



MOUNTAIN BIKING TEST

3 *Luxury* MOUNTAIN BIKES

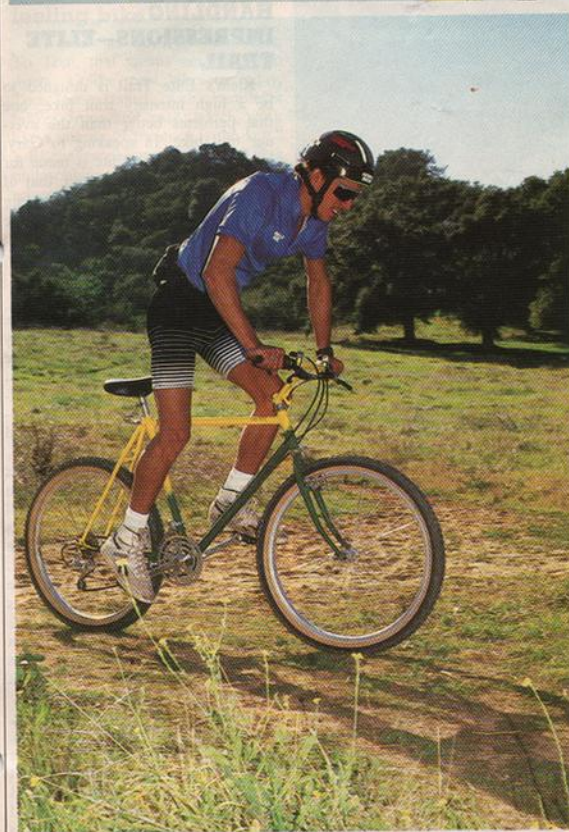
TESTING THE ELITE BREED OF \$1000+
MOUNTAIN BIKES.

The names of Benz, Porsche, and Ferrari loom in the history of finely crafted automobiles. In the world of cameras, it's Leica, Hasselblad, and Nikon. And in the realm of mountain bikes, no names reign like those of Ritchey, Fisher, and Klein.

They don't sell the volume of most other companies. They make and sell only limited quantities. Though the price tags are on the high side, we'd wager that their profit margins aren't as high as many of the mass marketed bikes. And they seem to shun following fads, unlike so many others in the recent past. What they do, which they all do very well, is to build

highly crafted, well thought out, and excellent performing bicycles. They're light, quick, strong, agile, and responsive. They're the summation of years of research, development, trial, and a little error.

In the opinions of many, the task of testing three expensive bikes, ones that are, for monetary reasons, out of reach of most riders, is a waste of time. After all, why not test a bunch of econo-bikes, those more people are apt to buy? Well, we will, but we feel that too many have made the mistake of testing inexpensive bikes without knowing what else more expensive bikes may have to offer.



It's our hope that by testing bikes that may (or may not) be too expensive for the masses, we can note the benefits that paying a little extra may offer.

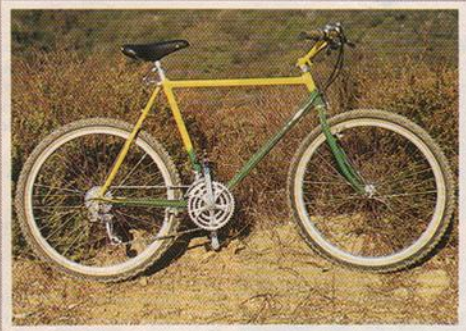
"Bikes known to be good performers"

When choosing *luxury* mountain bikes to test, we looked for several special attributes. First, we wanted bikes that have stood the test of time. In mountain bikes, that might only mean more than a year or so. Next, we wanted bikes that have helped shape the industry itself. We wanted bikes that are production bikes (or readily available), rather than testing custom bikes. We'll save that for another time. And lastly, we wanted bikes known to be good performers so that we might bypass much of the fact finding testing that goes into "new bike" evaluations. We wanted to dig in and see what makes these bikes tick!

Gary Fisher is thought to be one of the founders of contemporary mountain biking. He and his buddies blazed the northern California trails with hybrid bikes long before many of us had any desire to ride bicycles off-road. They'd throw their bikes into a pickup and drive to the top of a mountain. One such mountain hosted most of these rides, Mount Tamalpais. Fisher chose to name one of his finest bikes after the nickname for this now famous spot, Mt. Tam. This would be one of our test bikes.

A former compatriot of Gary Fisher, Tom Ritchey is another of mountain biking's founding fathers. Tom gained early attention as a road racer many years ago, though not nearly the attention his frame building has received during the past few. Designed as an "expedition vehicle," the Commando is an excellent example of Ritchey's quality craftsmanship. This would be our next test bike.

The Fisher Mt. Tam is a beautiful blend of high performance cyclery. It's rideable, raceable, and comfortable out of the box, and is a pleasure to look at.



Name:	1987 Mt. Tam
Manufacturer or Distributor:	Fisher MountainBikes 1421 E. Francisco Blvd. San Rafael, CA 94901 (415) 459-2247 approx. \$1300
Suggested Retail Price:	20"
Size Tested:	16, 18, 19, 20 and 21"
Sizes Available:	Real Teal and Yellow/Green blend
Colors:	
Frame:	
Head Angle	69.5 degrees
Seat Angle	72.5 degrees
Top Tube Length	22 3/4"
Seat Tube Length	20.5" (center to center)
Chainstay Length	17 3/4"
Rake	1 3/4"
Wheelbase	42 3/4"
Bottom Bracket Height	11 1/2"
Weight	28.5 lbs (actual)
Tubing	Tange Prestige, quad-butt, fillet brazed
Components	
Front Brakes	Shimano New Deore XT cantilever
Rear Brakes	Shimano New Deore XT U-brake
Levers	Shimano New Deore XT with reach adjusters and dust covers
Handlebar/Stem	formerly Bullmoose, soon to be Fisher Rhino stem and Fisher Buldge flat bars
Grips	Grab-on
Headset	Shimano New Deore 600 EX
Seat Post	Suntour XC QR
Saddle	Fisher Lambda
Drivetrain	
Front Derailleur	Shimano New Deore XT
Rear Derailleur	Shimano New Deore XT SIS
Shifters	Shimano New Deore XT SIS
Crankset	Shimano 175mm
Chainring	26/36/46
Freewheel	Shimano New Deore XT
Gearing	12/14/17/20/24/28
Chain	Shimano New Deore with Stay-Tuff protector
Pedals	Shimano New Deore XT
Wheels	
Rims	Araya RM-20 silver
Hubs	Shimano New Deore Sealed QR
Spokes	double butted stainless
Tires	Fisher Fatmax 202

Gary Klein first gained his reputation as one of the country's premier road racing frame builders. He's one of the few builders skilled enough to manufacture high quality frame sets made of aluminum. His designs, such as his Elite Trail, reflect influences from an area far north of our other two test bikes. They're high-tech as well as high performance. The Elite Trail would round out our field.

Rather than officially testing the bikes *against* each other, as a shoot-out generally will do, we've chosen to offer most opinions of the bikes based on their *own* merits.

HANDLING IMPRESSIONS—ELITE TRAIL

Klein's Elite Trail is designed to be a high intensity trail bike, one that performs better than the average trail bike. In speaking to Gary, he offered that the Elite is made for hard core trail riding, and that if someone wants a racing mountain bike or bike for the street, buy one of his other bikes!

"It's light, quick, responsive, and light"

We couldn't agree with him more. What the Elite does well, extremely well, is trail ride. On a tough, single track creek ride of ours through tight and twisty terrain, it performed better than anything else. It's light, responsive, quick, and light (oh, did we say that already?).

The aluminum tubed frame gives the rider a very different feel from a chromoly frame. Though not all aluminum bikes do, the Klein is lighter and more responsive, due greatly to its mere 26 pound weight. But it's more than just weight. The Elite feels short. Its wheelbase is just under 42 1/2 inches, its top tube barely 22 inches. Though it has a 69 degree head angle, you'd guess it to be 71 degrees by the ultra-quick steering.

As good as it is for trail riding, it must compromise some other area. The only area the Elite Trail steps back in is racing-type riding. If fast downhill is your cup of tea, spend your money elsewhere. If loaded touring is desired, you'll probably do better with a longer bike. But if

you're not a racer, but love to trail blaze, here's one to put on the wish list.

HANDLING IMPRESSIONS— COMMANDO

Tom Ritchey's Commando is a great combination of the refinements of today and the original (or nearly) design of Tom's early mountain bikes. It feels best going up or down hill, of which steepness doesn't matter. It climbs well and descends even better; smooth, stable, and predictable.

"The most sturdy feeling bike"

It's built as an *expedition* bike. To Tom, that means not having to worry. Unlike most bikes of today, Tom has stayed with cantilever brakes front and rear, which work like a charm. "Efficiency is the key," a Ritchey spokesman told us. These philosophies constantly restate themselves as you ride the Commando. It was the most sturdy feeling bike of the three, of nearly all we've ever ridden for that matter. This feeling of strength, not rigidity, is surprising, considering the double butted tubing. Many triple butted and quad butted framesets don't fare as well.

Just as the Klein rode so well on tight single track, that was the one area the Ritchey didn't like as much. On the same tight and twisty creek ride, it seemed to "buck" in the tight places. Though it was rideable, it prefers an open trail to a tight one.

HANDLING IMPRESSIONS— MT. TAM

We found the Mt. Tam to be a very good all around bike. There isn't much we felt it couldn't do. It cornered very well, climbed admirably, descended smoothly, and handled single track without complaints.

"A great all purpose machine"

The easiest way to describe its handling characteristics is by calling it a well rounded bike. The high headset and extended Bullmoose bars create an easy to steer front end (a new stem and bar combo will be

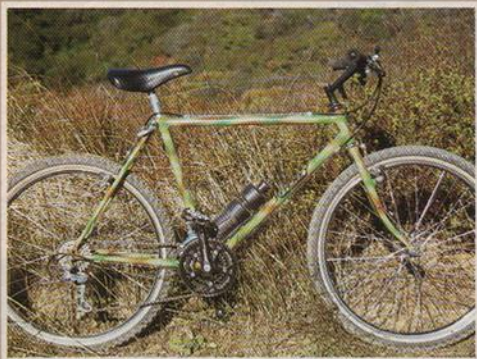


featured later in 1987). It's pretty light at 28.5 pounds, and features a 69.5 degree head angle and a 72.5 degree seat angle, slightly steeper than in past years. This makes for a great all purpose machine.

As rounded in handling as the Mt. Tam is, we feel most riders would be quite happy and very well suited with a Mt. Tam. For that same

The Fisher comes standard with a Shimano Biopace chainring set, a sealed cartridge bottom bracket, and single bend crimpless chainstays.





Name: 1987 Commando
Manufacturer or Distributor: Ritchey USA
 1326 Hancock City
 Redwood City, CA 94061
 (415) 368-4018

Suggested Retail Price: approx. \$1300
Size Tested: 19"
Sizes Available: 17-25"
Colors: Camouflage

Frame

Head Angle 69 degrees
 Seat Angle 73 degrees
 Top Tube Length 22.5"
 Seat Tube Length 19"
 Chainstay Length 17.25"
 Rake 2"
 Wheelbase 42 3/4"
 Bottom Bracket Height 11.5"
 Weight 28.5 lbs
 Tubing 4130 chromoly double butted,
 built by Tom Ritchey

Components

Front Brakes Shimano New Deore XT cantilevers
 Rear Brakes Shimano New Deore XT cantilevers
 Levers Magura Shorty
 Handlebar/Stem Ritchey Twinstrut (Bullmoose style)
 Grips Grab-on
 Headset Shimano New 105
 Pedals Suntour XC-2
 Saddle Specialized Lambda
 Seat Post Strong

Drivetrain

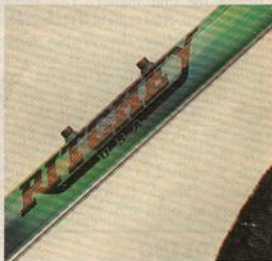
Front Derailleur Shimano New Deore XT black
 Rear Derailleur Shimano New Deore XT black
 Shifters Shimano New Deore XT black
 Crankset SR FXC
 Chainring 28/38/48
 Freewheel Shimano 600 EX
 Gearing 13/15/17/20/24/28
 Chain Shimano Uniglide

Wheels

Rims Araya RM 20 black
 Hubs Suntour XC sealed black
 Spokes Wheelsmith stainless
 Tires Ritchey Force K Duro



The Ritchey Commando is a wonderful example of the "Northern California" mountain bike, the style so many have tried to copy. The steeper the hill, up or down, the better the Ritchey likes it.



The Ritchey uses Shimano Deore XT cantilevers front and back, a bullet proof braking set-up.

reason, it doesn't cater to specific areas as much. Though raceable, it leans more to high performance riding. If you do a lot of different types of riding, here's a great bike. If you're an extremist, you may prefer something more oriented to your specific needs.

COMPONENTRY

One thing you certainly don't have to worry about in this price range is the componentry. Until 1987, these bikes have used a mixed bag of the Suntour XC Gruppo and the Shimano Deore Gruppo equipment, with some Shimano Dura-Ace and Suntour Cyclone tidbits thrown in.

All three of the bikes have shifted over, almost entirely, to Shimano's New Deore XT Gruppo. Their SIS derailleurs work quite nicely, once adjustments are dialed in. They're also quite light and strong. As of now, they're the best. And though they're using the other New Deore XT items, such as levers, hubs, and pedals, it remains to be seen how they'll perform in the long run. All three makers are continuing their testing.

The Mt. Tam and the Elite Trail use a New Deore XT cantilever in front and a U-brake in back. Though none dispute the Deore XT cantilever as being one of the finest on the market, the jury is still out on the U-brake. Opinions vary from "loving it" to "hating it," with most falling in the "it's all right" category. If further testing proves it to be inferior, look for a return to Suntour Roller Cams in the rear. As we mentioned before, the Commando uses cantilevers front and rear.

All other componentry used is top-notch, such as Strong or Suntour XC seatposts, Araya RM 20s, Grab-On grips, and Shimano and Sugino cranks. From the big stuff down to the nuts, bolts, spokes, and nipples, you don't have to worry about a thing.

THE COST JUMP

So does a name and the best componentry make a bike cost \$1000+? Yes and no.

Yes, the best componentry and a fancy builder's name is a start at breaking the \$1000 mark, but no, that's not all. In the case of our three bikes, there are many more



The Commando's handling was smooth and very predictable, most noticeable and important at high speed.

things involved in the bike (and the price tag).

When you buy a name in mountain bikes, just as in cars or cameras, you're buying a belief in that maker. The belief is that the maker not only knows what goes into a good bike but why. This allows him to make subtle changes, adaptations, and alternations that go into a first class bike. A term used in automobile engine building, *blueprinting*, describes when a motor is built up to exact specifications, taking great care in quality control and building procedures. That is exactly what you're getting in these mountain bikes: Blueprinted bikes. Refinements such as fillet brazed joints, aren't found on many inexpensive bikes. Used throughout on these bikes (lugless on the Ritchey and Klein), they make for strong, sleek, and pristine joints.

Tolerances can be kept tighter, as in chainstay length, when bikes are built by quality hands, rather than mass production lines. The tubing is kept straighter, more direct, and therefore stronger. In the case of chainstays, they can be made relatively short without compromising strength or tire clearance. Ovalized

or square tubing, such as on the Ritchey and Klein, respectively, solve space/strength problems encountered by other makers. Cable guides and routing are generally smoother and straighter. On the Klein, the cables are routed through the tubing, an engineering feat that cleans the lines while protecting the cables at the same time.

Use of special frame materials is another important consideration of the luxury bike. Of course, it's easy to see that Gary Klein uses special tubing. He's opted for the use of big, oversized and heat treated aluminum. He believes it to be a superior material, being both lighter than chromoly (26 lbs. complete) and just as strong. Gary Fisher has chosen Tange Prestige quad butted tubing for the Mt. Tam. It's one of the strongest and lightest (i.e., expensive) chromolys for bicycle building available. It weighs in at 28.5 lbs., light by chromoly standards. Tom Ritchey uses his version of the more standard 4130 double butted chromoly, but he's been able to retain strength, rigidity and lightness unheard of in other bikes of the same material (also at 28.5 lbs.).

(Continued on page 58)

WHO NEEDS A BIKE LIKE THIS

The first and most important reason to purchase an expensive bike like this is if you *want* one. They're among the best of the best, and by writing a check, you can have the best.

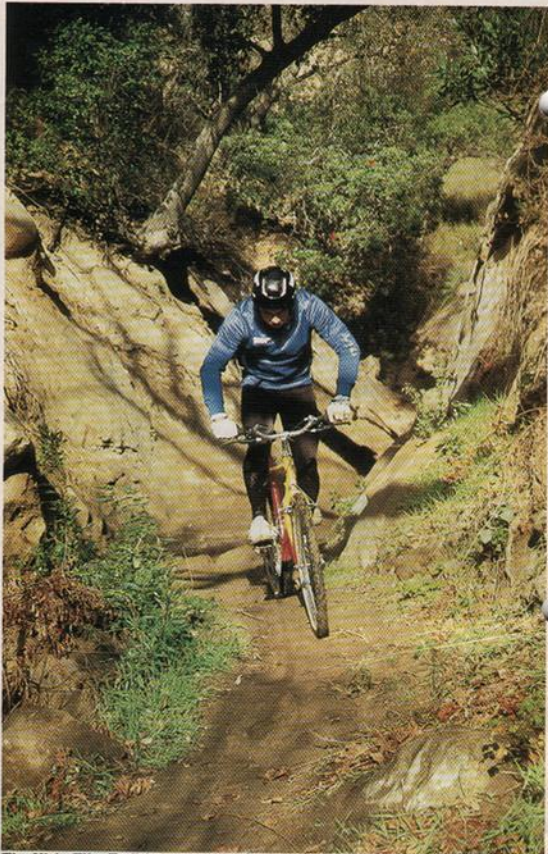
The second, and more practical reason is if you're an enthusiast looking for an upgrade in performance. Just as a Ford or Chevy will drive where you need to go, and a Polaroid or a Kodak camera will take pictures, there are lots of mountain bikes that will get you around. It's *how* you want to get around that also matters. If you're interested in a machine that will last as long as you will, and then some, then consider one of these.

One can look at the expenditure as an investment. Fishers, Ritcheys, and Kleins hold their values better than any other current mountain bikes. This is even the case with custom bikes. Very often a custom bike made for one person may be a toad for most others. Resale, should you ever find the need, will generally be very high with one of these bikes. Likewise, there's a lot less need to change bikes with one of these, especially with the lifetime warranties available. Components are much more likely to change drastically than frameset geometries in the future, so periodic upgrades of equipment might be all you'll ever need.

SUMMARY

The Ritchey Commando is a great bike, we feel lending itself to the high performance rider. It's a bike that feels just as at home going 5 mph as 35 mph. It has got more braze-ons for mounting things than you'll certainly ever need. If you're looking to go exploring, this truly is an expedition vehicle. If you're into heavy trail riding through tight and tricky terrain, we'd recommend looking elsewhere.

If that same tight and tricky terrain is what you do ride mostly, then check out the Klein Elite Trail. It's a nimble bike that is quick and fun. It's a very responsive bike that goes



The Klein Elite Trail is just as the name implies: an elite bicycle for serious trail riding. It's distinctive aluminum feel, quick handling, and attention to detail make it a pleasure on any trail.





Though the radial spoked front wheel looks neat, and we didn't have any problems, we'd opt for a cross pattern for any serious pounding.



where you direct it with very little objection. It also performs well in most high performance riding, though we'd not recommend it for those interested in competing. Get the race version for that.

The Fisher Mt. Tam is one of the best all around mountain bikes available today. It's more versatile than we had expected. It works quite well for trail riding, high performance riding, and occasional racing. If you ride a variety of terrain, look no further. On the other hand, if you're a technician in one specific area, your money may be spent better on a more specially designed bike.

Unless you've recently won the lottery, the decision to buy a premium priced mountain bike won't be an easy one. It should be well thought out, using reason and rationality (with a liberal sprinkling of emotion and personal desire). If you ride even but once a week, we think you can justify it. We know, we certainly have! ☆



Name:	1987 Elite Trail
Manufacturer or Distributor:	Klein 107 S. Prairie Road Chehalis, WA 98532 (206) 282-3305
Suggested Retail Price:	approx. \$1300
Size Tested:	17" (sloping top tube)
Sizes Available:	various
Colors:	yellow and /red blend
Frame	
Head Angle	69 degrees
Seat Angle	71 degrees
Top Tube Length	22"
Seat Tube Length	17" (20 1/2" center top top)
Chainstay Length	17 1/4"
Rake	2"
Wheelbase	42 1/2"
Bottom Bracket Height	11.5"
Weight	26 lbs
Tubing	Klein Power Tubing heat treated high strength
Components	
Front Brakes	Shimano New Deore XT
Rear Brakes	Shimano New Deore XT U-brake
Levers	Suntour XC Sport
Handlebar/Stem	flat or short rise bars with Suntour XC stem
Grips	Grab-on
Headset	Shimano New 105
Pedals	Shimano New Deore XT
Saddle	Cinelli
Seat Post	Suntour XC
Drivetrain	
Front Derailleur	Shimano New Deore XT
Rear Derailleur	Shimano New Deore XT
Shifters	Shimano New Deore XT
Crankset	Shimano
Chainring	24/34/46
Freewheel	Shimano
Gearing	13/14/17/21/26/32
Chain	DID
Wheels	
Rims	Araya RM 20
Hubs	Shimano New Deore XT QR
Spokes	stainless (radial spoke pattern)
Tires	Ritchey Force