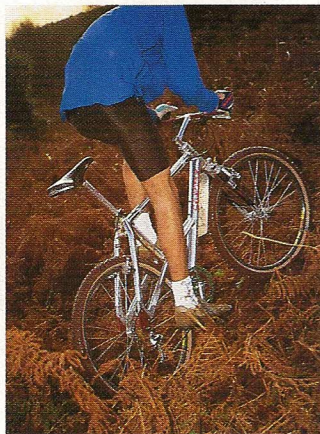


BIKE TEST

PHOTOGRAPHY BOB SMITH



The profiles, sales dynamics and breeding of the two bikes are a continent apart.

Which frame material is best is a frequently asked question that has no easy answer. A preference for one material or another is usually just someone else's opinion based on their own riding. Assuming that your choices are not limited by budget and logic alone, your buying options get increasingly confusing, with most of the major bike manufacturers offering two, three or four choices in frame materials, especially as the prices get up to around £1,500. Is carbon better than titanium? Is aluminium better than steel? Why do steel frames vary so much in value?

This month we're taking a look at two tricked out race bikes with very different approaches to frame material and design. Parkpre, the California based manufacturers, launched their range on to the UK market at the tail end of the '93 race season. Their star rider, '93 World Champion Paola Pezzo, has been something of a publicity boost in '94. Their two top machines, the Pro Elite Titanium and the Pro Image Aluminum, are followed closely in the range by our Pro 825 test bike, pointing out that the classic chromoly approach is always going to be up there vying for a place on the podium.

Our other test bike, a Smokestone, is from one of the UK's very few aluminium frame builders. After carving themselves a niche market on the southern race circuit, they're about ready to go, perhaps on a wing and a prayer, into big scale production.

The profiles, sales dynamics and breeding of Parkpre and Smokestone are a continent apart but, if you're looking for a race bike with something that makes it stand out from the crowd, you may well encounter these two.

Parkpre base their image strongly on the race scene. Their top eight bikes boast 'performance geometry', designed to work at their best with a suspension fork. In fact, the brochure only shows one bike with a rigid fork and that's a BMX. The rest offer a suspension choice that focuses on Rock Shox, Manitou and Marzocchi, but you can have their own PFR rigid fork if you're that way inclined. Top end Parkpre bikes have much in common with tricked out personal machines, boasting Pulstar hubs, Critical Racing or Dia Compe VC5 brakes, onZa pedals and several touches of colour matched anodising.

Frame & Forks

Tange's Ultimate Superlight tubeset is a blend of double butted main tubes, seat and chainstays, a butted and externally reinforced head tube and a machined bottom bracket. The 4lb 5.5oz weight of the main frame is impressive, and the grade of steel is superior to the Tange tubes further down the range. 'Superior' means less prone to fatigue weaknesses within the strength for weight equation. The thin tube walls are tough enough to withstand radical offroading but resilient enough to offer a remarkably responsive feel. Extra drive rigidity is dialled in by ovalising the seat and down tubes into the BB shell.

Parkpre design their frames for

maximum standover height, leaving about 2.5in of protruding seat tube above the seat cluster. Cables for the rear gear and brake run across the top tube and the front mech cable runs under the bottom bracket. Double bottle bosses are fitted but there are no mudguard or rack eyelets, stressing the 825's race pedigree. Finishing standards were superb. The finish itself was described as 'Ti Plated' - it was difficult to tell it apart from the real thing. All the welds were neat and tidy and buyers get a choice of fork, from a Rock Shox Judy to a Marzocchi, Manitou and PFR rigid. Our between-the-seasons test bike was fitted with a Manitou 3.

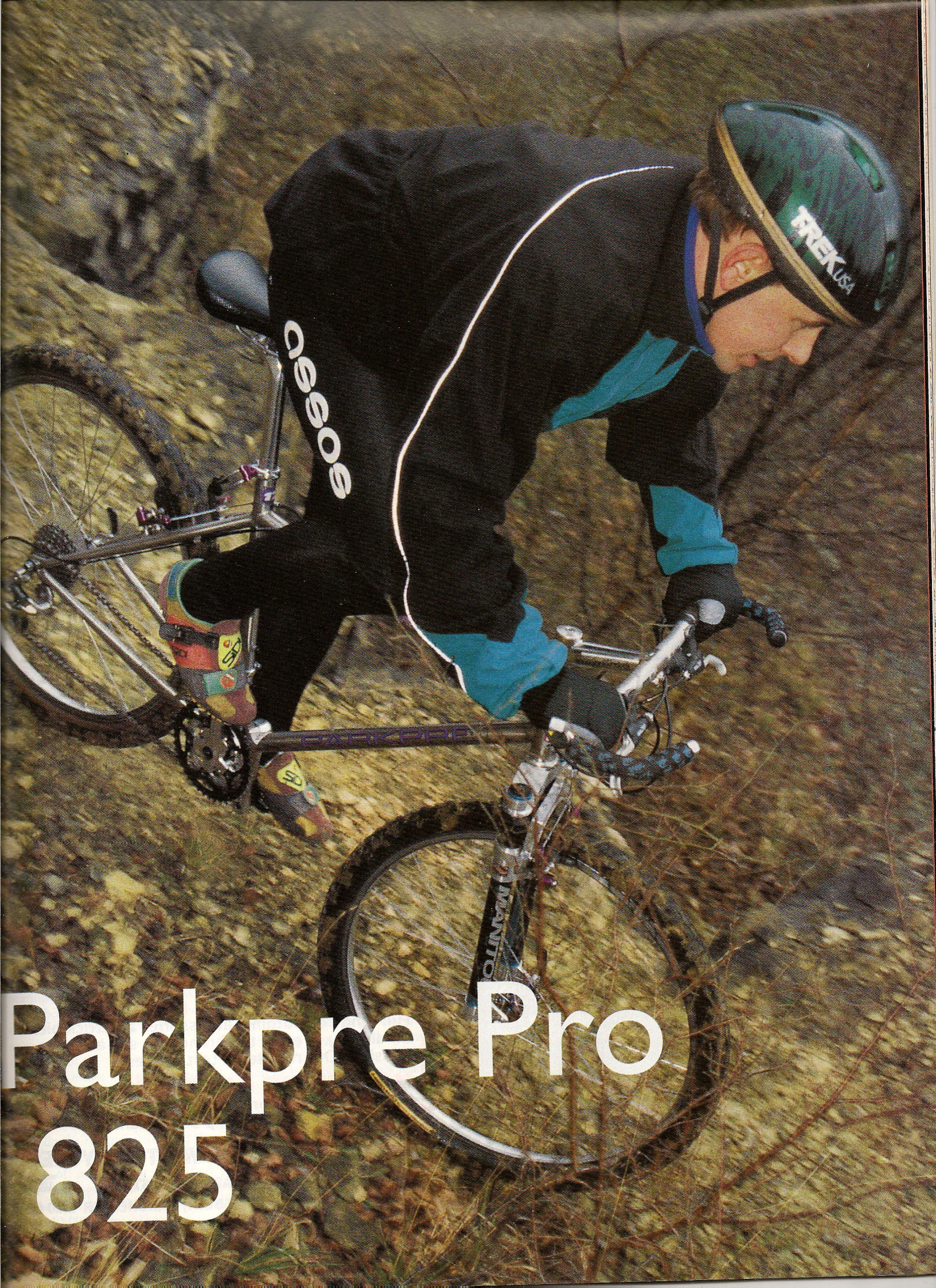
Pro Rating * **Design 95%** **Detail 90%** **Finish 95%**

Transmission

It's quite unusual to see a bike with a full Deore XT drivetrain these days. Gripshift usually gets a look in (not fitted to Parkpre's two top bikes), but the Pro 825 was fitted with our favourite shifters, Deore XT Rapidfire Plus. They may be slightly heavier than Gripshift but they offer more reliable shifting in the filthy conditions of UK winters. We tested the 825 over a three month period from late summer to early winter. The gears remained crisp and precise for that time after the initial cable stretching period. Deore XT offers an excellent gear range, adequate for all but the fastest pedalling.

Parkpre Pro 825

WEIGHT 25.5lb **PRICE** £1,669 **DISTRIBUTOR** Cambrian Tyres ☎ 01970 626777 * **FRAMESET** - FRAME Tange Ultimate Superlight (1960g/4lb 5.5oz) **FORKS** Choice of Rock Shox, Manitou or Tange - Manitou 3 fitted (1374g) **HEADSET** 1.125in allen key lock nut (136g) * **TRANSMISSION** - **CRANKSET** Shimano Deore XT 22,32,42 (694g) **DERAILLEURS** Shimano Deore XT (235g rear, 133g front) **SHIFTERS** Shimano Deore XT Rapidfire Plus (385g) **FREEWHEEL** Shimano Deore XT 8 speed 11-28 **CHAIN** Shimano **PEDALS** OnZa clipless specced **BOTTOM BRACKET** Shimano cartridge (310g) * **WHEELS/TYRES** - HUBS Pulstar sealed cartridge RIMS Araya RM395 **SPOKES** Stainless butted **WHEEL WEIGHT** Front 903g/rear 1480g **TYRES** Continental 1.9in/2.125in (735g) Kevlar specced **TUBES** Butyl (139g) * **BRAKES** - BRAKES Critical Racing fitted (174g), Dia Compe VC5s specced **BRAKELEVERS** Shimano Combi * **FINE DETAIL** - HANDLEBARS Zoom 22in fitted (155g) Forged PFR bar specced **STEM** PFR chromoly 120mm (350g). Aheadset specced **BAR ENDS** PFR full bend alu (198g pr) **GRIPS** PFR clear specced **SADDLE** Parkpre (264g), PFR Ti specced **SEATPOST** Kalloy 350mm (280g) **SEATBOLT** alu quick release (35g), allen bolt specced * **GEOMETRY** - **TESTED:** BB to top of top tube 16in (listed size 17in) • Standover height 29in • Head angle 71 degrees • Seat angle 71 degrees • Top tube length 22.75in • Wheelbase 41in • Rear end 16.75in • Bottom bracket height 12in



Parkpre Pro 825

PHOTOGRAPHY BOB SMITH



Pulstar straight pull hubs make for strong and stress reduced wheel lacing, but finding replacement spokes can be tricky.

A superior grade of steel means that the thin wall tubes are both tough and responsive.

downhills, where a bigger outer ring would be useful.

**Pro Rating * Specification 95%
Function 95%**

Brakes

Our '94 test bike had Critical Racing brakes. The '95 version has Dia Compe's excellent VC5 calipers with aluminium bolt caps. Though the purple anodised Critical Racing option was an image boost, I didn't find their function superior to Dia Compe's units. All the cable routing was efficient and slotted along the top tube for ease of maintenance.

**Pro Rating * Specification 90%
Function 90%**

Wheels

One of Parkpre's main marketing features is the use of Pulstar straight pull hubs on all their top bikes. They're nicely finished, they boast low maintenance, sealed cartridge bearings and they look great. We've never been totally convinced about the straight pull spoke idea. In principle, it makes for strong and stress reduced wheel lacing. In practice, it means that if you break a spoke you're unlikely to find a replacement in your local shop.

The freehub was sticking sporadically during the test period and the bearings developed some play after a couple of months, but the wheel build was good and we were impressed with the durability of the Araya RM395 rims. They suffered

plenty of hard knocks but always trued easily back into shape.

We've always been impressed with Continental's tyre range. The test bike had a 2.125in Pro 1 on the back and a 1.9in Cross Country on the front. The '95 bike comes with Leader Pro Kevlar Cross Country. The Pro 1 is one of the best traction climbing tyres on the market and the Cross Country a superb edge gripper.

The wheel and tyre package was not light for a £1,669 bike. Kevlar beads in the '95 tyres will help, but you still have hubs and rims of only moderate weight. The '95 hubs diet a little by going to an aluminium nutted skewer set rather than the Shimano QRs fitted on the test bike.

Pro Rating * Wheel spec 80% Tyre spec 95% Build 90%

Comfort & Detail

Several items have changed on the '95 model of the bike we tested. The handlebar is a forged aluminium job that weighs a claimed 112g! (we have yet to see a bar that weighs that little and survives more than half a race season). The stem is a new Aheadset version of the PFR chromoly model fitted. The seatpost is a new double clamp design and the saddle is a titanium railed cutaway model. Finishing componentry on a bike at this price has to be quality stuff and we're pleased to see these upgrades happening. Our test bike was well specced but not outstanding. The 22in handlebar was too narrow for

some, but the bar ends were top quality and the seatpost long enough, at 350mm, to allow even the 17in bike to stretch to a six footer. Riders around 5ft 9in-5ft 10in felt most at ease. Pedals were on Za clipless.

**Pro Rating * Specification 90%
Function 90%**

Handling

The Parkpre Pro 825 proved to be a real favourite among our test riders. Its two biggest assets, in our opinion,

are the remarkable resilience of the frame tubes and the ground hugging character of the tyres. The lively ride was tamed by the Manitou fork and a degree of 'give' in the bar assembly and saddle/seatpost that helped to inspire confidence at high speeds. Despite its ready-to-race appeal, the neutral handling of the front end meant even beginners were filled with confidence, commenting on its fast steering through twisting singletrack.

When we first looked at the geometry package, we were slightly concerned about the listed 72/72 degree frame angles. A 72 degree head angle can make the steering very nervous. However, we measured the head angle at a tad under 71 degrees with the Manitou fork fitted and just over 71.5 with a 395mm rigid fork fitted. The steering was still lively, but never disconcertingly so, and the relaxed seat angle meant that taller riders could sit well over the back wheel and maintain a longer stretch than the 22.75in top tube suggested. In a nutshell, the 825 was equally well balanced over every type of terrain. If we were to look for highlights, fast and narrow singletrack would figure highly.

Pro Rating * Slow technical 90%

Fast downhill 85% Uphill 90%

Cross-country 95% Singletrack 95%

Summary: Parkpre Pro 825

For an XT equipped chromoly race bike, £1,669 is a lot of money. In the '95 marketplace, it's up there with the likes of Marin's Team Titanium. However, in handling terms, it's as good as any bike we've

come across over the last few months, and better than most. That includes machines costing way over the two grand mark.

Our test bike was the '94 version. The only problem after three hard months was a sticking freehub and loose hub bearings. Pulstar's '95 hubs boast better bearings. The other changes between the selling seasons are small but nevertheless significant. In short, they make the '95 model Parkpre Pro 825 into a sound and serious expert level race bike (though we'll reserve judgement on that 112g bar).

