



M O U N T A I N B I K E A C T I O N T E S T

*Like a wolf in
sheep's clothing*

SPECIALIZED S-WORKS CARBON

■ When we first informed members of the winking crew that we would be testing a Specialized carbon fiber bike, some of the veteran testers winced. For those who had been around long enough to remember the first time we tested the Specialized Epic (MBA, July '88), the idea didn't bring back the best of memories. They remembered the bike as basically being two bikes in one: a chromoly frame with short sections of carbon fiber tubing inserted in the middle of each frame tube. The bike was heavy (for a supposedly carbon fiber bike), stiff and had minimal rear wheel clearance. Although some riders appreciated the original bike's stiff ride and good handling, on the day the new Carbon was scheduled to show up, all of the old-timers purposely found a reason to stay out of the office for fear of being picked to ride the bike.

Four years after the bike's first incarnation, the Specialized S-Works Carbon bike similarly became the source of debate. Only this time, we were arguing over its appearance. It is virtually impos-

sible to tell that the Carbon bike is made from carbon fiber. Since Specialized chose unidirectional carbon fiber tubes for the bike, the trademark cross-weave found with most carbon fiber products is not visible under the dark paint. The only visual highlight to the frame is a slight grape-purple sheen that brightens when hit with direct sunlight.

One group questioned the rationale behind designing a high-end, exotic mountain bike made from alternative materials, only to turn around and make it one of the dullest-looking mountain bikes on the market. "Why would someone want to spend the money for a carbon fiber bike that has the appearance of some flimsy, plainly painted, steel bike?" they would ask.

The contrary view defined the debate along sociological lines. Expensive consumer items, they argued, have long been the ingredient for class divisions and too often the multitudes of social climbers have relied on the flash of expensive toys to ensure that others stay away of their

have-not status. They pointed out, after all, that the fanciest of Italian and German sports cars rarely rely on neon paint schemes to attract attention to themselves. Why not downplay the bike's outward appearance, they reasoned, if only to lessen the envy and resentment out on the singletrack?

WHAT IS IT?

The S-Works Carbon bike is Specialized's entry-level carbon fiber bike. Of the two exotic-material bikes available, ours is available as a complete bike, while the upper-end S-Works Ultimate is only available as a frameset. What distinguishes the two bikes other than price and completeness? The Ultimate uses titanium lugs while the Carbon relies on more utilitarian chromoly for its metalwork. Since all of the bikes are made from scratch at Specialized's own frame-building facility, you can believe the "Made in USA" sticker on the seat tube.

Though our '92 model was available as a complete bike in the neighborhood of \$3500, for '93 Specialized is selling the

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frameset only, and for, we might add, a very reasonable-sounding price of \$1300. That's the same price that plenty of steel frames still sell for. Despite the comparable price, the carbon fiber isn't automatically a better buy by itself, but it does provide an interesting alternative. The bike enjoys a superb overall finish, owing to the bonded construction. Though the lugs themselves are welded together, the carbon tubes are glued and baked in place.

THE HAVES & HAVE-NOTS

For anyone out there who has been perusing the Specialized catalog and has never found a carbon fiber suspension bike, it's because it doesn't exist yet. We had been talking to Specialized about getting a carbon bike for a while, and when one finally became available, they decided to mount their latest '93 FutureShock suspension fork on it to see what we thought. This was a first-time coupling of the two products because until now the bike was sold with a rigid chromoly fork.

It was immediately apparent when we measured the bike that it wasn't designed around the longer suspension fork. The angles came in at a relaxed 72-degree seat and 70-degree head. Slap the standard rigid fork back on and you would end up with the classic 71x73 geometry. Everything else on our 19-inch test bike mea-



Work for the frills: Visually, there's not much to speak of with Specialized's Carbon frame. The iridescent purple finish only shines when the sun hits it at the right angle; otherwise it looks like a rather dull mountain bike. Only when you ride the bike does it really start to shine. Light and agile, the bike doesn't suffer from any unwanted flex.

sured in at the traditional numbers: 23-inch-long top tube, 11.75-inch-tall bottom bracket, 16.9-inch-long chainstays and a 42-inch wheelbase. The suspended carbon bike weighed in at 25.5 pounds.

WHY ASK WHY?

Simple, because we just don't see why Specialized would bother to put rack

mounts on the rear dropouts of a high-tech carbon fiber mountain bike. Oh sure, we all know that a majority of high-end bikes are never ridden off-road, but why cater to such a practice? Why not handlebar basket mounts? Rack mounts on this bike are tantamount to curb feelers on a Lamborghini Countach!

We were also left to wonder about the front-derailleur cable routing. The placements of the head tube and bottom bracket cable guides route the cable diagonally across the downtube, actually putting the cable in contact with the downtube surface midway along its route. If the head tube cable guide was mounted in a lower position, the problem would be solved.

CHANGE WAS INEVITABLE

When the old-timers finally returned to the office, they found a carbon fiber Specialized that looked nothing like the bike we tested four years ago. Gone were the chromoly lugs that seemed to make up 80 percent of the frame. The chainstays now offer excellent rear-wheel clearance thanks to the magnificently molded carbon fiber chainstays. The Carbon bike truly can be called a carbon fiber bike now.

When it came time to get the Specialized dirty, test riders thoroughly enjoyed themselves aboard the light bike. For some riders, the fact that there was virtually no noticeable frame flex was another mark in the Carbon's favor. Some testers remembered the flexiness of the carbon fiber

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Trek 8700 (MBA, April '91), and said they much preferred the Specialized's stiffness.

The Specialized FutureShock now features a six-click adjuster to alter the fork's lockout. Without a doubt, these were some of the most effective adjusters of any fork we have ridden, save for Cannondale's Delta-V fork. From the softest position to the firmest, there was a noticeable difference in how the fork absorbed the bumps. Every Rock Shox owner who rode the Carbon immediately wished his golden suspenders offered such a distinct range of adjustability. Though the lockout indicator graphics on top of the forks were rather unsightly, they were easy to read and allowed the rider to adjust the forks without squinting.

One of the virtues of carbon fiber frames is their ability to dampen road shock. With the addition of the suspension fork, the damping contributions of the frame are now greatly minimized.

MAKING A CASE FOR THE CARBON

In the last four years Specialized has come a long way in the development of its carbon fiber mountain bikes. What would we like to see in the future? Call us pretentious geeks, but we would prefer to see the visible weave of carbon fiber in the frame tubes, at least in the front triangle.



More to come: The adjustable Specialized FutureShock is just one of many new forks that the company will be producing for next year. Weighing 3 lb. 6 oz., each of the fork's six settings had a noticeable effect on the damping quality. Since the frame was designed around a rigid fork, the Carbon's angles are slightly more relaxed than intended.

While Specialized opted for a unique, albeit austere, visual character for the bike, it's like wrapping a *chile relleno* burrito in a hot dog bun! Why hide the good stuff? We want to know what we have! Since the frames are all made in-house, we figure the awkward cable routing should be



Not the least bit missed: The first time we tested a carbon fiber bike from Specialized, the chromoly bottom bracket lug stretched halfway to the rear dropout. The chainstays on the new Carbon frame have gotten rid of the excess steel by using beautifully formed carbon fiber tubes. Lack of a chainstay bridge increases wheel clearance.

an easy fix, just as lopping off the rear eyelets should be. If they plan to market the bike with suspension in the future, it would also be good to make new frame jigs with geometry to accommodate the added length of a suspension fork.

As for the complete package, Specialized will be making available three different S-Works parts kits to accompany the frame (Shimano XTR, SunTour XC-Pro, Shimano LX).

Understated or not, the S-Works Carbon is a wonderful example of high-tech off-road componentry. Even though the most interesting part of the bike is well masked, in the end, who else really needs to know how good the bike is but the rider? □