

DEFINING THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN CYCLIST

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DESCEND KILIMANJARO BY BIKE
WITHOUT GETTING SHOT BY THE RANGERS

A RIVER OF STONE?
BRING ON THE SOLSTICE

A MATTER OF SUBSTANCE
THE CRAFT OF INDEPENDENT FABRICATORS

13 1/4 HOURS IN THE OLD PUEBLO
STILL WORTH WRITING HOME ABOUT

be doing, and I actually wasn't doing ground work anymore."

This was in 2005, and two months after Tomac approached Smith, Smith agreed. With Bradbury still present in the background, Smith and Tomac set to work.



Eli and John Tomac pose for a portrait on Eli's dirt bike before the start of an American Motorcyclist Association supercross race in Phoenix. The elder Tomac spends his days operating his ranch in Cortez, Colo., and coaching his son.

January 2011: Near his home in Lincoln, Neb., Joel Smith loads a box van with gear, tires, tools, wheels, stems, forks, shocks and several sizes of the latest Tomac frames. He gets in the driver's seat and aims the hood southwest. Two days later, he parks in Phoenix.

Five years after the rebirth of Tomac Mountain Bikes, Smith meets Tomac at the base of South Mountain to demonstrate the merits of the new Supermatic 120 and Diplomat cross-country bikes. Journalists and bike testers from England, France, Germany, Spain and the U.S. attend one of two weeklong media camps.

"Johnny and I do a lot of ride testing," Smith said. "We're not just riding around in circles. We're trying different setups, different forks and swingarms and triangles."

Smith described a research and development team that consists essentially of himself and the transcendent racer and modifier, John Tomac, whose sensibility defines each bike—its stated purpose his only compass.

In the case of the Diplomat, the compass pointed toward a full-suspension 29er cross-country bike that handles like a traditional 26-inch XC.

"We wanted to take advantage of the 29-inch wheels, but with more of a 26 ride," Smith said. "If you ride this after another 29er, you'll feel that it's more nimble and quicker.... We expect this to be our biggest seller."

Smith explained the science. It measures a little over 43 1/2-inch wheelbase on a medium frame, "relatively short," he said. This is accomplished with 17 1/2-inch chainstays and a braced seat stay. "I'm a big believer in the seat stay brace. It retains stiffness like a rigid," Smith said. The Diplomat sports 71- and 73-degree angles on the head and seat tubes, respectively.

"We rode a bunch of 120mm 29ers," Smith said. "We looked first at a 67-degree head angle like other 120 29ers ... but it was wheel floppy. Nobody else has done suspension development on a 29er; they are all guessing. This was quite the engineering project; this is a

different beast."

Yeah, a beast spawned from a man whose "diplomatic" style has been bridging disciplines for decades ... and a bike-building philosophy was borne of a blond kid from Owasso, Mich., whose needs for equipment have always crossed categories.

Tomac ultimately decides what works, what goes into production, what achieves the goal. And he does it the way he's always done it: He rides and rides and rides.

"What I find interesting in development with Johnny is that, since I have to get involved in the nitty gritty, he just says, 'This is what we need,'" Smith said. "I get too close to it. ... Where I'm physically rebuilding shocks and putting it together, he's going out and riding it, bringing it back and saying yay or nay. ... When we ride together, that's how we usually get ideas for new bikes. We talk about our bike line, hone it down to specific categories. With the Supermatic, we wanted to design a 24-pound 120, and that's what we did."

"I really focus on ride quality," Tomac said.

Bikes in the late '90s gravitated toward multiple categories: heavier, full-suspension bikes for downhill ... lighter hardtails for cross-country. Today, as evidenced by rises in popularity of all-mountain riding in general, and races such as the Downiesville Classic, riders increasingly expect their cross-country bikes to climb well, handle gracefully and still kill it on the descents—Tomac's trademark combination.

Yet rather than boost the hype of his brand by investing in a massive marketing machine, Tomac is conspicuously invisible, preferring to put his talent toward research and development.

Today, Tomac bikes make their way to a rising ridership via 40 international distributors in locations as geographically diverse as Hungary, Slovenia, China and Chile. Sales for the small bicycle brand are strongest in Europe.


"Our top markets go Germany, United Kingdom and the U.S.," Smith said. "The U.S. is only about 10 percent, and most of that is in Colorado. ... The high-end market is in Germany. I go on these Tomac rides in Germany, and I have the crappiest Tomac out there. ... They are very particular. ... They want the best."

Tomac still competes now and again. He showed up at Kamikaze Downhill on Mammoth Mountain in 2004, won it, came back and did it again in 2005. He was 37 and 38, respectively.

Last year, Tomac again ventured away from his home in Cortez, Colo. He did not have to go far to compete in 12 Hours of Mesa Verde outside Durango, Colo. Tomac's Local Legends team included former pros Travis Brown, Daryl Price and Dave Wiens. At the end of a neck-and-neck battle, Tomac's team took a close second to the Directory Plus/Zia team, comprising current pro Andrew Ferguson, Cale Redpath, Miles Venezia and Nick Gould.

Much of Tomac's time now is dedicated to operating his 760-acre ranch where he lives with his wife, Kathy, and their youngest son, Eli, who is an up-and-coming motocross superstar. Eli Tomac leaped into the limelight last May, when he won his professional motocross debut. As his father did before him, Eli turned pro at age 17.

"We have practice tracks at home and a small gym," John Tomac said. "It's a pretty good set-up for training. I just try to teach him how to do the work that has to be done to be successful."

Eli learned about victory from quite possibly the most successful man ever to ride upon two wheels. Whether he's on a BMX track, a wooded singletrack, a desert double-track, a paved road—or pushing the boundaries of bike design—John Tomac is still winning. 

easy to see how Tomac amassed more trophies in more events in more places than anyone before or since.

In 1991, Tomac was inducted into the Mountain Bike Hall of Fame ... but he did not stop racing, or winning. For the next seven years, he remained a fierce competitor. In 1998, he broke his collarbone; in 1999, he broke his wrist. He still managed a bronze in the 1998 X Games; but after 10 years of BMX and 15 years of successful mountain and road bike racing, Tomac knew the crux of his career had passed, and he retired from full-time, professional competition.

During his years on the circuit, Tomac met a few bicycle-building insiders whose expertise contributed to the continuing evolution of bike design. One such person was Doug Bradbury of Manitou Springs, Colo., a garage framemaker turned entrepreneur, who founded Manitou Bikes. In 1992, Bradbury licensed Manitou's name and products to Answer, Inc., which continues to produce Manitou suspension forks to this day (both the Answer and Manitou names have been owned by Hayes Bicycle Group since 2006).

"I met Doug some time around '89. ... I was riding Yetis, and he was helping me with the original Manitou forks," Tomac said. "I chose the Manitou over the Rock Shox at that time because I thought they suited me better for racing both cross-country and downhill. I also really liked Doug, so working with him was just a natural fit for me. I worked closely with him on the original development of that product line, especially in the race application of the original prototypes."

Bradbury and Tomac continued to work together throughout Tomac's career. When Tomac retired, he and Bradbury founded Tomac Mountain Bikes and entered a new kind of competition—a free market—and a market that in two decades had feathered into multiple markets. Gone, at least temporarily, were the days of one bike does all; downhill and cross-country had diverged.

Tomac and Bradbury's first bike was a downhill—the Magnum 204. For the next few years, they crafted other frames, and sales climbed like a rigid on red rock. The majority of those sales came from Europe, where Tomac was (and is) widely regarded as a demigod.

"Cycling there is like baseball here," Tomac said. "There's real history there and people have an appreciation for it beyond what you typically see in the U.S."

In consequence, perhaps, 75 percent of Tomac-brand bicycles journeyed across the Atlantic from Bradbury's small Colorado shop. Tomac's role was what it always had been: conceiver, tester, knower of what works.

Within four years, sales increased nearly beyond the output capacity of Bradbury and Tomac. In an effort to keep up with demand, Tomac signed a licensing agreement with American Bicycle Group, which at the time oversaw marketing and manufacturing for Merlin and Litespeed.

"In Taiwan, production was starting to get so good. ... Specialized was doing everything there," Tomac said. "We felt like it would be better."

But production of Tomac Mountain Bikes stalled, and John Tomac was not satisfied with the outcome.

"They weren't planning the product line or focusing on what



At a January 2011 press camp in Phoenix, Ariz., which hosted mostly foreign journalists, Tomac glides the new carbon fiber Supermatic 120 through the area's famously rugged terrain.

the next model was targeted to do," Tomac said. "The Litespeed guys didn't really know what to do with the brand."

On to plan B, which meant enlisting another old friend: Joel Smith, director of product development at Manitou, and a former amateur racer and extreme sports journalist turned high-level guru of manufacturing.

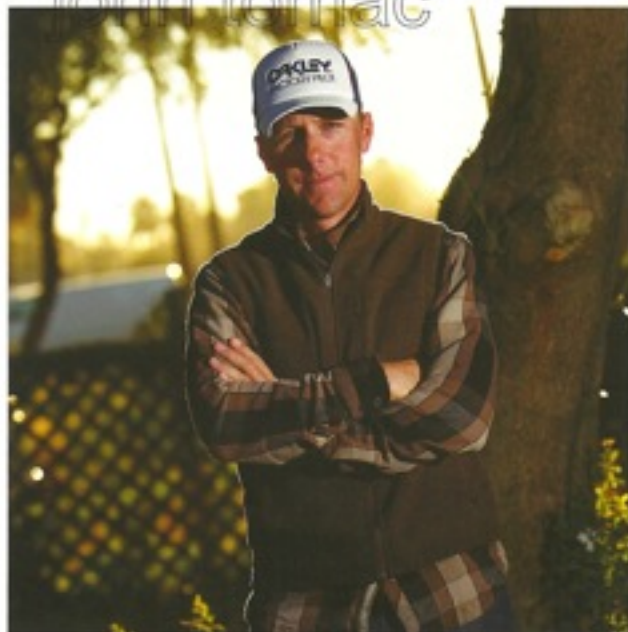
Smith recalled the first time he met Tomac during a race in the late 1980s. On a series of switchbacks, Smith turned and spit over a ledge, only to pull focus on Tomac passing under the spittle's trajectory.

"The first time I met him, I think I spit on him," Smith said. "He didn't say anything. ... I ended up riding along with him for about 10 minutes, and he was a super nice guy. He really was my hero at that time, and somehow, even after knowing him all these years ... he has the qualities that sustain your initial feelings about him."

Smith graduated from University of California, Los Angeles, and wrote first for *Dirt Rider*, a motocross magazine, and then *Bike Magazine*. Later he joined the staff at Manitou. He worked his way into product development, where he interfaced directly with Tomac. That's where he learned the ins and outs of Taiwanese manufacturing.

So when things failed to pan out at American Bicycle Group, Tomac brought the brand to Smith.

"I told him I'd shop the brand around," Smith said. "We'd get on conference calls with companies that had a road bike line but not a mountain bike line ... with money guys who didn't know the bike industry or bike guys who knew nothing about money. There was no clear fit. One day Johnny said, 'Why don't you do it?' I hadn't really thought about it. I had a good job at Manitou. ... I was in charge of sales, marketing and product development, and I worked with a great staff there. ... But in your life, you can get elevated beyond what you want to



Mountain biking legend John Tomac turned pro at age 17. Now 43, he has built a legacy of mountain biking history, with a line of bikes that bear his name.

Prestige Series as well as three national cross-country races.

Mongoose responded to Tomac's requests for better handling and agility and produced machines on which he continued to win. Consequently, Tomac's needs in competition came to govern the direction of the Mongoose line.

Mongoose unveiled its Tomac signature bike, which featured a radical move toward aggressive geometry—72- and 73-degree head and seat tubes, respectively—at a time when most frames were still essentially built along the slack lines of beach cruisers.

If Gary Fisher and Joe Breeze wrote Genesis in the gospel of MTB, then it might be said that John Tomac led the exodus. Mountain bike racing and mountain bike design were both finding their stride; and he was at the vanguard on both fronts.

"I recall working with Shimano on original index shifting, original SPD pedals," Tomac said. "I was able to test original Rock Shox, Manitou Forks and early generations of full-suspension frames."

Tomac affected bike design for Mongoose, and later Yeti, Raleigh and Giant. Today he designs his own brand.

"When I first started, we had old friction shifters, the kind where you move the cable and your bike might shift. ... I went from that to racing with 8 inches of travel," Tomac said. "I've seen the whole evolution. Ever since I started racing, I've been involved in product development."

Eighty-eight proved a watershed year for Tomac, who won the National Off-Road Bicycle Association championship overall title at Mammoth Mountain. He did it by amassing the most points in three distinct events: downhill, cross-country and slalom. While dominating in the dirt, he also earned accolades in the cycling family's older, more established member: road biking.

Tomac road raced professionally in the U.S. and Europe while



In 2006, Joel Smith took the helm of Tomac bikes, rescuing the brand from stagnation. Since then, Smith has worked tirelessly to market bikes that are worthy of the Tomac name.

simultaneously racing mountain bikes and consistently won at both. He became the U.S. Cycling Federation's National Criterium Champion, and Velo News voted Tomac the world's best all-around rider in 1988.

His cross-discipline successes continued over the next decade, and they came to define Tomac as a racer. These are the years for which he is famous. Opponents who lined up with Tomac knew that regardless of event or terrain, they were matching wits with an adroit and aggressive champion.

Throughout the '90s, Tomac staggered cycling fans with his ability as well as his unconventional equipment. Modern riders may recall Tomac's iconic "disc" wheel, a swirling billboard for his sponsor.

"It was not stronger," Tomac said. "My discs were reliable for 30 hours; then we could no longer race on them. They were more shock absorbing than standard three- or four-cross spoked wheels, and I guess that if you broke 40 mph ... they were more aerodynamic. Mostly they made a rad sound flying down the trail and were a huge marketing tool for Tioga at the time."

Tomac lived for a season in Belgium, the headquarters of his road sponsor. He continued to travel between hemispheres and win world titles on both dirt and pavement.

During Tomac's one year with Yeti Cycles, the company outfitted his bike at his request with drop bars, which became another iconic symbol of a racer whose talent was not bound by riding style. Tomac said he used drop bars in order to maintain similarity with his road rig.

That same year, he raced on the first Manitou forks, further distancing mountain bikes — and the sport in general — from their beach cruiser beginnings.

Among the 100 races in which Tomac competed in 1990 were road races such as the Tour of Flanders in Belgium and a week later, the Paris Roubaix. Looking at 1990 as a cross-section of his career, it's

Riding the Supermatic 120, Tomac Mountain Bikes' newest edition to the 2011 lineup, John Tomac shows a group of journalists how it's done during the company's press camp in January. Tomac helped extensively in the testing and design of the 120 mm travel carbon fiber bike.



a Pacific breeze. This attitude prevailed beyond California; it spread eastward.

Mountain bike races cropped up like California cacti. The need for manufacturers to make better all-terrain machines was now very real.

Tomac, who in 1986 switched from Mongoose's BMX team to its infant mountain bike team, recalls the late '80s as a time of prime product advancement.

"We really did not have things that were complete failures so much," he said. "Successes were more common. It was all evolving quite quickly back in the late '80s and early '90s. It was an amazing period for mountain bike development."

John Tomac the racer, mountain biking as a sport and mountain bikes as apparatus evolved together from that point forward.

Tomac hit the circuit at a time when Ned Overend and Joe Murray dominated the sport.

"They were the men back in the day ... the original kings, godfathers of the sport," Tomac said.

Tomac would later earn such monikers.

His first big win of 1986 took place on the East Coast. After winning the Ross Fat Tire Stage Race in Massachusetts, he went back to Los Angeles and won the L.A. Coliseum Supercross Mountain Bike Exhibition Race.

In 1987, he raced every mountain bike event in existence, which included hill climb, downhill, cross-country and, moving closer to his BMX roots, dual slalom.

Again that year he won the Ross Fat Tire Stage Race, and he tacked to his curriculum vitae wins at the Mountain Bike Action Super

STILL winning

HOW CYCLING CHAMP JOHN TOMAC
REVOLUTIONIZED THE GLOBAL CYCLING MARKET

Words by Phil Stake / Images by Brian Leddy

In the mid-'70s, a blond kid from Owosso, Mich., discovered bicycle racing.

Back then, "mountain bike" was a nebulous term the way "hybrid" is today. The difference is that a market for hybrids exists today.

In 1976, mountain bikes were made by just a handful of California renegades: Gary Fisher, Joe Breeze, etcetera. Fat tires ... beach cruisers ... smoke wafting away from smoldering coaster brakes ... Mount Tamalpais, north of San Francisco Bay ... most people know some version of the story.

In any case, these guys occupied a liberal fringe of cycling culture. Bikes they made lacked form. A mountain bike was a liger, a modified something with no clear identity.

None of this mattered to that kid from Michigan, of course—at least not until much later. John Tomac, or Johnny as he has been known among friends, competed in bicycle motocross races beginning at age 7.

"I always liked riding my bike," 43-year-old Tomac said recently. "There was a local BMX race when I was 6, and once I did that, I was hooked. My parents were supportive; they'd take me to races. Sometimes I'd travel with friends."

He pedaled around berms and over tabletops, flew across doubles. He was fast. In the misplaced words of Charlie Sheen, he was winning. By age 16, his talent was known. Tomac joined the Factory Mongoose Team. That year, he took the national BMX cruiser class title, which solidified his status as a serious competitor. The next year, at age 17,

he went pro.

The year after that—this was 1986—Tomac moved to Southern California, where those liger bikes from the bay had more than migrated; they had evolved. No longer mere cruisers with curtailed handlebars, derailleurs and gnarly tread, mountain bikes had flourished and found purpose.

In Los Angeles, for example, cyclists could escape smog and pavement. Modern machines were capable of taking them over the nearby San Gabriel and San Bernardino mountains, or in between them, through Cajon Canyon, and down into the Mojave. With enough stamina and sunscreen, in fact, they could keep going, across the desert, beyond Tehachapi Summit, down again, and up into the Sierra. ... The point is that roads and groomed tracks no longer bound cyclists, and the idea that they ever did dissipated like roost in

