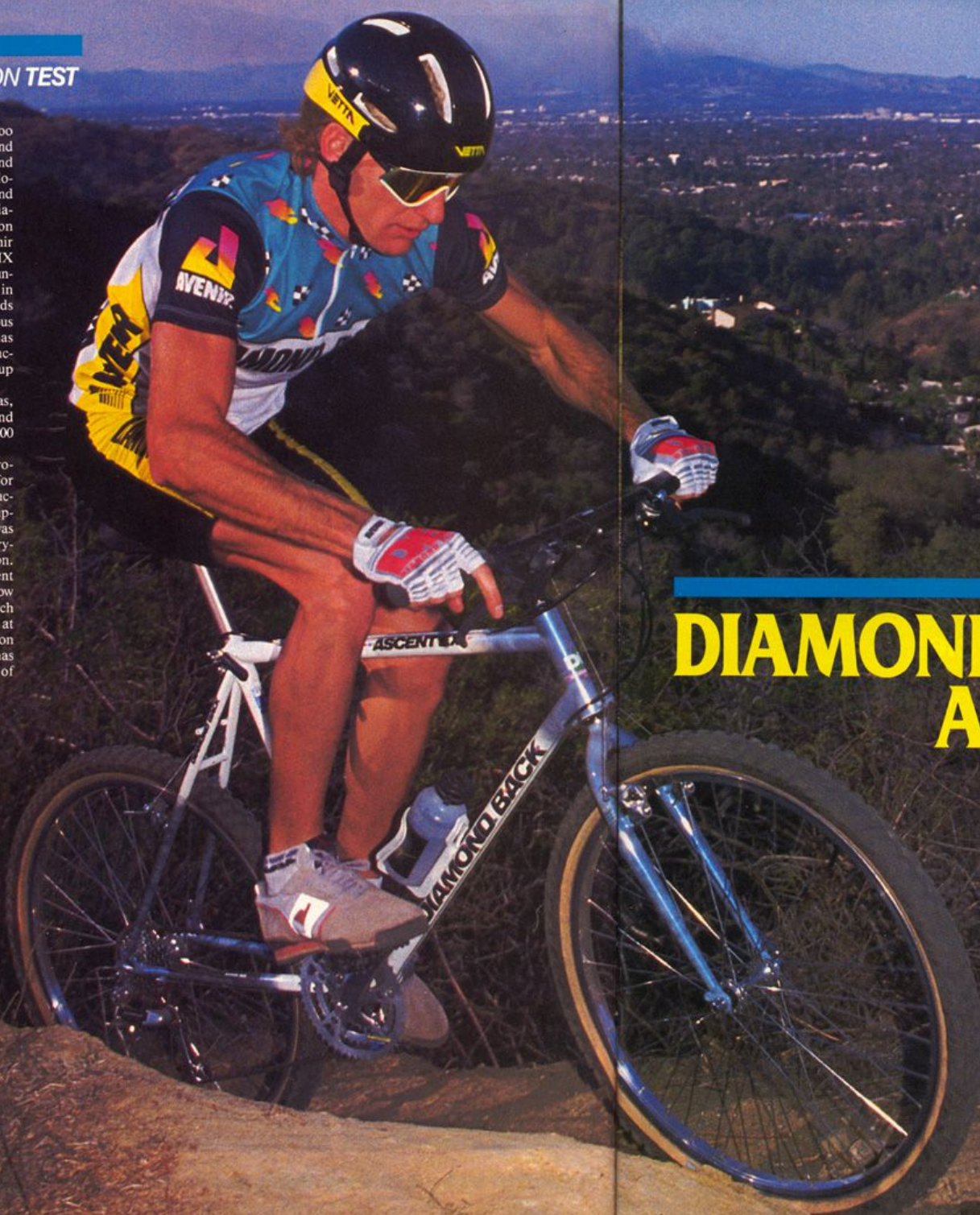


A bicycle aficionado wouldn't be too far off the mark to say that Diamond Back is the Ford Motor Co. of cycling. And the DB boys have borrowed the General Motors concept that "what's good for Diamond Back is good for mountain biking." Diamond Back is part of a large corporation that includes Centurion road bikes, Avenir clothing and trainers, Diamond Back BMX and freestyle bikes and Diamond Back mountain bikes. There is a lot of buying power in a corporate entity that produces thousands upon thousands of bicycles for an enormous dealer network. And Diamond Back has used its size to good advantage by producing a varied, attractive, well-spec'd lineup of off-road bicycles.

Starting with the affordable Topangas, there is a Diamond Back for every use and every price range (ending with the over-\$1000 Axis Team).

A few years ago Diamond Back introduced the Ascent mountain bike. It sold for an attractive \$345. It was an immediate success, and consumers clamored for an upgraded version. Thus the Ascent EX. It was conceived as a deluxe model of the entry-level, city bike-ish Ascent. It also caught on. As each new selling season came and went the dilemma for Diamond Back became how to produce the original low-cost, low-tech Ascent and still offer the deluxe version at an affordable price. This natural progression of price, componentry and technology has always been a paradox for manufacturers of high-gloss products.



DIAMOND BACK ASCENT EX

The all-purpose
all-terrain
'55 Ford
Thunderbird

TAKE THE T-BIRD, FOR EXAMPLE

What Diamond Back faced with the Ascent and Ascent EX was public demand to, on one hand, change with the times, and, on the other, change the Ascent EX, even more with the times. After all, the EX was the *deluxe* version. Back in 1955 Ford introduced the first Thunderbird. It was a pleasant little two-seat pleasure car. It was affordable, nice-looking and designed to give the Ford Motor Co. a sporting image. Compare the original '55 Ford to the full-size, high-dollar, non-sporting, luxury Ford Thunderbird of today and you can see the dangers of changing with the times, keeping up with consumers' sometimes outlandish demands and componentry upgrades.

The under-\$400 Ascent and Ascent EX couldn't incorporate better handling, better shifting, better stems, better rims, better tires, better components and still remain an entry-level, low-cost, low-tech off-road machine. What was Diamond Back to do? They did what the public wanted! The Ascent and Ascent EX got better, and new models were introduced below them to become the sporty "Thunderbirds" of 1990.

FRAMESET: TANGE MTB TUBING

Diamond Back's 1989 Ascent EX has an artistic acetylene smoke tri-panel fade color scheme capped off with very bold black graphics. The smoke paint combo is faded over a pearl white main triangle.

Tange MTB double-butted chromoly tubes are TIG-welded (in Taiwan) into a very straightforward diamond frame. The weld-



Model: Diamond Back Ascent EX
Manufacturer: Western States Importing, 4030 Via Pescador, Camarillo, CA 93010, (805) 464-8100
Sizes available: 15", 17", 19", 20.5", 22.5"
Colors available: White with acetylene smoke front and rear
Retail price: \$490
COMPONENTS
Front derailleur: Shimano

Mountain LX
Rear derailleur: Shimano
Mountain LX seven-speed
Front brake: Shimano
Mountain LX cantilever
Rear brake: Shimano
Mountain LX cantilever (seat

slay-mounted)
Cranks: Shimano Mountain LX, 175mm, 48/38/26/ High Performance Biopace
Freewheel: Shimano Cassette, Hyper-Glide, 13, 15, 17, 20, 23, 26, 30

FRAME
Tubing: Tange MTB double-butted
Head angle: 70°
Seat angle: 73°
Top tube length: 22.5"
Chainstay length: 17"

Braze-ons: Double water bottle bosses, single rack eyelets (front and rear), upper rack mounts, chain hanger

SPECIFICATIONS

ing beads are adequate, with only an occasional bulging bead around the bottom bracket. The oversize top and down tube vastly increase rigidity on the sturdy Ascent EX frame. Extra touches on the frame are both good and bad. On the good side, the reinforcing seat collar provides a strong joint to weld the tapered fastback seat stays and seatpost quick-release to. An additional good point is the indenting on the chainstays to give the rider an extra dose of chattering clearance. Conversely, the rear dropouts are filled horizontal units that have the limitations of vertical dropouts, while retaining all the liabilities of horizontal dropouts. Filled horizontal dropouts came into being when vertical dropouts became *de rigueur* on off-road bikes. The casting houses simply filled in half of the horizontal slot so that the wheel couldn't be pushed back and forth very far in the slot. It doesn't turn a horizontal dropout into a vertical one, but it has none of the advantages of a horizontal dropout, either. It's a design anomaly.

Braze-ons include a chain hanger, double water bottle bosses (with room for two large-capacity bottles), single rack eyelets front and rear and upper rack mounts.

Forks are straight-blade, 1.125-inch chromoly units. They have a rugged, beefy and super-stiff feel to them. Tire clearance on the front forks is only adequate because of the large uni-crown bend. Rear wheel clearance is good enough for most casual riding, but the move to seat stay-mounted cantilevers will not be fully appreciated until manufacturers take advantage of the extra room gained in the wet.



Setup: Run the saddle as far back on its rails as possible to compensate for the 73-degree seat angle and 22.5" top tube, adjust the plastic brake levers as tight as possible to negate slop and pop for a set of toe-clips to keep you hooked up.

GEOMETRY: INTO A CHARTERED REGION

Diamond Back listened to the consumers who demanded a quicker, better-handling and more aggressive Ascent EX for 1989. *Mountain Bike Action's* test riders' only complaint about the setup of the Ascent EX stemmed from the top tube length. Our 20.5-inch frame had a 22.5-inch top tube, which Diamond Back's Byron Friday proudly pointed to as a "long top tube." And it is a "longer" top tube for the Ascent EX, but the Ascent EX could use a minimum of a half-inch more. We have seen 20.5-inch frames with as long as 24-inch top tube lengths. To compensate, Diamond Back spec'd the Ascent

ASCENT EX

EX with a long stem, also. The 4.5-inch-reach Tioga T-bone does succeed in stretching the rider out into a more comfortable off-road position.

The rest of the numbers on the Ascent EX read well: 70-degree head angle, 73-degree seat tube angle, 17-inch chain stays, 11.75 inches of ground clearance and 1.75 inches of fork offset. The Ascent is designed to respond quickly to pilot input.

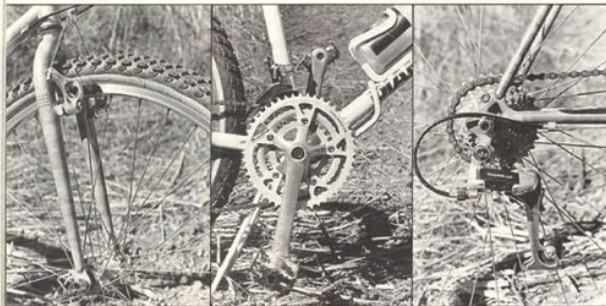
WHEELS: ALUMINUM AND RUBBER

It only takes a quick once-over to see that the Ascent EX wheel assemblies are strong enough to take the abuse of off-road riding. Silver-colored Araya RX-7 rims, 14-gauge spokes and Shimano M452 quick-release hubs build up handsome and durable hoops. The natural-colored rims won't get thrashed-looking the first time you ride in sand and the Shimano hubs have sealed mechanisms to help keep the crud out. The RX-7 rims are very nice-looking, but don't feature the built-in brake pad lip of the more expensive R-20s.

It used to be that companies would throw on "rim-saver" tires instead of good off-road rubber, but Diamond Back mounted 1.95 Tioga Farmer John Cousins (front and rear). This is a popular combo with off-road riders and makes the Ascent a well-shod off-road bike. There is no need to spend extra cash on new sneakers.



Good stuff: With a suggested retail of under \$500, the Ascent EX leaves last year's model in the dust in terms of performance and components. It is a very good trail bike that is perfect for picking its way through rough terrain.



ABOVE LEFT: Straight Arrow: Armed with 1.125" straight blade chromoly forks, the Ascent EX comes with single rack eyelets, Farmer John Cousins tires and Araya RX-7 alloy rims. The blue smoke paint scheme is neat-looking. **ABOVE CENTER:** Almost round: Shimano High-Performance Biopace chainrings are more round than elliptical. The Mountain LX cranks are held on with a nutted spindle. Watch it! Nutted spindles come loose all the time. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Best of times: Seven-speed rear spacing and Hyper-Glide have a lot to do with how well the Mountain LX rear derailleur does its job. The machined ramps on the rear cluster aid the chain in jumping from cog to cog.

ASCENT EX

DRIVE TRAIN: MOUNTAIN LX

Last year Shimano offered the public the new Shimano Exage off-road group. It was supposed to fill the gap below Deore (which means bikes below \$600). Exage was a nightmare for the serious off-roader (and serious off-roaders don't always have the money to buy the most expensive bikes). It was poorly laid out, flimsy and suffered in the hands of hard riders. Shimano went back to the drawing boards. Their goal was to produce a component group that could fill the price point below Deore, but erase all memory of Exage. Mountain LX is the new group.

The seven-speed, SIS rear derailleur shares most of the design features of its more expensive brothers, and doesn't really suffer in the looks department, either. The solid shifting of Mountain LX is a revelation after spending last year with Shimano Exage. Part of the success of the new group is related to the switch from six to seven speeds. The tighter cog spacing, Hyper-Glide cassette gears, narrow chain and crisper cable-draw produce noticeably sharper shifting response.

The new shifters mount on brackets that extend from the inboard part of the brake lever perches. They are adjustable in and out and up and down. Unlike last year's Exage parts, the Mountain LX shifters actually have some metal for the threads to bite into. The click detents for the rear derailleur are solid and predictable. Very nice feel.

Brakes are Mountain LX cantilevers front and rear. The rear seat stay-mounted cantilever has the cable threaded through a cast aluminum cable guide that is held in place by the seatpost quick-release bolt. We like the idea of avoiding any extra braze-ons for the rear cantilever, but the Ascent EX cast cable guide wiggles loosely when you apply the brakes.

The new brake levers feature nice rubber-covered lever blades and a spring-assisted alloy perch, but the MBA wrecking crew is very suspicious of the cable adjuster mechanism. The cable is inserted through the thread-in cable adjuster bolt (which isn't slotted), then fed through the brake lever perch (which also isn't slotted) and then into a metal cable holder. The first time we changed cables the metal insert on the thread-in cable adjuster bolt got stuck inside the perch. It wouldn't come out, and until it did the cable couldn't be released. We knocked it out with a punch. Equally irritating was the tendency for the brake levers to bounce up and down in their perches at speed. Not too sano.

The Mountain LX cranks (Shimano M452) are decidedly average and they are held in place by nutted spindles. Not an off-road favorite. High Performance Biopace chainrings (48/38/28) are almost round. If this keeps up the latest technological breakthrough will be round chainrings. What a



Long John: The long Tioga T-bone stem gives the Ascent a tendency to oversteer the front end at speed. One noticeable advantage to straight blade forks is the distance that the front brake cable clears the headset by.

revelation! Rear gearing is a very good 13 through 30 spread.

RIDING IMPRESSION: THE T-BIRD EFFECT

When the 1955 Thunderbird was released it was never intended to be a race car. T-birds didn't go out and cover themselves in racing glory—they were pleasure cars. Perfect for cruising and looking cool. The 1989 Diamond Back Ascent EX is really a T-bird-type mountain bike. It has all the show-and-go goodies, but it is best suited to casual trail rides, city commuting and long off-road day tours. Not that you couldn't race the Ascent EX, but you'd have to fine-tune it before you'd be successful.

We recommend running the saddle as far back on the seatpost as its rails will allow. This will put a little more weight on the rear of the 17-inch chainstays for climbing and keep some weight off of the 70-degree head angle and longish stem. For all-around riding, the Ascent EX is an honest all-terrain vehicle. It can go anywhere, do almost anything and handle whatever's thrown at it. The good shifting (we didn't think the front Mountain LX derailleur was as fluid or slick as past Shimano offerings), fat tires, strong wheels, rugged frame and upright geometry allow the casual off-roader to tractor over everything in sight.

On fast downhills and rough high-speed sections the Ascent EX doesn't shine. There is too much rider weight transferred forward by the stem. This causes the front end to wash out when steering response exceeds the contact patch. What makes the Ascent EX a good trail bike and agile slow-speed bike hampers it at speed. The very strong, rigid chassis (oversize tubing and beefy fork blades) isn't mixed well with the short top tube and long stem. It's a chatterbox at speed and a handful to boot.

But the people who wanted a quicker, more aggressive and off-road-worthy Ascent EX are going to get their wish. It is a better trail bike than it was. In fact, it's twice as good as it was when the pavement turns to dirt. And within the Ascent's window of speed (below quazar) it will give years of durable, fun and adventuresome use. □