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JULY/AUGUST 2004**

MOUNTAIN BIKES FOR BEGINNERS

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- What To Look For
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BY DAVID FERRIS

Mountain Bikes

FOR BEGINNERS



*Specialized Stumpjumper FSRxc Pro Disc
— It's rare to find a full-suspension bike
with disc brakes for under \$1500. Its
Mavic rims and exceptionally light and
durable drivetrain are trick, as well is the
Fox Float R rear shock, which negates bob
on the uphill. MSRP: \$1470.*

If you're interested in getting in on the fun and excitement of two-wheeled backcountry travel but don't know where to start, here's a primer on pedal-powered dirt bikes for the entire family

Mountain biking can be a peaceful ramble or a white-knuckle adventure — you decide. Cruise a gentle dirt ribbon at your own speed, taking in the view and listening to the sound of pebbles crunching under your tires. Point the knobby wheels downhill, though, and soon you won't be able to tell which is pounding harder, the shocks or your heart. A mountain bike is a two-wheeled, human-powered vehicle that gets you where others can't go. You'll find vistas not accessible by car, visit sites farther afield than many reach on foot and have an adventure on the way, all while getting a good workout. What's not to like?

A mountain bike differs from other bikes in two important ways: It has big, fat tires with knobs (called lugs) to bite into and grip the ground, and it has a suspension to smooth the jarring from ruts, rocks and roots. If you think of your old cruiser as a sedan and of Lance Armstrong's bike as a Porsche, then a mountain bike would be like an SUV, but without the hydrocarbon emissions.

The hardest part of picking a mountain bike is choosing just one. Dozens of companies make these bikes and dozens more make bike components. Your purchase could cost as little as a family run to the grocery store or as much as the monthly mortgage. For this story, we've highlighted brands with product in the low- to midprice ranges and included some that are widely available and that come in all sizes. Check out mtbreview.com for user reviews of bike models and parts.

Your forays can be big or small, from daylong treks on twisting single-tracks to gentle explorations of the local bike path. Either way, you'll need the right bike and gear for your style of riding. ▶



WHAT'S YOUR STYLE?

Hardtails: These are for use mostly on dirt, with a little pavement duty. The hardtail is the “classic” mountain bike form. It has a thick and sturdy frame, fat tires with big lugs and a front fork with springs. A hardtail will take care of you on all but the most extreme downhill sections.

Hybrids: These are made mostly for pavement use, with a little dirt road thrown in. If you want a bike that can cruise around town and take a smooth trail, get a hybrid. Its suspension and tread can swallow mild bumps and its upright seat with a relatively light frame means it's at home in the 'burbs, too.

Full Suspension: This is the big time! If you expect to launch yourself off something very steep or bumpy, consider a full-suspension rig. Its rear shock floats over even the choppiest section of trail. In general, a high-quality full-suspension bike will be more expensive than either a hardtail or hybrid.

WHERE TO SHOP

There are two types of steely steeds for beginners: The kind you buy at a big-box or sporting-goods store and the kind you buy at a specialty bike shop. The brands rarely overlap. At the big store you'll find heavier, lower-quality bikes — but a lack of expertise — at great prices. At the bike shop you'll find lightweight, high-quality bikes and good service, but you'll pay more. Walk into any bike store and you'll find a selection to make you dizzy. To make that trip easier, we've picked out four manufacturers — Giant, Schwinn, Specialized and Trek — that make great bikes available just about anywhere.

We've focused on bikes that will help you get into the sport without emptying the checking account, including models priced from \$129 to \$1470 (high-end bikes can run \$5000 or more). They include base and midrange models, as well as some that are top in their class. You'll pay anywhere from \$50 to several hundred dollars to move to the next level, which usually represents a lighter bike overall with more durable components such as rims, brakes, derailleurs and suspension, and, sometimes, a lighter and stronger frame.



Schwinn Rocket 3 — This low end of Schwinn's full-suspension offerings is a quality ride for the price. It's a nice surprise to find Shimano shifters and drivetrain at this price point. MSRP: \$499.



If you plan to bike more than a few times a year, it's worth going to a specialty shop. There you can often get a tune-up package with your purchase, which can be useful, as your bike will need fine-tuning as you break it in. You can also talk to the local gearheads for useful bike and trail knowledge. The most important reason to visit a bike shop, however, is to make sure the bike is a proper fit.



BIKE FIT

Fitting a bike to your body type is more complicated than choosing a pair of pants. The size of the frame, the height and orientation of the bike's saddle (seat) to the handlebars, the qual-

ity of the saddle and the suspension can all affect comfort. And comfort determines whether you use your bike a lot or leave it in the garage as a laundry hanger.

Trek 6700 WSD — The 6700 has been well received by female riders as one that has the height, brakes and handling best suited for women. It also has clipless pedals and lightweight components anyone could take seriously. MSRP: \$769.



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Specialized Rockhopper — The company's venerable entry-level hardtail is one of the most affordable and best-quality bikes of its kind. Well-constructed aluminum frame, Manitou fork and Shimano drivetrain are its feature highlights. MSRP: \$440.



How do
you manage
all these factors

if you've never ridden a mountain bike before? By riding lots of bikes. Visit a number of bike shops. Shops usually won't let you take a new bike on dirt, but you can approximate the ride by riding up and down small inclines, hopping curbs and other small obstacles in the store's parking lot.

You should feel like you could pedal your bike for hours without pain in your back, neck or knees. Choose a bike that feels light and responsive, that takes bumps without rattling your jaw, that shifts gears quickly and brakes evenly.

If you really like a model but find yourself cramped, the bike techs can often adjust the bike to fit you. For a more detailed look at fit, check out coloradocyclist.com/bikefit.

FRAME ELEMENTS

The frame is the skeleton, the basic and most important part of your bike. Buy the strongest and lightest frame you can afford.

If you have a good frame and only so-so components, you can switch the components as they wear out and as your experience grows.

If you're curious, test different drivetrains, shocks,

seat posts, saddles and brakes. If there's a particular component you would like to replace, you may be able to swap parts for less money before rolling out the door than after you've ridden the bike in the dirt.

Steel is strong and flexible, which makes for a comfortable ride. It's also heavier than other bike-frame materials. Look for "chromoly," which is steel combined with chromium and molybdenum, or high-tensile steel, which is strong but heavier than chromoly.

Aluminum and its alloys are lighter than steel and very stiff, which is both good and bad. All that rigidity means the frame won't absorb jolts on the trail as well, but on the other hand, the lightness of the frame makes it easier to power up the trail, and the bike's suspension system will hopefully make up for the difference. Road test both steel and aluminum frames and see what suits you.

Carbon fiber and titanium are as light as aluminum and as flexible as steel — superior qualities for which you'll pay a superior price. Don't make this your first bike purchase. Instead, spend more time in the saddle of a lower-priced bike. You'll shave more weight off your love handles without slimming down your wallet.



Giant MTX 260 — This is not just a great price for a full-suspension kid's bike; it has adult-worthy components, including Shimano and SRAM drivetrain components. The low-slung unisex aluminum frame makes it useful for many sizes of riders (think hand-me-down). MSRP: \$330.

No matter what material you choose, take a good look at the construction. Butting is the layering of additional material near the joints that receives the most stress. Seek out frames with double and triple butting.

All of the bikes pictured in this story are aluminum with the exception of the Schwinn AeroStar, which is high-tensile steel.

POWER TRAIN

Pay special attention to the quality and workings of the power train (all the links in the chain of equipment that make the bike go). The elements of the power train — front and rear derailleur, chain, chain ring, pedals, cranks, rear cogs and jockey wheel, cables and shifters — all work together to move the back wheel along the ground. Higher-quality components in the drivetrain are lighter, better machined and finished, and make for smoother and more responsive operation.

SUSPENSION

The front fork and the rear shock (on full-suspension bikes) absorb the insults of the trail so you can glide smoothly over the rough spots. Springs inside the suspension take up the impact, and oil or air compression damps the coil.

Look for 3 to 5 inches of "travel" on the shock and 75 to 100 millimeters on the fork. Rear-shock travel (the distance the wheel

moves up and down) is measured in inches; front forks are measured in millimeters. If you're heavy for your height, ask the bike tech if the fork is hearty enough for you.

If you're considering a full-suspension rig, ride it uphill and see if the rear shock bounces as you climb — a phenomenon known as "bob" that robs you of power on every stroke. The better shocks will minimize bob.

PEDALS

Most beginner models come standard with a platform pedal, and a toe strap and clip, just like the cruiser in your garage. However, some midlevel bikes feature spring-loaded, clipless pedals, which allow you to bind your foot to the pedal with a cleat on a special cycling shoe.

This innovation makes for a powerful, efficient stroke, but can be unnerving at first. Explore the option at the bike shop. If you try clipless and get used to it, you'll forever be glad you did.

BRAKES

When you pull the brake lever on most bikes, you cause the brake pads to squeeze the wheel rim between them. One preferable



ACCESSORIES

These are what we consider "must-have" riding accessories:

Helmet — Modern helmets are made with ventilation gaps so your head won't get too hot, and lightweight foam that will collapse on impact so your skull won't.

Tube Repair Kit and Tire Irons — The tiniest kits are smaller than a half-dollar, and tire irons, despite the name, are plastic levers that get your tire off the rim. They're all you need to patch a flat. Don't know how? Ask the bike shop tech to show you. It's better than walking the bike home.

Air Pump — You'll want the compact, portable variety. Some pumps are designed to fit along your top tube, and the stubby ones will fit easily inside a jersey pocket or small day-pack.

Saddle Bag — A small one for the essentials fits unobtrusively under your seat. A big one can carry the family lunch.

Multitool — A tool kit for your bike. Most good multitools on the market today have everything you need for field repairs, from Allen wrenches for adjustments to a serrated knife for slicing salami and cheese at the rest stop.

Hydration System — Biking is thirsty work, so don't forget to drink. Carry at least a water bottle (your bike probably has a bottle cage) or one of the popular and easy-to-use backpack hydration systems, which can carry enough water for the whole family on a short trip.

Gloves — Cycling gloves have padding in the palms that help absorb jolts on the trail. Fingerless are the ticket for warm weather and full-fingered for cold weather.

Padded Shorts — Mountain-biking shorts look so cool you would never guess the wearer has a chamois pad in his crotch. If you plan to ride more than 5 miles on any regular basis, padded shorts will make your day far more comfortable.

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Schwinn Aerostar — The Aerostar is designed for 6- to 8-year-olds and has both grip and coaster brakes to help Junior or Junior-ess make the transition to an adult bike. Good alloy rims, too. MSRP: \$129.

(but pricey) option for mountain bikes is disc brakes, which act at the hub instead of the rim, and brake smooth even in wet and muddy conditions (see the Specialized FSRxc Pro Disc).

SADDLE

The saddle (seat) affects your comfort, and reportedly perhaps more than that. The traditional hard bike seat has been shown to restrict blood flow to the reproductive organs and, in some cases, has led to dysfunction in both men and women. Be sure to get a saddle that has a gap or padded section running down the center to avoid this problem. Other than that specific advice, just find one that is padded and most comfortable for you.

MAINTENANCE

Because mountain bikes get beaten up and dirty (that's part of their job description), they require more care than most of your other toys.

This means the bike will need regular tune-ups, which you can have done at a specialty bike shop or you can do yourself once you have some experience. See if your bike shop has repair clinics, or check out the many easy-to-use repair guidebooks.

If you take care of your bike, it will take care of you for many years of fun and healthy riding to come! ▲



Giant Sedona — A quality hybrid at a great price. The Sedona features a Shimano drivetrain and quality aluminum alloy brakes, and a seat post that also comes with suspension. MSRP: \$290.



Trek 4900 — Picked from the midrange of Trek's excellent line of hardtails, the 4900's best features are the Rock Shox Judy TT fork, Bontrager and midrange Shimano components. It's also disc-brake compatible if you decide to upgrade. MSRP: \$569.

