FAT CITY Slim CHANCE

Fat City's welded road bike is everything you've ever wanted in a steel frame, only less.

By Keith Mills

What's wrong with this picture? Nothing, unless you think it's not right for a bike to forgo lugs and save weight. The Slim's welded joints show off a production quality that is minimalist, accomplished, and, on the box-crown fork, unique.

Eight years at the helm of Fat City Cycles have taught Chris Chance a lot about road bikes. That may seem like an incongruous statement—after all, Fat City has made its imprint on our bicycle culture as a builder of high-performance mountain bikes. Road bikes, it appeared, were strictly a part of Chance's former life as a custom framebuilder.

Still, Chance wondered if the same people, processes and facility that turn out such esteemed off-road bikes in Somerville, Massachusetts, could reasonably be called on to produce a road bike. Eventually, he wondered no more. He knew—the methods that had made "Fat Chance" a fat-tire household name would prove viable, and even advantageous, on a road bike. And so was born Fat City's first road bike, the Slim Chance.

"In designing this bike, I really wanted to make the ultimate statement about a TIG-welded road bike," Chris Chance declares. "Learning how to make an off-road bike light and strong has been our mission at Fat City, and the Slim has a lot of design elements that we came up with over the years." If the Slim Chance has a theme, it is a reflection of the valuable, but not always conspicuous, ways that Fat City has steadily improved its mountain bikes. If the Slim Chance has a lesson, it is a confirmation of the relativity between road and mountain bikes.

Topping the list of these credentials is the Slim's welded construction. Welded joints are nothing new for Fat City, but a tubeset as lavish as the Slim's Columbus TSX is. Moreover, welded TSX tubing may well have qualified as an oxymoron. Usually, the white dove on the Columbus decal is perched artfully next to a lug—all the better if it's an ornately sculpted lug. The Slim has no lugs, and brazing, the stock in trade of most road-bike construction, is used here mostly to attach bit parts (bosses, cable guides). Everything else on the Slim is TIG-welded.

That makes the frame notably light. Our 56-cm Slim weighs three pounds, 15 ounces, earning it a solid spot on the roster of lightweight contenders. More to the point, it is one of the lightest steel frames ever to float into these pages, regardless of size. Steel frames usually don't have the make-up to breeze into lightweight territory, but the Slim makes the cut because Fat City doesn't play by the usual rules. Properly carried out, welding conserves weight. It's easy to imagine, and even easier to see—it's the difference be-

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TONY SCARPETTA

tween a few slim sticks of steel welding rod and a full set of lugs. In fact, says Chance, "A lugged frame probably uses more brazing rod, in terms of weight, than we use in steel welding rod." About 20 grams of welding rod, and a smaller portion of sliver brazing rod, go into fusing the Slim's joints, and that is all—the frame is then as light, and as secure, as a normal steel frame gets.

A light frame has a virtue all its own, especially since it is the foundation of a light bike. The Slim also weighs in with a decidedly light fork—although low weight (one pound, 6¼ ounces) seems like a secondary achievement to this fork's mere existence. It is a unique set of blades, with a style borrowed from Fat City's off-road "box-crown" fork. For the slimmed-down version of the box-crown, Fat City takes a computer-designed, laser-cut sheet of steel, bends it into a fork crown, and TIG-welds the TSX blades and steerer to it. A flawless finishing job at the crown, plus a gracefully gentle rake, make the fork look just as seamless and elegant as it was meant to be.

But there is more to the design than a beguiling aesthetic. A pair of triangularly tapered gussets (welded, of course) trickle from the crown along the inside tops of the blades. "Gussets add a lot to the strength and stiffness of the fork," explains Chance. "It helps relieve a stress-riser situation where that box comes into the blade. The gusset brings it all down to a taper and helps distribute the stress over the length of the blade." And, in a further fit of fork reinforcement, Fat City finishes off the brake hole by brazing a solid tube through the crown and steerer.

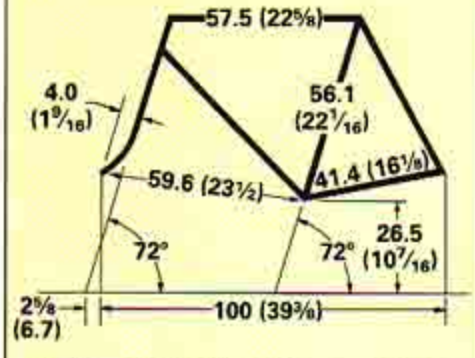
The frame picks up on the durability theme where the fork leaves off, starting with the head tube. A welded gusset, resembling the ones on the fork, reinforces the potentially troublesome, crash-sensitive junction of the head and down tubes. Also, the head tube has external sleeves at its top and bottom. They are not added; rather, they are untouched while the rest of the tube is machined from a larger outside diameter. Fat City doesn't have to do this—most head tubes can go straight from the tubing mill to a frame—but the results are apparently worth the effort. The head tube is slightly lighter, and, where it contacts the headset, stronger.

The bottom-bracket shell receives the same treatment. Machined-out sleeves face the BB cups, while the rest of the shell—already shorn of lug-like sock-

Stainless steel G.P. Wilson dropouts are welded to the stays. Because of the taxing finish work, however, most Slims are using different dropouts.

FAT CITY SLIM CHANCE

Approximate price: $1125 (frameset only; price may vary, shipping and dealer prep extra)
Sizes available: 52-62 cm in two-cm increments (center to center)
Size tested: 56 cm (22 1/16)



Total weight: 21 lbs, 3¾ oz (as shown)
Frame without fork: 3 lbs, 15 oz
Fork only: 1 lb, 6¼ oz
Front wheel only: 2 lbs, 6½ oz
Rear wheel only: 3 lbs, 5¼ oz
Frame: Columbus TSX double-butted chrome-moly tubing throughout; G.P. Wilson stainless steel dropouts. Columbus TSX fork with Fat City box-crown. Bosses for two water bottles, brake and derailleur cable stops and guides, chain hanger, pump, and shift levers.
Manufactured by: Fat City Cycles, P.O. Box 218, Somerville, MA 02143; 617-625-4922

ets—gets lighter still. Elsewhere, the chainstay bridge is brazed, the seatstay bridge welded. The dropouts are welded as well. On our test bike, the dropouts come from the little-known foundry of G.P. Wilson, but there is a problem. Check that—there is nothing visibly wrong with these dropouts. They're stainless steel to stand up to endless wheel changes, and they're pretty, especially with a radiant complementary finishing job from Fat City. The problem, though, according to Chance, is that the finishing job for these dropouts is more like a sentence, requiring hours of strenuous hand-filing of the stainless steel. "The finish filing ended up being a brick wall for us," he assesses. "I feel like G.P. Wilsons do offer value, but what we have to go through to make them look like what we're willing to put our name on is not worth it."

Subsequent Slims will come with dropouts that are less challenging—and, sadly, less charming (probably standard Shimano ends). Realistically, however, dropouts do not affect a bike's ride—unlike the other parts comprising the frameset, particularly the tubing. Indeed, it is impossible not to consider a steel frame in the context of its tubeset. With the Slim Chance, this perspective is sharpened by the sheer lack of embellishment. Lugless joints create a disarmingly simple effect—it's as though you get to ride the tubeset, and nothing but the tubeset. In many ways, the Slim rides like any light-gauge steel (Columbus TSX, SLX) road bike—it is forgiving over bumps and somewhat flexible under pedaling forces, perhaps too flexible for power riders who want no trace of bottom-bracket sway or speed wobbles.

The weight difference, while significant, is not overwhelmingly obvious, nor does it necessarily make the Slim go any faster than a lugged steel bike. And our early sample test bike skews from the geometry plan (parallel 72-degree angles instead of 73½ head, 73 seat; though other figures, including the long top tube, are correct). Yet riding the Slim can bring an inescapable feeling that this is how a steel bike is supposed to respond. It is, in a word, smooth—not pave-over-the-bumps smooth, but an honest smooth that keeps you tuned in to the pavement without amplifying any harshness. Admittedly, good steel bikes can leave one with a loss for original words. So be it. Chance, who has worked with steel for most of his adult life, describes his favor-

ite material with some of the usual imprecise, touchy-feely terms: "Steel has a kind of liveliness to it. It's got a nice spring feel to it. I really like the way you can feel it transmit energy. I like the feel when you push on the pedals."

By praising the material, he tacitly affirms that it's hard to go wrong with a bike that uses a well-engineered steel tubeset. A reasonable evaluation of Fat City's output, however, would have to conclude that the company turns out bikes that are more than the sum of their tubes. When Fat City gets its hands on a well-engineered steel tubeset, the in-house signatures—judicious machining, flawless welding and finishing, and strict alignment—elevate the product from a nice steel bike to a nice light steel bike, and even to one of the nicest bikes anywhere.

The Slim upholds this pattern nicely, carrying the incalculable durability Fat City builds into its frames. At the Slim's lofty price ($1125 for a frameset), it *should* be first-rate, but there is apparently a segment of the road-riding populace that resists the Slim's grand entrance into the high ranks. It seems the bike is too unconventional. "At the trade shows," relates Chance, "there were a few people who said, 'If I bought one of these bikes, could I get it finish-filed around the welds—then maybe it would be a road bike.' At first, I really wasn't ready for that question. I've been looking at welded bikes for so long, and I'm so proud of what our welders do . . ."

He pauses, and it is clear that he is almost rankled. The complaints are a bit unfair—the Slim's welds are so minimalist that the beads are not overly visible anyway. Finish these welds? "Ultimately the answer to the question," continues Chance, "is, 'There's really no reason to do that; what you have here is some amazing welding.' It might be hard to appreciate from a finish-filed-lug point of view. I used to address that mentality head-on with the custom-built, lugged bikes I built before Fat City Cycles. It's kind of an unfortunate attitude."

But, as Chance duly notes, mountain biking and triathlons have pried open a lot of minds in recent years, and the liberation from convention is beginning to flourish throughout all of cycling. More and more riders, it seems, are interested not in scrubbing off weld beads, but in knowing the particulars of the welds. And that should benefit Fat City, because this company stands as perhaps the finest

TSX tubing conforms to road-bike tradition. But many more touches (welding, seat collar, split cable guides) hew to Fat City tradition.

practitioner of TIG-welded bikes. It is, says Chance, no problem for Fat City's welders to fuse the thin-wall TSX tubing on the Slim. He says some of them have experience welding tubes thinner than anything found on a bike. TSX tubing walls get as thin as 0.6 mm, but that is in the main triangle's unbutted sections, sandwiched between thicker butts (0.8 and 0.9) that actually feel the heat from the welding.

A word about TSX: The Slim is the first bike we've sampled with this latest conventional Columbus tubeset. TSX updates the internal reinforcing Columbus first used on its SLX tubeset. There are actually two tubes' worth of difference betwen the two—TSX expands upon SLX's "helical reinforcement" (splines drawn into certain tube ends) by running the spirals the entire length of the top and down tubes. This is supposed to make the frame stiffer, and, because the tubing walls are one mm thinner in the butts (0.8 mm instead of 0.9), lighter. In reality, though, Columbus TSX, SLX, and SL tubesets share some of the same tubes and weigh roughly the same. That makes them ride similarly in a frame. It's difficult to evaluate the effect of TSX's splined reinforcements—granted, the two most significant tubes get the costly end-to-end treatment, but we wonder if a full-spiral design for all frameset tubes would make the merits of TSX more tangible. Either that, or it could be time to say "read our lips, no new TSXs."

Anyway, Chance says he decided to use TSX for the Slim in order to make it more palatable to road-bike consumers who often judge a bike by its tubing. This meant Chance had to bypass his usual tubing pipeline—True Temper draws custom-gauge steel for Fat City's mountain bikes—to satisfy the demand for a known commodity. Still, "so much of the Slim is not conservative," he maintains. Conservative or not, the Slim can look almost conventional with the right components attached. That is the case with our test bike, which sports a full Mavic road group. These parts are a natural for the Slim, because Fat City and Mavic have cultivated a relationship over the years, perhaps culminating with Mavic's use of Slim Chances in its racing technical-support program during the past season.

On our Slim, the latest incarnation of the chic French ensemble works well. The crank is one impressive piece of machinery, especially viewed from the perspective of the saddle. The 551 hubs anchor a set of tubular wheels that are almost ridiculously smooth and light. The indexed shifting (here paired with a seven-speed Sachs-Huret freewheel) is consistent, though the lever lacks the insistent, positive "click" of the well-known Japanese systems. Even the Modolo-made brakes, which have been accused of being the weak link of Mavic's groups, bring everything to an agreeable, painless halt.

If you judge a bike by the company it keeps, the Columbus and Mavic links bestow a worldly traditionalist aura on the Slim Chance. But the Slim demonstrates that its creator belongs in that realm of renowned, dependable bike companies. At one of the bike industry's trade shows last fall, Chris Chance received a visit from an older Italian man. The man's name was Ugo DeRosa, and any observer could witness the mutual respect between Chance and the sainted patron of road bikes. Whatever symbolism is derived from that encounter, it's hard to get more telling than this: "He's got a welded bike now," Chance says.

As traditionalist biases further erode, Fat City could well find itself in the enviable position of providing the standard for welded road bikes. Which is probably not far off the standard for steel road bikes, and which is hinted at rather broadly by the current version of the Slim Chance. □