they've actually had no problems.

Triple chain rings, sealed mechanism hubs, Araya alloy rims, pedals with chrome-moly axles, and chrome-moly stem and handlebars round out the package. The two areas where manufacturers always cut costs on low priced bikes are the saddle and tires. Schwinn is no exception. The saddle isn't bad but it may not be what you'll want if you plan on doing lots of riding. Plus, the seat post is entirely too short. It's more what we'd expect on a road bike. The tires modified street tread reflect the bike's normal usage. You'll need to change them for off-road use.

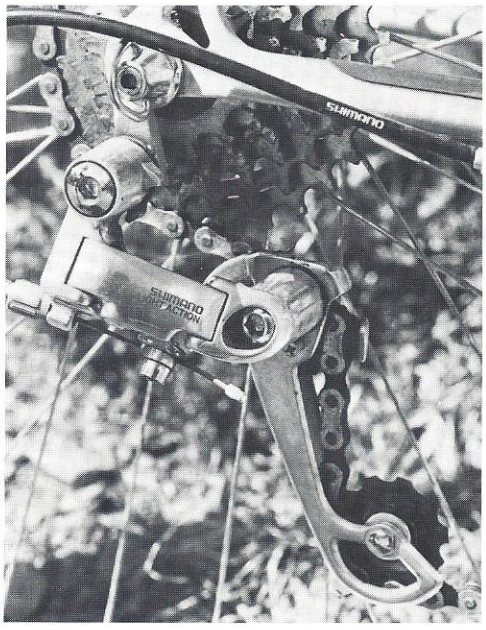
Once you're on the bike, you'll quickly forget the bike's price. The performance is excellent with balanced weight distribution and quick handling. Every one agreed the 70-degree head angle is an excellent compromise between nimble handling, slow speed climbing, downhill agility, and snappy handling on pavement. About the only change anyone would have liked to see is shorter chain stays for better traction on hills. The basic design is well thought out and was obviously borrowed from the Cimarron's, Schwinn's current top-of-the-line model. But what kept throwing everyone off were the slight modifications that made the bike more of a street machine: the high rise bars, the too short seat post, and especially the street tires.

But with a few judicious changes, the Sierra can quickly turn into an aggressive off-roader. It's all there; it just needs to be exposed. The only problem is that every time you make a change, you'll add to the bike's basic price. And if you're going to do that, you might be better off looking at the Sierra's big brother, the High Sierra. But it is too bad the Sierra is so citified. Considering the fact that's where almost all of them are ridden certainly justifies the changes but really, this is a fine mountain bike if only set up accordingly.

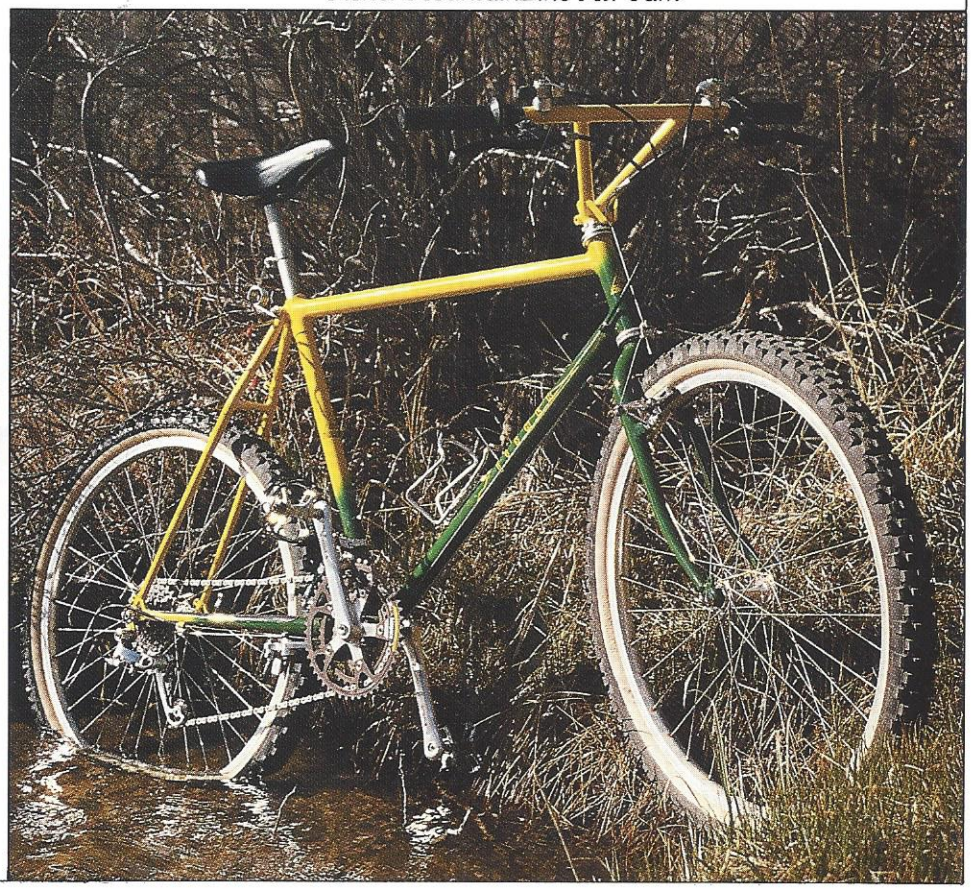
Schwinn High Sierra

This is the bike that Schwinn's top mountain bike racer, Ned Overend, first competed on before Schwinn had ever even heard of him. He won with it in what was basically its stock form. In fact, the only really major changes he made to the High Sierra were replacing the riser bars with short, flat bars, switching saddles and seatposts, and putting on better pedals with clips and straps. The High Sierra's basic geometry is unchanged from what he first raced on; only the materials have been upgraded. Today's High Sierra's main triangle is constructed out of 4130 chrome-moly tri-caliber tubing with 4130 chrome-moly stays and forged dropouts. A chrome-moly 4130 Unicrown fork with oversized blades completes the frame set.

Angles are 70 degrees parallel, wheelbase is 43 inches with 18-inch stays. Nothing extravagant, just a conservatively modern geometry just like the Sierra's. In fact, the bike rides exactly like the Sierra. The High Sierra's frame is probably lighter than the Sierra's but we were unable to detect any difference in ride between the two bikes. Weight distribution is excellent. The bike fairly flew through turns with only subtle body movements required to adjust the line. And again, just as with the Sierra, we all bemoaned the lack of shorter chain stays for better traction. Especially since the High Sierra was so much fun to ride.



Fisher MountainBike Mt. Tam



Why Ned was able to race so successfully on this bike is easily understood (beyond the man's inherent athletic abilities) as soon as we headed out onto a single track. The bike darted along over twisting trails with minimal effort and seemed to encourage aggressive riding. Except that constantly off-setting the bike's nature were the too wide riser handlebars, the ubiquitous combination street/dirt tires, and a saddle no one was particularly overwhelmed by. In fact, we kept thinking what a sweet bike this would be with quick release hubs, pedals with toe clips and straps, a longer seatpost, flat bars, and aggressive dirt tires. Then someone would remind us that "hey, the bike only sells for about $420! Lighten up. Those things cost money."

They were right of course. The bike is remarkably inexpensive. It's just that it's performance engendered a desire to really hammer. Plus, from what we were told by Schwinn dealers, just like the Sierra, most High Sierras are ridden on the street. Those poor folk just don't know how much fun they're missing though there's no doubt the bike is delightful on the street too but really, the dirt is where this one belongs.

Components are impressive with Suntour XC Sport roller cam brakes and levers, Suntour XC derailleurs, Suntour shifters, a six-speed Suntour freewheel, sealed bearing hubs, Araya 1.5 alloy rims, and triple chain rings. There are also braze-ons for front and rear racks including a front lowrider rack plus double water bottle brackets. As already mentioned, our only main gripes were the tires and handlebars and the latter is really strictly a matter of personal preference. A lot of riders prefer the comfort of rising bars. But the tires really are seriously lacking if you plan on going off-road; they just don't work. But every dealer we spoke to said they'll happily switch tires if that's what the customer wants. In fact, one dealer said he regularly switches handlebars and saddles for buyers also.

If a year ago, someone had said that by the summer of '86 a mountain bike could be bought for just over $400 equipped with roller cam brakes, we'd have had to laugh. We're talking pretty high tech here and that kind of stuff just doesn't show up on $400 bikes. But here we are in the summer of '86 and that's exactly the case. We're impressed. Especially since the entire bike reflects that level of performance.

Fisher MountainBikes Mt. Tam

This is Gary Fisher's made-in-America flagship, a bike you can cycle across Africa, putter down to the local bakery for croissants and coffee, or, if the inclination overwhelms your normal caution, race. The Mt. Tam features a beautifully crafted, fillet brazed frame built out of quad-butted Prestige tubing. Componentry is top-of-the-line, carefully selected from various companies. Shimano Dura Ace EX hubs with quick releases, Shimano New Dura Ace 6-speed freehub, Shimano New 600 EX crank arms with Shimano Biopace chain rings, Shimano New 600 EX headset, Shimano Deore XT front brake, Suntour XC Sport roller cam rear brake with cover, Suntour XC-II pedals, Shimano Deore XT front derailleur, Shimano Light Action rear derailleur, Araya RM-20 rims with Fisher Fattrax 202 tires, etc., a Hite-Rite is even standard. You might argue with some of the selections only because you prefer another company's product, not because of a lack of performance.

The best news is the geometry Fisher bikes sport for '86. The head angle has been steepened from sixty-eight to sixty-nine and a half degrees. Gone is the older bike's front wheel tendency to flop into a turn at slow speeds because of the shallow angle. (Such feelings are not unanimous though. Many a rider still prefers the older geometry. They like the stability and smoothness during downhills inherent to laid back head angles. It's just a matter of style.)

Our test riders were universal in their praise of the new head angle. They loved it, including one who's had a Fisher race bike for years and was hard core against steeper angles. The Mt. Tam lost nothing in downhills to the older Fishers but was much quicker at negotiating rough passages and single-tracks. It's hard to believe that such a small change in angle can cause that much difference in handling but it does. The new front end struck everyone as an excellent compromise between the more laid back geometries promoted for so long by Gary and the more radical, steeper designs of Mantis, Salsa, and Specialized. One indication of its compromising nature was the lack of any complaints about the Mt. Tam's steering.

The only problem we had with the bike was an overly long bullmoose handlebar stem, quickly rectified by moving the saddle forward and switching to an available shorter reach bar. Finding a Fisher to fit is all but guaranteed with frame sizes' of 14.5 (with 24" wheels), 16, 18, 19, 19.75, 20.5, 21.25, 22, 23, and 24.5 inches to choose from.

A seat tube angle of 71.5 degrees and chain stays measuring 17.625 inches on a 42.75-inch wheelbase (dimensions vary according to frame size) added up to an immensely likeable bike. Weight distribution was excellent. The relatively short stays made for stubborn traction in most conditions while the shorter than average wheelbase and head angle gave it plenty of agility for high speed single-tracking without compromising its descending capabilities. (Given Gary's reputation as a ferocious downhiller, it's safe to assume that Fisher bikes will always be good coming down.) The bike was completely neutral, requiring minimal body english over rough terrain. There was never any need to think about how to ride the bike. We simply pointed it where we wanted to go and it went.

A test ride over one of our favorite tracks near Moab, Utah, a combination of graded dirt road, slickrock, loose gravel, and sand, brought out the bike's finest with the sand traps providing the ultimate test of its balance. We'd hit sand traps at high speed fully prepared to wrestle the handlebars and make wild weight adjustments to avoid a loss of control in the dramatically different medium. But instead of thrashing around then tiptoeing through like a colt on ice, we'd drive into the softness with a subtle shift of our weight back then quickly move forward a tad and spin through with narry a wobble. After awhile, we became bolder and started flying into the sand faster than we ever had before. The Mt. Tam cruised them all.

Fisher's Fattrax tires undoubtably had something to do with that. The name is appropriate. They might be the fattest tires on the market. Their size results in a very high air volume yet with a claimed weight of only 700 grams, they're surprisingly light. Aggressive traction knobs combined with small side dams ala the Ground Controls provided plenty of grip. The tires provided a wonderfully comfortable ride with fine traction, never sliding when we didn't want them to.

The Mt. Tam comes equipped for just about anything. There are braze-ons for water bottle racks, front pannier racks, rear pannier racks, and fenders. Nothing's missing. The only thing we changed were the pedals, Suntour XC II's. The preference for Suntour XC Comp's (formerly MP 1000's) with toe clips and straps was unanimous. Especially on a bike of this quality, this much performance, and an over $1,300 price tag.

The bike's finishing touch was a classy yellow and green paint job that made an outstanding bike stand out even more. The Mt. Tam was one bike no one was in a hurry to return.

levers, hubs, derailleurs, shifters, and stem. The seatpost is wonderfully long with extension calibrations marked on it. The only two gripes we had with it were the grips and tires. The grips were the soft rubber type that seemed to be on almost every mountain bike in the past but have fortunately passed away. Contrary to what some think, soft grips are not more comfortable on rough terrain. They just kind of squeeze down until you're practically holding onto the metal. Replacing the grips with something like the Grab-on grips is highly recommended. The tires, though they had a definite off-road tread, didn't seem to have the traction of many other tires on the market. The same tires have appeared on a number of bikes with always the same result: not as much traction as we expected. There's nothing wrong with them; it's just that superior treads are available.

Priced at about $620, the Bianchi might just be the bike you were looking for. It's certainly not alone in that price range so you'll just have to decide for yourself if it fits you and if the package is the kind of value you're looking for.

Fisher's new Fastrax tires