

BRIDGESTONE MB-1

Fat Tires Meet Drop Bars ■ By John Kukoda

The mountain bike's ability to conquer terrain previously inaccessible to cyclists only partly explains its popularity. Many of you, our surveys say, also see the ATB as an attractive alternative to drop handlebars, narrow racing saddles, and toe clips and straps.

Bolstered by this fact, many gonzo-come-lately manufacturers are profitably producing cosmetic ATBs with fat tires and flat handlebars. These bikes are about as well-suited for the rigors of off-road cycling as a Schwinn Varsity would be for the Coors Classic.

At the other extreme is the \$880-\$925 Bridgestone MB-1, which at first glance looks more like a sporty road bike than a high-performance off-road machine. It has the narrow Turbo saddle favored by the Tour de France gang, featherweight, 335-gram XC-Compe pedals with toe clips and straps, and (here's the real shocker) a drop handlebar.

Bridgestone isn't the first to put drops on

an ATB. Ibis and Wilderness Trail Bikes sell off-road drops, and many riders have simply installed road bars after bending them to a more suitable shape. But other than the MB-1, we're aware of only one other production bike, REI's mountain/touring model, which is spec'ed with drop bars.

The Case for Drops

I've had drops on my ATB for a year. I think they're superior to flat bars for all but technically demanding trials riding, where slow-speed control and frequent lifting of the front wheel is necessary. Otherwise, the variety of hand positions that drops afford makes long rides on any terrain more comfortable.

On rocky descents, drops help spare the upper body from jackhammer-like jolts. Your wrists won't flex as much, and your bent elbows will serve as shock absorbers. You can damp shock even more by padding the upper half of the whole bar with foam

grips split lengthwise and wrapped with tape. This cushions your hands without making the bar too fat and squishy. The MB-1 comes with unwrapped bars so customers can pad as they wish.

Drop bars work better on ascents, too. Seated climbing is less tiring because when gripping the drops your wrists are in line with your pull on the bar, thus reducing strain on your chest and arms. For less strenuous climbing, placing your hands on the brake lever hoods or bar tops allows you to sit up and breathe freely, just as it does on a road bike.

When out of the saddle with hands on the drops, the slight outward flare of the Bridgestone (and most other) off-road bars provides adequate wrist clearance. As with seated climbing, the upper body is in a more comfortable position than with flat bars, and the wrists are aligned with the direction of pull. Stand and climb on a road bike with your hands on the tops and you'll see what I mean. It's not as natural or comfortable as gripping the hoods.

Unlike a road bike's bars, which are set low for aerodynamics and often gripped about the hoods, off-road drops are high and close to the rider. This allows you to cycle for long periods on the drops without strain. If you find yourself searching for alternate hand positions during most ATB rides, you're a good candidate for drop bars.

As opposed to road bike position, the bar top should be about 2 inches higher and 1-2 inches closer. (For extended road riding on an ATB, lower the bar for a more aerodynamic position.) To attain the correct bar location, use a stem with a high rise and short extension. Simply installing drops into a stem made for flat bars will result in a low, stretched-out posture that's inappropriate for anything but time trialing.

Until this year, there were 2 stem



PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN P. HAMEL



Slightly flared, heat-treated drop bars on the Bridgestone MB-1 aid comfort, control, and climbing efficiency.

choices: the high-rise Nitto Technomics, which provided the correct position but looked delicate and inappropriate on a burly off-road bike, and the costly chrome-moly models made by Cunningham, Ibis, and others.

The MB-1 goes a different route. A col-

laboration between Bridgestone and Nitto has resulted in an affordable, alloy "DirtDrop" stem for the equally new Nitto (or Ibis or Cunningham) drop bars. According to Bridgestone USA's Grant Petersen, the DirtDrop stem and bar will also be sold retail.

Positive Performance

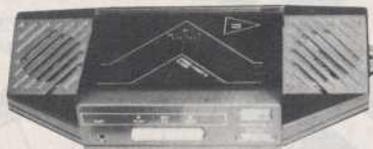
Even without its drop handlebar, this Bridgestone demands attention. The steep, tight frame geometry makes it look more like a road bike with fat tires than a typical ATB. But improved performance, not cosmetics, is the purpose of the design. Ultra-short, 16⁷/₈-inch chainstays position the rear wheel under the rider for superior traction during standing or seated climbing. A 73-degree seat angle puts the rider in the same efficient position over the pedals that's typical of a road bike. In front, a steep, 71-degree head angle combines with 2¹/₈ inches of fork rake to provide both stability and maneuverability at speed. The bike willingly stays on course during fast descents, although it demands more of the rider than "Marin style" ATBs with 68- or 69-degree head angles.

At slower speeds, our test riders liked being able to steer around obstacles without experiencing wheel flop—a common problem with slack-angled ATBs. On tight, single tracks, the MB-1's precise handling made it easy to stay in the tire tracks of the rider ahead. Thanks to the tight wheelbase and relatively light weight, lifting the front wheel and jumping the bike was easy.

The lugged MB-1 frame features forged

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front and vertical rear dropouts and is built of heat-treated Tange Prestige off-road tubing.

Prestige has 25% more tensile strength than other chrome-moly, which allows for tubes with thinner walls. This reduces frame weight to 4.95 pounds (without the 1.85-pound Tange chrome-moly fork), or about 3/4 of a pound less than a typical chrome-moly ATB frame. Our complete test bike weighed only 27.4 pounds, due in part to light wheels built with Araya's hard-anodized, 485-gram RM-20 rims and Ritchey's Force wire-beaded tires (675 grams front, 725 grams rear).

Unlike a heavy-gauge chrome-moly or fat-tube aluminum frame, the MB-1 flexes noticeably during hard pedaling, although this doesn't seem to detract from its climbing performance. On the contrary, the frame's resilience may aid control on rough trails, since the rider is less affected by each jolt. The springy frame also means you don't have to reduce tire pressure to improve shock absorption, so snakebite flats and dinged rims are less likely.

Bridgestone obviously labored over the details that distinguish a great bike from a good one. Slotted cable stops are one example. This feature becomes a godsend when cables seize after a ride in the slop.

Without it, relubricating the cables is an hour-long chore that requires disconnecting the brakes and derailleurs, then readjusting them. With slotted stops you simply slip the cables free, slide the housing down, and lubricate. Five minutes, no tools, no sweat.

Another example: What part of an ATB wears out first? No, not the rider. It's the headset, but the MB-1 has a Tange G-Master roller bearing model that virtually eliminates pitting in the lower bearing races. The top locknut even includes a rubber gasket to keep sweat from entering and forming a bothersome chemical element, "neverbudgium," between the aluminum stem and steel steerer tube.

Clickless Shifting

Because it has SunTour bar-end shifters, which aren't indexed, the MB-1 is one of the few '87 ATBs that doesn't click. It does, however, use an AccuShift-compatible XC-9000 rear derailleur, which, thanks to the tight tolerances necessary to work well in index mode, also shifts extremely well with the friction lever. The freewheel is a narrow-spaced 13-28 Ultra-6, necessary because the rear wheel is built with minimal dish to maximize strength.

The freewheel/chainring selection is

geared toward the fit and fast. The 26-inch low gear can be softened to 22 inches, however, by replacing the 28-tooth granny ring with a 24, the smallest size accepted by the SR crank. The 100-inch high gear results from pairing a standard 13-tooth small cog with a 50-tooth outer chainring.

Bridgestone also bucked a trend by fitting the MB-1 with cantilevers instead of the more popular roller cams or U-brakes. We appreciate the greater mud clearance cantilevers provide, although we wish Bridgestone had spec'ed a different model. The Dia-Compe 982 cantilevers are easy to adjust, look great, and stop okay in dry conditions. But replacing the wimpy cables and housings with serious off-road material would improve performance considerably, and cable adjusters should be added to the brake levers.

When these brakes get wet, beware. I began to administer my own last rites while waiting for the brake pads to take hold on one particularly nasty descent. Brakes are not a trivial part of a bicycle. Fortunately, lousy pads are easily and inexpensively replaced. Petersen assures us that during this model year the MB-1 will switch to Dia-Compe's 1-piece shoe/pads, which are a great improvement. Meanwhile, we strongly suggest replacing the stock pads

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with Aztec, Kool-Stop, Mathausser, or the new models by Dia-Compe and Shimano. All have superior pad compounds that work well when wet.

Finally, if the MB-1 sounds like your kind of ATB, act fast. Petersen says Bridgestone plans to offer only 300 this year. ●

HIGH SPEED STABILITY	4
LOW SPEED MANEUVERABILITY	4
CLIMBING	4
COMFORT	4
FRONT SHIFTING	4
REAR SHIFTING	4
CONTROL LEVERS	4
BRAKES	4
OVERALL MECHANICAL	4
OVERALL ROAD FEEL	4

BRIDGESTONE MB-1

Distributed by: Bridgestone Cycle (USA), Inc.
15003 Wicks Blvd.
San Leandro, CA 94577

Country of origin: Japan
Suggested retail price: \$880-\$925

Sizes available: 45, 50 (tested), 53, 57 cm, center-to-top
Weight: Frame, 4.95 lbs.; fork, 1.85 lbs.; complete bike, 27.40 lbs.

Frame: Tange Prestige heat-treated chrome-moly main tubes and stays; Tange chrome-moly fork blades; lugged construction; vertical rear dropouts; 2 pairs of downtube bottle mounts; slotted cable stops

Wheelbase _____ 105.4 cm; 41 1/2 in.
Seat tube _____ 50 cm; 19 5/8 in.
Top tube _____ 56 cm; 22 in.
Head angle _____ 71 degrees
Seat angle _____ 73 degrees
Chainstays _____ 42.9 cm; 16 7/8 in.
Bottom bracket height _____ 29.2 cm; 11 1/2 in.
Fork rake _____ 5.49 cm; 2 1/8 in.
Trail _____ 5.57 cm; 2.19 in.

Wheels

Hubs _____ SunTour Cyclone, sealed bearings, low-flange, quick-release, 126-mm rear axle
Spokes _____ 36, 14-gauge stainless, 4-cross front and rear
Rims _____ Araya RM-20, 26x1.5 in., hard-anodized
Tires _____ Ritchey Force wire-bead: Racing, 675-g front; Duro, 725-g rear

Drivetrain

Derailleurs _____ SunTour XC-9000 rear, XC-9000 front (reverse-action XC on test bike), with ratchet-action bar-end shifters
Chain _____ DID Lanner
Crankset _____ SR FXC-T310, 28/38/50T round chainrings; 175-mm crankarms

Components

Pedals _____ SunTour XC-Compe, black cage, with nylon clips and straps
Headset _____ Tange G-master alloy, roller-bearing, black
Seatpost _____ SR MTE-300, 330-mm, 1-bolt
Saddle _____ Sella Italia Turbo, black suede
Bar/stem _____ Nitto/Bridgestone DirtDrop, heat-treated alloy, 43-cm width at curve; Nitto/Bridgestone high-rise DirtDrop
Brakes _____ Dia-Compe 982 cantilevers front and rear, with Royal Compe racing levers

	28	38	50
Gearing in Gear Inches	13	x	76
	15	48	66
	17	43	58
	20	36	49
	24	30	41
	28	26	35