



Photo: Peter Moyness

# ROLLING

**CALL IT THE COOLEST. CALL IT FOR CLOWNS. BUT BEST NOT KNOCK IT 'TIL YOU ROCK IT. FROM GLACIER RIDING IN ALASKA TO BOG BUSTING IN THE EVERGLADES, THE FORMERLY FREAKISH FAT BIKE IS SLOWLY INFILTRATING MAINSTREAM PEDALLING. INDEED, THIS CHUNKY MONKEY IS HIGHLY FUNCTIONAL, UNDENIABLY FUN AND AN ALL-SEASON REASON TO PUT SOME JUNK IN THE TRUNK**

# A FATTY

**BY VINCE HEMPSALL**



EVOLUTION AIN’T ALWAYS pretty. The hyena, the great white shark, *Tyranosaurus rex*: all at the top of their respective food chains and yet, oddly perhaps, each and every one is butt ugly. The same can be said for certain manufactured products. When was the last time you were like, “Damn! This internal combustion engine is beautiful!”?

The bicycle, though, that’s an entirely different story: A striking combination of sharp angles and supple curves. Functionality and grace. Hard metal and a soft seat. There is a reason the most romantic culture on earth considers *la bicyclette* to be feminine; it’s the Cinderella at the global-transportation ball. It is often called “the noblest invention.” Until, that is, you smack a four-inch-wide slab of rubber on each wheel, and then you’re stuck with a frumpy, fat-assed stepister.

The fat bike has recently seen a huge jump in popularity, and the thing is, whether it looks good or not, riding one is a good time. “When you first see a fat bike, you’re like, ‘Oh, that thing’s a pig. What can you really do with it?’” says Ramin Sherkat, owner of NRG Enterprises, a Nelson, British Columbia-based distribution company

**PLENTY OF FAT “FRANKENBIKES” HAVE COME AND GONE IN THE ENSUING YEARS, BUT IT WASN’T UNTIL 2001 WHEN ONE OF GRONEWALD’S CREATIONS CROSSED THE FINISH LINE FIRST AT ALASKA’S GRUELLING 1,700-KILOMETRE IDITASPORT IMPOSSIBLE THAT FAT BIKES GARNERED REAL RESPECT.**

that supplies mountain bikes and parts across Canada. “Then you get on one and you realize, ‘Oh wait. That’s right. This is a mountain bike...and I’m riding terrain I’ve never been on before.’”

And that’s the beautiful thing about the unseemly fat bike: it will take you where you’ve never been before, *plus* it breathes new life into your regular trails during the months you once relegated to spin class.

FAT BIKES have been around since the 1980s when a Texan named Ray Molina was fashioning super-wide tires that allowed him and his hombres to ride on sand. A decade later, Alaskan Mark Gronewald incorporated similar designs on his custom-manufactured bikes for snow and ice riding. Plenty of fat “Frankenbikes” have come and gone in the ensuing years, but it wasn’t until 2001, when one of Gronewald’s creations crossed the finish line first at Alaska’s grueling 1,700-kilometre Iditasport Impossible, that fat bikes garnered real respect.

Four years later Minnesota-based Surly Bikes launched the Pugsley, the first mass-

produced fat bike. It had loads of space between the fork blades and the stays to accommodate 65mm rims—which are about 15mm wider than standard rims—and a specially designed frame that solved the chain-rub problem associated with using wide tires. “It’s interesting to think back on how, at the time we introduced the Pugsley, most people inside and outside of the bike industry thought we were idiots,” says Peter Redin, brand manager at Surly. “Now many of those same folks think of us as pioneers...Fat bikes are not about fashion for us; they are about allowing us to extend the ride to places we couldn’t previously go on a bicycle. And it’s exciting that others are starting to see fat bikes in this same light and taking things in directions of their own.”

To be clear, a fat bike is not just wide tires stuffed into a regular frame. “Because the wheels are so big, you have to consider the constraints within the chain line,” says Ian Schmidt of Kona Bikes. “Some companies solve this by offsetting the rear wheel, while others build special symmetrical hubs.”

Today, there are dozens of companies manufacturing fat bikes and parts, but the biggest players are Surly,

seven fat bikes the following month.”

But that’s Vermont, where the skiing can’t even lick the powder-strewn boots of the Kootenays. Is fat biking destined to be a winter sport only in areas with either a shortage of epic pow or a plethora of sand? Certainly big events, like the Arrowhead 135 in Minnesota and the Northern Michigan Fat Bike Series, cater to a flat-land audience. “I used to live in Manitoba and there’s been a small core of [fat bike] riders there for the past 10 years,” says Paddy Humenny, who now works at Kootenay Cycle in Kimberley, British Columbia. “In places like the Midwest and Alaska, we’ve seen a steady increase in interest because there isn’t a lot to do in the winter.” Fair enough. But it wasn’t until Humenny moved to a mountain town with great downhill skiing that he took up fat biking. “I sold my truck last year, bought a Pugsley Necromancer and now I ride the five kilometres up to the hill to go skiing.”

Nelson resident Eddy Marcelet tells a similar story. He lives in a place that was voted “Best Ski Town in North America” by *Powder Magazine* readers, and he could care less because the winter riding outside his door is so damn good. “There are people out

there who could give three shits about skiing. Sure I snowboard and cross-country ski, but I have to drive to those areas,” he says. “When I first got on a fat bike [in 2012], I couldn’t believe what I was capable of riding. You’d just assume that they’re clunky and slow, but they’re actually super efficient and versatile.” Marcelet snowshoed the local downhill trails at the start of the season to pack them down, and then he rode his Carver Ti O’Beast for the entire winter. “I rode every day,” he says. “By the time I get back on dirt, I’m going to be a superhero.”

Others who are stoked about the year-round appeal are bike shops and distributors. “This coming year we booked three times more sales than last year, and that’s three times more than the year before,” continues NRG’s Sherkat. “Fat bikes are huge for bike shops because it allows them to move product every month. If I hadn’t seen the progression over time, I’d think it was a bit of a flash in the pan, but knowing the bigger manufacturers are getting into it means fat bikes will be around for a while.”

Indeed. So what if a skinny frame



## REQUIRED GEAR

- 1 large cottonwood stump
- 1 dual-headed mining rockhammer (with at least one sharpened tip)
- 1 nail for each player
- 1 or more drink(s) or beer(s) for each player

## RULES

1. Each player is assigned one nail.
2. Each player must manually push their nail into a fresh area on top of the stump (i.e. Not in a crack, previous hole, or other depression).
3. The round's starting order is determined by tossing an extra nail on the stump. The player facing the pointed end of the nail starts first.
4. Play begins and must always continue in a clockwise manner.
5. Each player's turn consists of a single swing at their nail with the tip of the rockhammer. Prior to swinging, the player must rest the tip of the rockhammer on the stump next to their nail. The rockhammer must be gripped behind the line on the rockhammer and with one hand. The swing must be done in one continuous up-and-down motion.
6. If the nail becomes crooked during the course of the round, the player is allowed to use their turn to strike the nail in a sideways-swinging manner to attempt to straighten it.
7. Ridiculing other players is permitted (and encouraged) provided it does not result in an infraction (see Drinking and Shotgun Drinking Infractions).
8. The player with the last nail down buys the next round of drinks.
9. Additional house rules may also apply at the discretion of Retallack Ownership.



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# OFFICIAL RULES OF NEGLIN™

## OBJECTIVE

1. To be the first one to pound in one's own nail. To win, the head of the nail must be flush or under the surface of the wood.

2. To drink or not to drink.

## DRINKING INFRACTIONS

1. Balking when hitting the nail (i.e. Not swinging in one continuous motion; not starting a swing with the rockhammer tip resting on the stump; or improperly gripping the rockhammer). Balkers automatically lose their turn once they have been 'called out' by a fellow player(s).
2. Sparking the nail. This infraction does not apply to players wearing dark sunglasses at night.
3. Playing out of turn or not in a clockwise manner. The infracting player automatically loses their turn.
4. Falsely accusing another player of any drinking infraction.

## SHOTGUN DRINKING INFRACTIONS

1. Placing a hand or other body part on the stump while any player's swing is in motion.
2. Placing a drink or other foreign object on the stump.
3. Dislodging one's own nail.
4. Hitting or touching another player's nail.
5. Interfering with another player's swing in any manner.
6. Conducting three 'drinking infractions' during the course of the round. Once the required shotgun is completed, the count resets to ensure the player is eligible for another potential shotgun.
7. Dropping the rockhammer. A gentle tossing of the rockhammer on the stump, for effect after a successful hit, is permitted.
8. Comparing Neglin™ in any manner to Hammerschlagen or Nagelspielen or otherwise disrespecting the game of Neglin™.
9. Falsely accusing another player of any shotgun drinking infraction.

## TAKE NOTICE:

The infracting player is not allowed to return to the game (and misses their turn(s)) until they drink or execute a proper shotgun. The rockhammer tip or an extra nail must be used to initiate the shotgun hole.

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Main photo: John Gibson

# FAT CAMP

Whether you prefer racing across Lapland tundra or drinking green beer in Gaylord, Michigan, a fat-bike event for you exists somewhere on earth — except British Columbia, so far. **BY VINCE HEMPSALL**

## LA RUTA DE LOS CONQUISTADORES



The world's first multi-day mountain-bike stage race now has a fat-bike category. Over the course of three days in October, riders cross the width of Costa Rica, a distance of 259 kilometres through five mountain ranges. It took the Spanish conquistadores 20 years to cover the same distance.

## WINTERBIKE VERMONT



Riders travel from as far away as Ottawa and Newark, New Jersey, to congregate for this one-

day social affair every February at Kingdom Trails in East Burke, Vermont, where they swill local beer around campfires, go on group rides and test their mettle in the six-person snow-cross race.

## YUKON ARCTIC ULTRA



This insanely frigid and epic race (sorry, survival fest), follows the Yukon Quest Trail near Whitehorse and is billed as "The world's coldest and toughest ultra." There are four distances—26, 100, 300 and 430 miles—and three divisions: fat bikers, cross-country skiers and runners. The average temperature for February in these parts is -20 C.

## NORTHERN MICHIGAN FAT BIKE SERIES



The first race series dedicated entirely to obese-tired bikes is here. From January through March, there are four races around northern Michigan including a "St. Fatty's Day" celebration in the town of Gaylord, which involves a two-hour race, and, well, beer.

## FAT BIKE CHAMPIONSHIP, JAPAN



Japan's Fat Bike Championship takes place near Toyota City

in May and involves a dress-up party, a mellow 15-km race and lots of mud.

## THE PLATTY FATTY



Every December, a night race around the snowmobile trails, singletrack and paths in the city of Platteville kicks off the Wisconsin State Fat-Bike Series. The 10-mile race starts at 6 p.m. and finishes with an awards ceremony and party. Headlights required.

## ROVANIEMI 150



This is the world's most-northern fat-bike

event—a 150-kilometre race near the city of Rovaniemi, Finland, which is also famous for being Santa Claus' hometown. Participants navigating their way through this part of Lapland need to avoid wild reindeer.

## FAT BIKE BIRKIE



Be sure not to miss this prestigious opportunity, March 2013 marks the one time each year where entrants can ride fat bikes on the famous American Birkebeiner Trail near Cable, Wisconsin. Normally bikes aren't allowed on these perfectly groomed nordic trails, but an exception is made for this social 40-km and 24-km race.

## ARROWHEAD 135



Since 2002, athletes have shown up in January to race 135 miles (217 kilometres) of the Arrowhead State Trail, a snowmobiling trail in northern Minnesota. It's non-stop, self-supported, and has a 60-hour time limit. Last year temperatures dropped to -37 C.

## IDITAROD TRAIL



This fat-bike and foot race follows the famous sled-dog route that begins in Anchorage, Alaska. There's a 350-mile category, which finishes in McGrath, and a 1,000-mile category that ends in the community of Nome and takes racers about 20 days to finish.

mounted on a pair of bloated tubes is reminiscent of pot-bellied pigs double-teaming a greyhound? The fat bike may look stupid, but the fact is it's smart. It allows you to embrace a sport you love year round; you can ride it straight out your door on roads, frozen rivers and tramped trails, and you'll never have to suffer early season numb bum again. Even if you're a die-hard skier, what better way to access backcountry areas like

Kokanee Glacier Park than pedalling on someone else's snowmobile track? "A fat bike will only set you back about \$2,000 instead of \$12,000 and you're substituting bananas for petrol," says Winterbike festival's Thibault. "But really it's about the passion. If you love biking, giving it up for half a year is a big sacrifice, even if you're shredding pow every day. By pedalling through the winter, it feels like the summer fun never ended."

Unlike true fads—the mono-ski or mountain unicycle are examples—fat bikes are easy to use, they're fun and, yes, even in the Kootenays, they're here to stay.

*During his career, Vince Hempsall has written about everything from harvesting icebergs to rock climbing in the Middle East. He says no pigs or greyhounds were harmed while researching this story.*

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