Project Bike

Part 2

We began this project with the idea of trying to put together a bike that had as much Canadian content as was possible, something that immediately caught the fancy of everybody we mentioned it to. However, somewhere along the way it also evolved into a personal bike for me - such hardship.

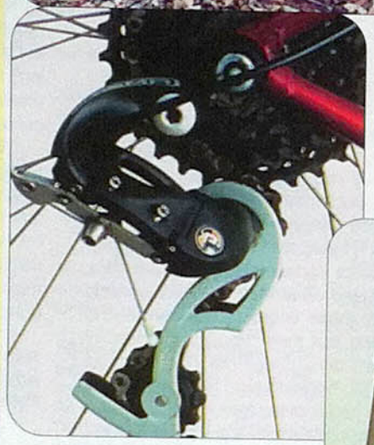
Let me explain: I am actually embarrassed to admit that I have not owned a mountain bike of my own for a few years now and, even more damning, none of the ones I owned previously were Canadian - pretty bad for the editor... In my own defence, I would like to say that it didn't happen intentionally this way; what with always riding review bikes, I never got around to deciding on what I wanted for myself (and my older bikes were gathering dust, so why not give one to my brother-in-law and ...). This project was a perfect opportunity to rectify that problem, plus the bike would become a platform for future product testing (so why do I sound like I'm making excuses?). Whatever the reason, I got the brass ring.

As soon as that happened, the project became of even greater importance to me (funny how a little self-interest sharpens your attention), and I was plunged into the world of trying to decide what I wanted. Since I wanted steel, and to try out the new Reynolds 853 tubing, we started looking at who could build the frame to my specifications. There are a number of Canadian companies working with 853, including Dekerf and Norco, but I decided to go with someone more local to me who does custom work - Hugh Black of True North.

Hugh has been building for 4 years now, with a variety of materials, including Aermet. He was very much in favour of using Reynolds, saying that it was a particularly strong tubing, well suited for the large frame I need (I'm just under 2 metres tall). To be truly Canadian, we could have possibly gone with Canadian aluminium, from someone like Devinci, but that would have been a stock bike, since there is no one building custom aluminium frames (if we are mistaken, let us know!)

Once the material was decided upon, it was time to work out the details of what I wanted in a bike. This is the best part of getting a custom bike - working with the builder, trying to describe what it is you want in a bike. My preference has always been for stiff bikes that climb well, with quick steering. I also like to be stretched out on a bike more than many people, so a long top tube was important. The bike would have front suspension, so the geometry had to be designed with that in mind. I didn't get too much into discussing frame angles, chainstay length and the like - I feel that is something best left up to the builder. In some ways, this is the true test of a framebuilder - can they take your somewhat nebulous (and often contradictory) desires and turn them into something that meets your demands?

Hugh delivered in spades. My True North was meticulously finished, with extremely clean joins, so that the tubes flowed together. 853 was used throughout, with the exception of Hugh's signature seat stay bridge - a piece of aerodynamic aircraft cromoly steel. Ritchey dropouts were used at the rear end. Another nice touch was the sculpted, extended seat tube. As per my requests, the 21.25" seat tube was married with a 24" top tube (both are the effective centre to centre lengths, since the bike has a sloping top tube). The chainstays were a short 16.5", while the overall wheelbase was 42". The head and seat angles measured 71.5 and 71 degrees respectively.



Top:
The final (?) product.
Above left:
Sachs Plasma rear derailleur.
Above right:
Strange brakes
Left:
Allan Metalcraft stem.

What this gave me was a nimble, but stable bike, that climbs like stink - thanks to the short stays. It is a bike that inspires confidence in the rider. As I rode it more, I found myself attacking steep slopes that I might normally have already mentally given up on. The bike also impressed me by being remarkably surefooted in technical sections. I always felt that I could point it in the direction I wanted to go and there would be no backchat! You know what I mean: the bike seems to want to go one direction, while you are trying to steer it in another. Not so on the True North.

By now it should be apparent that I am very impressed with this bike. However, it is not perfect. One of the things that makes this bike such a joy on hard, smooth trails is the rigidity of the frame - due to both the 853 tubing and the short stays. On the other hand, extended riding on rough ground did beat the rider up. This was particularly noticeable when riding at high speed across a grass field - the many lumps and bumps you normally run into in such terrain had me bouncing around pretty good. This is, unfortunately, part of the trade off one has to make in order to get that quick handling and climbing capability.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this article, the idea with this bike was to try and use as much Canadian content as possible. We were actually able to do pretty well in this department. Vancouver-based component manufacturer Race Face supplied one of their cartridge headsets, handlebar, their superb XY seatpost, a cartridge bottom bracket and Turbine LP crank and chainrings. From Cycle Dynamics (also Vancouver) we received a 12-32 8 speed titanium cogset. Allan Metalcraft from Brantford, Ontario manufactured the stem, and Strange Cycle (Brantford as well) provided the brakes. We had also intended to use Canadian-made hubs, but the company who was going to supply them (Underworld of Montreal) pulled out of the hub business, so we are still looking for a suitable replacement.

Of course, there were a number of pieces to the puzzle that we could not source in Canada. For derailleurs, the new Sachs Plasma units were used (see sidebar review). Sachs also supplied the chain and the grips. Mavic SUP rims were shod with Hutchinson Python tires - tires that have become favourites of mine because of their excellent traction and cornering ability. The only downside to the Python is that it is a bit narrow for loose or sloppy going. Pedals were tried and true Shimano SPD's. Since the True North was put together it has been used to test three forks already, but the fork we spec'd with was the Rock Shox Judy XC - painted to match the frame. It is a solid, reliable choice, maybe not as plush as the Marzocchi's, but it gave a balanced feel to the bike.

So how much would the bill come to for a bike spec'd like this? (Note: some of the the stuff we put on the bike will be going back to the manufacturers, and we will be constantly changing equipment as it comes in for testing) Well, keeping in mind that a custom bike always adds at least 30% to the price, we pegged it at about $3200. The biggest chunk of that was the frame - with the custom paint job it worked out to about $1450.

This project proved that, as Canadians, we have a lot to be proud of in the bicycle industry. Manufacturers such as the ones we showcased on the Project Bike are just the tip of the iceberg, as far as Canadian talent goes.

We wish to thank everyone who helped to make this Project a reality: Raceface, KMI (Sachs, Huchinson), Allan Metalcraft, Bell Sports Canada, Strange Cycles, Reynolds and True North.

SACHS PLASMA DERAILLEUR

Plasma is Sach's top-end rear derailleur, designed for the competition crowd. It is extremely light – under 200 grams – and has some unique design ideas. The light weight is a function of the plastic body and D.I.R.T. – Direct Response Technology. Direct response refers to the fact that the Plasma has a unique cable routing system that eliminates a barrel adjuster. The cable and casing feed directly into the derailleur body and the cable wraps around a pulley before being secured with an anchor bolt. Another major difference from the industry standard Shimano is the mounting of the upper jockey wheel in-line with the lower derailleur bolt, which allows it to maintain a constant distance from the cogs. Suggested retail on the Plasma is $189.

I used the Plasma with both Sachs and Grip Shift shifters, and had no problems – I have been told that it works equally well with Shimano trigger shifters. The derailleur is extremely finicky, but once it is set up properly supplies very crisp and precise shifts. I had spoken earlier in the year with Alison Sydor, who races on Sachs stuff, about her experiences with it. Alison said that she had had problems with early versions not having a strong enough spring, and the chain skipping on rough trails. That has since been addressed, and none of our testers had a problem with skipping.

Two potential problems with the Plasma (neither of which I experienced) are the lack of adjustability (no barrel adjuster, remember?), and breakage – that plastic body is pretty flimsy, compared to aluminium. The first is a bit of a non-issue, since a properly stretched cable will not need much adjustment (plus you've got the shifter adjusters), and to address the second concern, Sachs has released rebuild kits. Remember – we are talking about an ultra-light derailleur, so there is a necessary weight vs durability trade-off.

I am very impressed with the Plasma so far, we'll just have to see how it stands up to a few more months of riding.

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