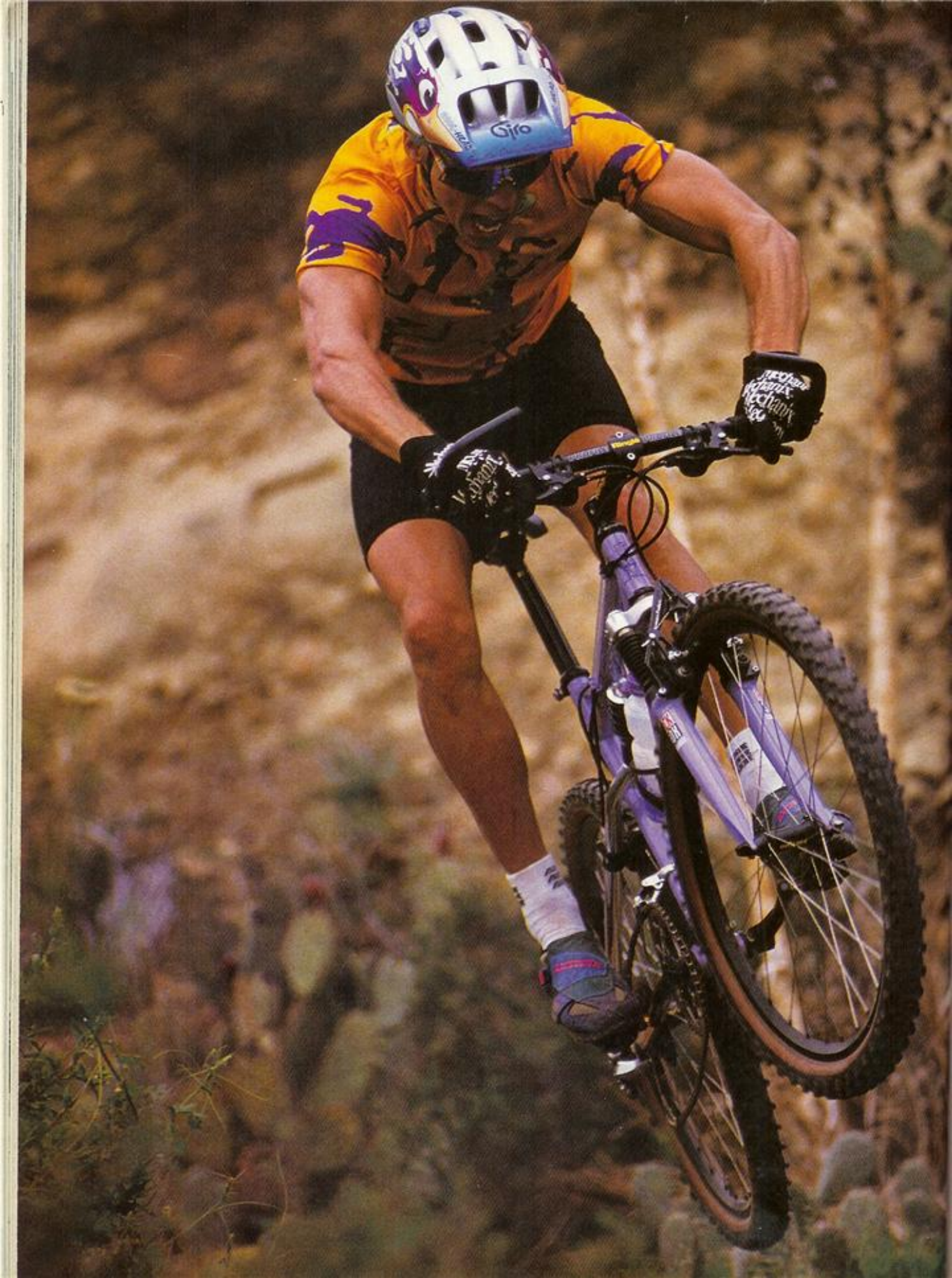
Giro

FAT CHANCE SHOCK-A-BILLY

Why are these guys all smiling?

Chris Chance has seen trends come and go over the dozen-odd years that he and his band of jolly East Coast balloon-tire folks have been building frames. Fat Chance is their name and conservative performance is their game. An unwavering dedication to rigidity, light weight and eking out the last iota of efficiency from the classic diamond frame has made them famous from one end of the globe to the other. Yeah . . . rigid! Light! Classic! Traditional! That's how the Fat Chance brochures have always read. "Soooo, what is a downright reactionary band of TIG-welding frame builders doing with a full suspension bicycle in their '94 line?"

The Fat Chance reply didn't come easily: "Um . . . ahem . . . aaaah, well, originally we thought suspension was really stupid. Ah, but some of us tried some cool suspension bicycles and, ahem, really had fun. We built some prototypes (just to evaluate any potential benefits of rear suspension, mind you). After a year, we decided to go for it. We just had a gas riding full suspension bikes!"

As things turned out, the AMP Research design fit Fat Chance's philosophy of simple construction and strict adherence to the diamond-frame school of proven designs. After some arithmetic and feasibility studies, Chris negotiated with Horst Leitner to purchase complete AMP rear suspension sections. The plan was simple, and it turns out not all that rare. Fat Chance would build the rest of the Shock-a-Billys in its own factory and the AMP rear section would bolt on.

The concept of a fully suspended Fat Chance is as remote as the 3000 miles that separate the Laguna Beach, California, company that makes the rear and the Somerville, Massachusetts, company that makes the front. It might be blasphemy to loyal Fat Chance buyers and it's certainly something to ponder for the West Coast boys: can East Coast dudes crank out an awesome suspension bicycle? Chris Chance has just put his quarter on the table.

FIRST LOOK

Steel has always been the weapon of choice at Fat Chance—very thin steel. The Shock-a-Billy's frame is TIG-welded from oversized, quad-butted, heat-treated, chromoly tubing. Most suspension builders choose large-diameter aluminum for extra rigidity, but Fat Chance has a unique relationship with an unnamed tube company that draws custom tubes just for them (we would guess that it is True Temper). Frame construction is near perfection and small design touches are apparent throughout the frame. Paint? Man oh man, these dudes love to candy-coat their bikes. Our test bike was pearlized lavender.

The first feature to pop into view is a small reinforcement tube at the seat/top tube junction. This allows the top tube to be lowered to compensate for maximum standover height. Instead of wads of welded alloy around the bottom bracket/swingarm area, two thin tabs and a small brazed tube form the swingarm pivot boss. Up front, the main frame tubes are distinctly oversized. The seatpost diameter is a big 29.4mm to prevent flexing at full extension. A machined, alloy, seatpost clamp incorporates a plastic seal to prevent dirt and moisture from invading the seat tube. A small gusset further reinforces the head/down tube junction. The aluminum AMP rear section (swingarm, strut and shock) is left polished. Our Shock-a-Billy came with the Noleen shock option (the lighter but less sophisticated AMP thru-shaft unit comes stock). A color-matched, long-travel, Rock Shox Mag-21 SL fork shares suspension duties (Answer's Manitou II is an option also).

When Chris Chance asked us how we wanted the bicycle set up, we told him to send the Shock-a-Billy exactly how he would like to ride one. When the bicycle arrived, it set off a drool-a-thon.

THE NUMBERS GAME

East Coast bikes used to favor short top tubes, steep seat angles and high bottom brackets. Head angles could run as steep as 72 degrees. Fat Chance may have done that some time ago, but its experience with international competition and some extensive vacationing out west has had a moderating effect on their geometry.

Shock-a-Billys come in small, medium and large sizes. The medium frames' top tube length runs 23 inches, bottom bracket height is 12.5 inches, wheelbase 42 inches, chainstay length 16.625 inches with a 72-degree seat and 71-degree head angle. Rear suspension travel was two inches. A long-travel Rock Shox Mag-21 provided 2.375 inches in front. The Noleen shock is clamped in place to provide a ride height adjustment. A wide variety of spring rates are available (ours was set up with a 550-pound unit). Frame weight is 5.4 pounds. The bicycle as tested weighed 24.75 pounds. Frame only—including the color-matched Mag-21, Noleen shock option and Afterburner fork brace—is close to 1900 bucks. The 'Billy isn't offered as a complete bicycle. Buying the whole package would equal a substantial chunk of the national debt.

COMPONENT PICKS

Fat Chance is famous for cool paint. Any hue or scheme is possible for the right price. Just ask. The Shock-a-Billy driver's compartment was top-notch. Profile alloy handlebars, Onza bar ends, Ringlé zero-rise (135mm) stem, Grafton brake levers and Rapidfire mounts round out the dashboard. Seating for one was provided by an Avocet Air-40-R saddle on a Ringlé Moby post. The stopping department spotlighted Grafton cantilevers, stiffened up with an Afterburner clamp-on alloy bridge in the rear and a Two-Wheel Performance fork brace. The transmission was Shimano XTR derailleurs and shift levers. Grafton 26/36/46 cranks powered an 11-32 Action-Tec eight-speed titanium cog set. Rolling stock featured Ringlé Bubba freehubs, 32-spoke Velocity aerorims and Continental Competition-Pro 2.1 tires (front and rear). Other notable items were a Chris King threadless headset and a Grafton Ti bottom bracket.

ON THE DIRT

First impressions are lasting. The Shock-a-Billy didn't disappoint in the feel-good department. Every test rider remarked that the bicycle was "right." The 'Billy was low enough in front for hammering up long climbs and long enough to let it fly on any worthy stretch of downhill. Steering response was crisp and ac-

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A classic rendered in steel: The Fat Chance's ultra-thin, steel front section felt spot-on. Overall layout of the controls, stem and components followed suit. The 'Billy showed that an old dog can add new trickness.

Flights of fatness: An ultralight cross-country racer that can be mercilessly hammered at speed? The Fat Chance Shock-a-Billy is a Ninja in an evening dress. Pretty paint and trick components were icing on this kamikaze cake. ►

curate. The Shock-a-Billy's front end did what it was told—the first time. Fat Chance's neutral handling was a saving grace because the Continental tires broke loose without warning on hard, fast corners. Whoa!

The stiff 550-pound shock spring gave the 'Billy a solid feeling when sprinting out of the saddle. That surety came at the expense of harshness at slower speeds. Damping in the Noleen unit was smooth. Watching it move proved to non believers how active the shock was even on smooth surfaces. We ran 35 to 40 psi in the Rock Shox to balance the bicycle (front to rear) throughout the speed range. Riders looking for more forgiving low-speed suspension can switch to the next lightest spring rate. Noleen even has titanium shock springs in stock.

Climbing in or out of the saddle was a pleasant experience; however, some

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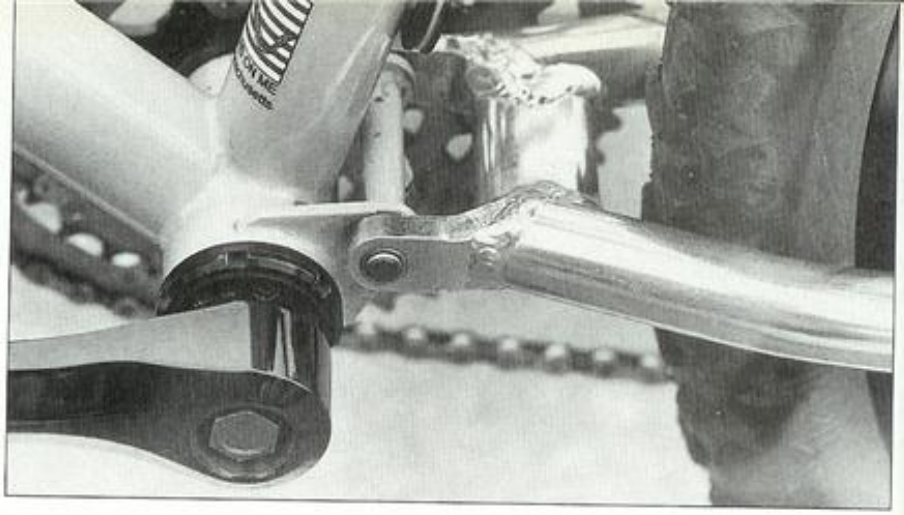
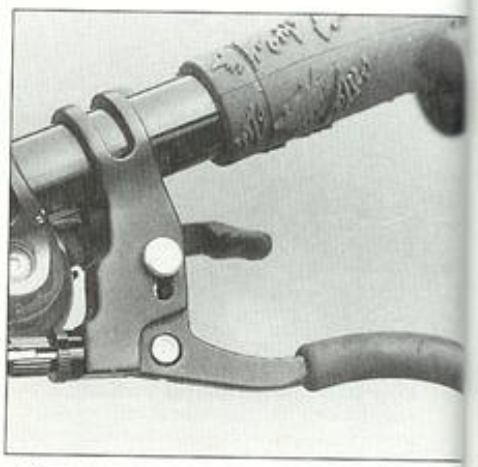
fiddling with the cable adjuster was necessary to keep the rear derailleur from ghost-shifting. The Action-Tec cogs and seat stay cable routing overtaxed Shimano's XTR indexing mechanism. The cool 32-tooth low gear in the rear was put to good use in the local desert, grinding up super steep, rocky pitches that tested the 'Billy's and test crew's technical skills. The bike passed with honors. The only place the Continental tires did well was in sandy and rocky sections (a European desert tire?).



Chris Chance goes one smaller: Few suspension designers can believe how small Horst Leitner's pivots are. By switching to steel, Chris Chance uses near-miniature supports for his Shock-a-Billy/AMP design.

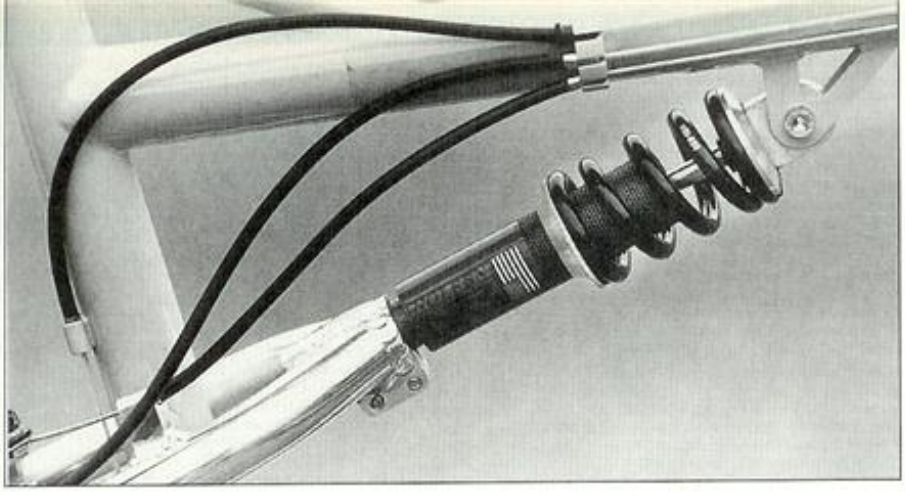


Adjustable alternative: Grafton's brake/shift controls were light and very functional. The pivot location on the brake lever could be adjusted to firm up the flexy rear brake. (We set the rear brake in the lowest position and the front in the middle position.)

Braking was good up front and fair in the rear. As with all MacPherson Strut designs, the long, flexible seat stays and offset brake pull hinder rear braking performance. Adjustable pivots on the Grafton levers made a big difference in firming up the rear stoppers (we set the pivot full-down for max cable pull). The Afterburner machined, alloy, bolt-on, seat stay bridge helped stiffen the rear noticeably, but left little clearance above the tire. Braking was good enough for the 'Billy's intended role as a cross-country mount, but downhill work would require better rear stoppers.

SUSPENSION SPECIFICS

Fat Chance purchases its rear section from AMP Research, so its features are the same as all AMPs. AMP designs the most active rear end, and we especially liked it with the Noleen shock. The Noleen shock has slightly less travel than the AMP thru-shaft unit, but there is a very noticeable improvement in perfor-



Welcome addition: We had a chance to compare an AMP shock with our other favorite, the Noleen. We have always felt that the AMP shock lacked suppleness in the damping department. The Noleen unit was a dream.

mance with the Noleen unit that more than compensates for the missing half-inch of wheel travel. Those who appreciate simplicity and insist on being able to do their own upkeep might want the workable AMP shock. The thru-shaft design can be rebuilt with a screwdriver, a pair of pliers and a splash of automatic transmission fluid. Both the Noleen and AMP shock are coil spring types with threaded preload collars. The more complicated Noleen unit features speed-sensitive valving and a high-pressure nitrogen reservoir to prevent shock fade (rebuilds are best left to an expert). The Fat Chance uses stainless steel pivot pins in addition to AMP's permanently lubed bearings. Included with each frame is a new set of bearings and an applicator tool (as well as setup and operating instructions). The rear end stayed tight throughout the *MBA* thrash-fest, including some rained-out sessions. Overall, the Shock-a-Billy rear suspension scored high marks in all departments.

SUGGESTION BOX

Although the Shock-a-Billy is not available from Fat Chance as a complete bicycle, our test bicycle can still shed light on your future purchase. Here is what we would change to set the bike up for better performance: (1) Unless you live in the mid-Sahara, choose another type of rear tire. Full suspension bicycles don't need flotation tires to smooth out the ride; they do need a stiff, knobby tread that can stand up to aggressive riding. Tires are for traction only in the new world order of suspension bikes. (2) Every test rider downgraded the rear brake. With so many similar suspension designs, somebody's got to have a solution to mushy MacPherson Strut brakes. (3) Full-length cable housing from the top tube stop to the rear derailleur would keep the moving suspension parts from affecting shifting performance.

WHAT DO WE THINK?

The Shock-a-Billy has it all—great looks, feather weight, impeccable trail-side manners and awesome component selection. The only person who wouldn't like this bicycle is some nothing-but-rigid-for-me type (and we assumed that Chris Chance was in this category until he built the Shock-a-Billy). Rigid guys need not apply, but the rest of fat-tire humanity could peg the fun meter on Chris Chance's latest full suspension bike. The Shock-a-Billy, if built up in similar fashion to our test model, could be a top contender at the races. ❑