

The evolution of the fat-tire mountain bike

By **Bjarne Holm**
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Fat-tired bicycles have cropped up all over Sisters Country. Where did these all-weather, all-terrain bikes come from?

Reports of bicycles traveling over the surface of frozen rivers during the gold rush in Alaska date back to the late 1800s, but when bicycles were invited to race on trails groomed for the Iditarod sled dog race, a revolution in fat-tire bicycle design took off.

The trail for the Iditarod sled-dog race covers a distance of over 1,000 miles from Anchorage to Nome. The first Iditarod race was launched in 1973, inspired by brave mushers who shuttled life-saving serum to Nome during a diphtheria outbreak in 1925, at a time before flights to Nome were possible.

It was back in 1986 when Joe Reddington, considered the father of the Iditarod sled dog race, approached the mountain bike community to suggest they stage a long-distance mountain-bike race along trails that had been prepared for the sled-dog race. The first mountain-bike race, the Iditabike, took off in February of 1987, covering a distance of 200 miles from Big Lake, north of Anchorage to Skwentna and back, following a course across frozen lakes, swamps, clear-cut survey lines and along the Susitna and Yentna Rivers.

The first race was won by Dave Zink in 33 hours and 50 minutes. All competitors rode on skinny mountain-bike tires, which forced cyclists to

push their bikes on foot over long distances. The finish time also reflected the concern that such long distance events were pushing beyond human limits of endurance, so a six-hour mandatory layover was required at the half-way checkpoint. In 1989, race organizer Dan Bull, along with Mark Frise, Roger Cowels and Les Matz, launched the first bike expedition along the 1,000-mile length of the Iditarod trail, reaching Nome in 21 days.

Competitors soon experimented with custom-made bikes.

Dave Ford of Girdwood, Alaska, combined two rims together so each wheel could be fitted with two tires. There was even the famous "Six Pack" bicycle, ridden by Roger Cowels in the mid 1990s, sporting three tires on each wheel. On hard snow, only the larger center tire contacted the ground. The other tires came into play when trail conditions softened. As one can imagine, the bike was very heavy and unwieldy.

The first improvement available to all competitors came in the early 1990s with the advent of 44-mm wide Snowcat rims, developed by Simon Rakower of All-Weather Sports in Fairbanks, Alaska. The Snowcat rim was the widest rim that would fit within the frame of a standard mountain bike, and it allowed cyclists to lower tire pressures for a wider tire print without the tendency for pinch-flats to occur. Tire manufacturers soon developed bigger tires to use with the Snowcat rims, but were



PHOTO BY PHOTOJUNKIE

Sun Spider AT fat-tire bicycle, featuring 26x4-inch tires, aluminum frame, and a 2-speed hub, on display at the Carnegie Science Center in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

still confined within the standard frame of a mountain bike.

In the late 1990s Ray Molina in New Mexico commissioned 82-mm wide rims to go with 3.5-inch wide tires, called the

Chevron, or "Mexican Sand Tires." They were used on custom-made bicycles for a tour-guide business in deserts. Mark Gronewald and John Evingson, both from Alaska, visited the Interbike Trade Show in Las Vegas

and saw Milona's creation. Immediately they both realized the potential for using such wheels on snow.

By February of 2000 they worked together to design

See **FAT TIRES** on page 15

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Coffee & Doughnuts with Bob and the Boys: This support group, for men only, takes place from 9:30-10:30 am the second and last Friday of the month.

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