rider dismounted and pushed up the slope.

It wasn't just the uphill that caused riders problems. Overend, who was expected to give Murray a hard time for the title, bounced off a rock on a descent, leaving gashes in his tyres and dents in his rims. It took him five minutes to repair the flats and by that time Murray had shifted into the final phase of his game plan, though eventual second placed Roy Rivers was pressing him hard until the last lap.

•IF your children or younger siblings are pestering you for a mountainbike but you can't quite afford the ackers, then this might be the solution. English Cycle's Jeremy Torr has converted a bog standard BMX frame into a fully fledged, 15 gear junior mountainbike for the princely sum of £125.

It's a relatively cheap way of getting a mountainbike and a natural step up from the single speed BMX. And before you start laughing it really does seem to work; at least one six foot rider's managed to get around on it for an afternoon. The conversion's not as difficult as it might at first seem, and certainly needn't cost as much as £125. In fact the only part of the job that requires more than basic mechanical knowledge is dishing the wheel sufficiently to take a five speed block and splaying the rear dropouts to take it. Everything else can be done by bolting on off-the-shelf components in a couple of hours. The chainset's a conventional Takagi 48/38/28 (£35), which may need a new bottom bracket (£8). Brakes are ACS cantilevers, designed for BMX freestyle, that mount on without special bosses and deliver pretty hefty stopping power. And with the addition of derrailleurs there you have it - a small, tight, but nevertheless functional mountainbike.

