

T E S T

BATTLE VR MAC-STRUT

*Big country
suspension bike*



It is now possible to purchase a top-performing, full-suspension bike from the big brands for about the same price a frameset would cost from a cottage-industry builder. This move towards affordability is a good thing, but for some enthusiasts the sticker price isn't their prime motivation. For dyed-in-the-wool mountain bikers, riding the back country is an integral part of life. They could never be happy riding a two-wheeled, off-road appliance made in some foreign land by cigarette smokers who do their job because they need to eat regularly. That would be unAmerican! Apart from that, most discerning riders can tell the difference between a mass-produced and hand-built bicycle.

We can't really argue with that logic. Throw a leg over a bike that has been hand-built by a person who lives and breathes mountain bikes and you know there's something more than a couple of wheels and a bunch of Shimano components underneath you.

The Battle VR illustrates this point. In profile, the aluminum-tube, interrupted-seat-tube, MacPherson-strut suspension bike shares similar lines with a dozen other brands, but anyone with a dash of savvy could recognize that there is more here than meets the eye. Where the big brands use stamped plates to reinforce the frame, Battle uses elegantly CNC-machined versions. The VR's rear suspension, like some mass-produced bikes, is rectangular alloy tubing, but Battle's swingarm and compression strut could be classified as industrial art. Each machined junction is sculpted to carry the loads in a most eye-pleasing manner. The VR's blue/gray and black finish is a comfortable respite from the garish jewel colors, polished silver and Judy jive that cover dealers' floors. Yup, the Battle VR Mac-strut has soul.

WHAT ABOUT THAT BATTLE MAC-STRUT?

Like most interrupted-seat-tube designs, the Battle's seatpost mast is heavily gusseted with aluminum plates that double as upper shock mounts. Rear suspension duties are handled by a 1.5-inch-stroke Fox Alps-4 air shock (delivering about 2.75 inches of rear wheel travel). The VR's dropped top tube adds generous standover clearance to the frame, and a

long section of seat tube above the bottom bracket accommodates a host of derailleur and chainring options. Welding and construction on the 6061 T-6 frame is superb. All pivots ride on permanently lubricated composite bushings, including the robust Horst Link dropouts.

Up front, a three-inch-travel Manitou Mach 5 and an aggressive Maxxis 2.1-inch tire are the bike's front line of defense.

HOW DOES THE BATTLE RIDE?

The Battle VR hails from the Rocky Mountains in southern Wyoming, yet rides like an East Coast trail bike. The front end slices and dices and feels steep in the head angle. The VR really comes into its own in the twisty stuff. Test riders found that the Battle responded best to a mix of out-of-the-saddle attacks and a brisk, carve-'em-up cornering style. Traction was available in abundance, especially in rough, loose terrain. The max trax could be attributed to the active Mac-strut suspension and Maxxis' gluteous rear tire.

Our medium-sized Battle had a long, 23.5-inch top tube, but its wheelbase was a standard 42 inches. The bike got its nimble handling not from its wheelbase or top tube, but from a steep 71.5-degree head angle and slackish 72.5-degree seat angle. The upright front end made for quick steering, while the laidback seat geometry kept the saddle in the right place as its rider transitioned from a seated to a standing position.

At speed, the VR held a line through the rough stuff and was neutral in a slide. Although it's not a perfect downhiller (it hunted around at speed), whatever the VR gave up at Mach velocity was compensated for at singletracking speeds. The Battle bobbed and weaved like Muhammad Ali. In the twisty stuff, the fun factor was pegged at ten.

Climbing on the VR was very agreeable. On vertical climbs the Battle's rear suspension didn't wobble or flex (and test riders could feel only a slight amount of suspension sag under power—an active suspension trait). Unlike many suspension rides, the VR invited quick hardtail-like jumps.

Native American: The Wyoming-built Battle VR has the nimbleness to thread its way through the badlands and the mettle to put its head down and gallop when the opportunity presents itself.

WINNING THE SUSPENSION BATTLE

Fox makes the best air shocks in the biz, but MBA's test crew would have preferred Fox's coil-spring Vanilla shock for the Battle. As good as the Battle's rear suspension was, a coil-spring shock would have delivered a far more posh feel to the back. Mac-struts are, by nature, slightly progressive systems. Adding an air spring exaggerates the rising rate, resulting in a harsher feel over the big hits (when the damper is set correctly for low-energy impacts).

The Manitou Mach 5 fork surprised every MBA test rider. The Manitou was perfectly sprung for the VR and soaked up most of the trail debris. We set the fork's adjustable damping at three clicks in with the preload all the way out. The Battle VR would have been a top suspension bike only a year ago. Today it's a great under-three-inch-travel suspension bike (we are getting used to three to five inches of rear travel). For cross-country racing, the Battle is just right.

WHAT MBA THINKS ABOUT THE BATTLE

MBA's testing crew gave the battle an A as a cross-country mount and a B+ as a NORBA racer. There isn't very much we would change about the VR. Its Shimano (with GripShift) component selection was nearly perfect. The suspension was well balanced and the handling was perfectly suited to ripping through singletrack. The Battle breaks no new ground in the suspension war, but its sum is greater than its parts.

BATTLE INFORMATION

The Battle VR is available in 16-, 18- and 20-inch sizes. Framesets cost \$1475 with Fox ALPS-4 shock (Risse Racing and Stratos dampers are options) and can be ordered in cream soda metallic (our choice), black, yellow, and red and dark emerald green metallic colors with black rear sections. For more info, call Battle at (307) 327-5952 or write 'em at P.O. Box 510, Encampment, WY 82325. □

