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# dirt

HILL & FAIRCLOUGH  
ALL NEW  
SPECIALIZED TEAM

# mountainbike magazine



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# LES ARCS

661 MINI DH

# RAGE DH

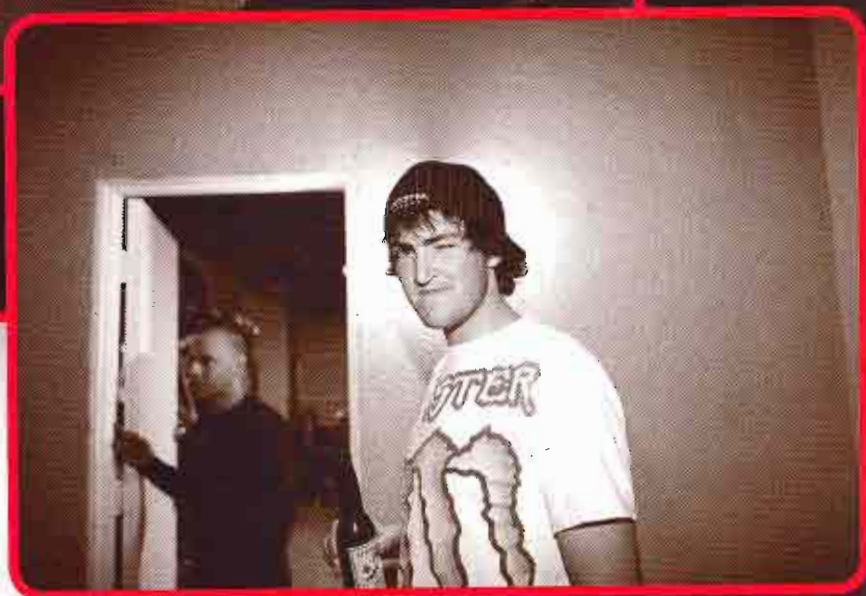
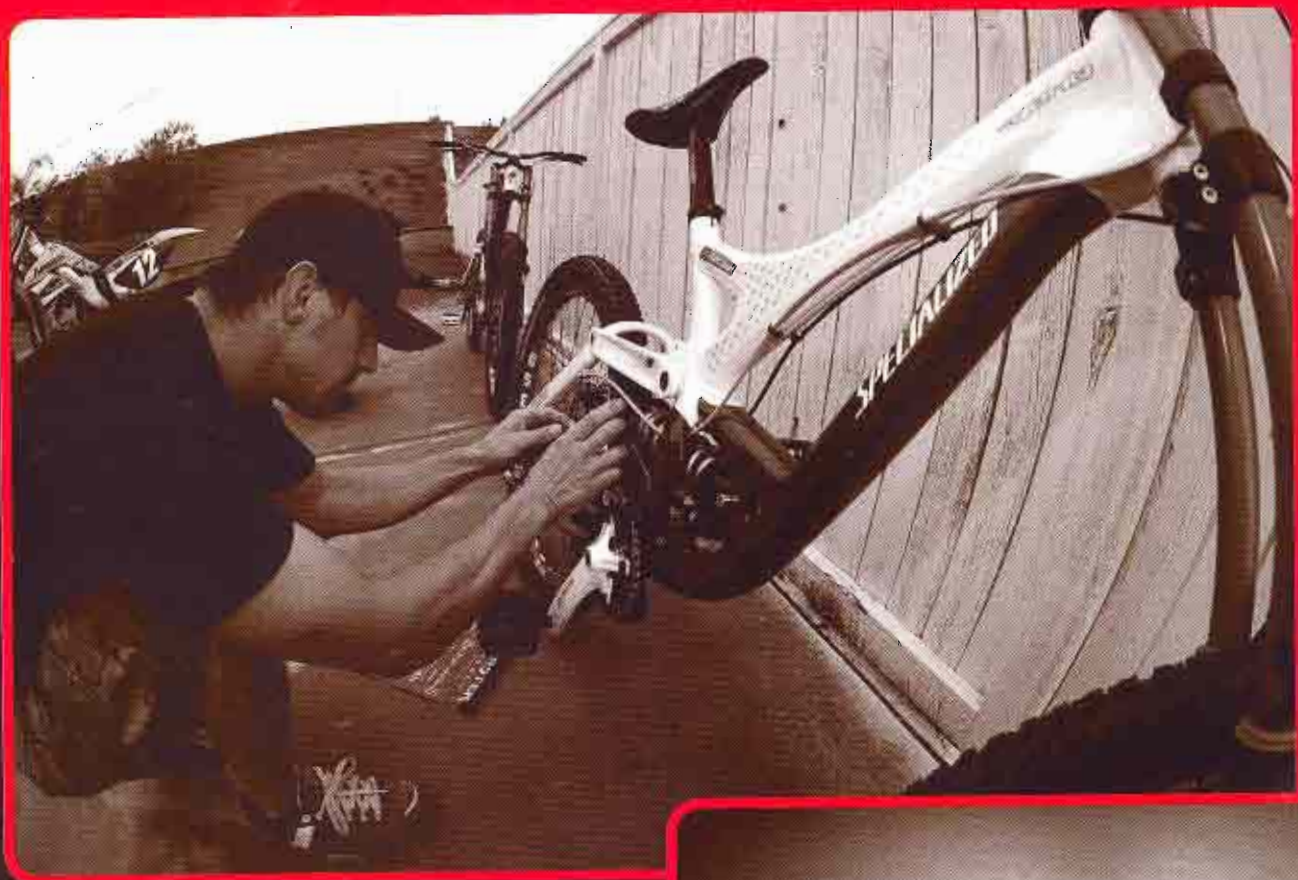
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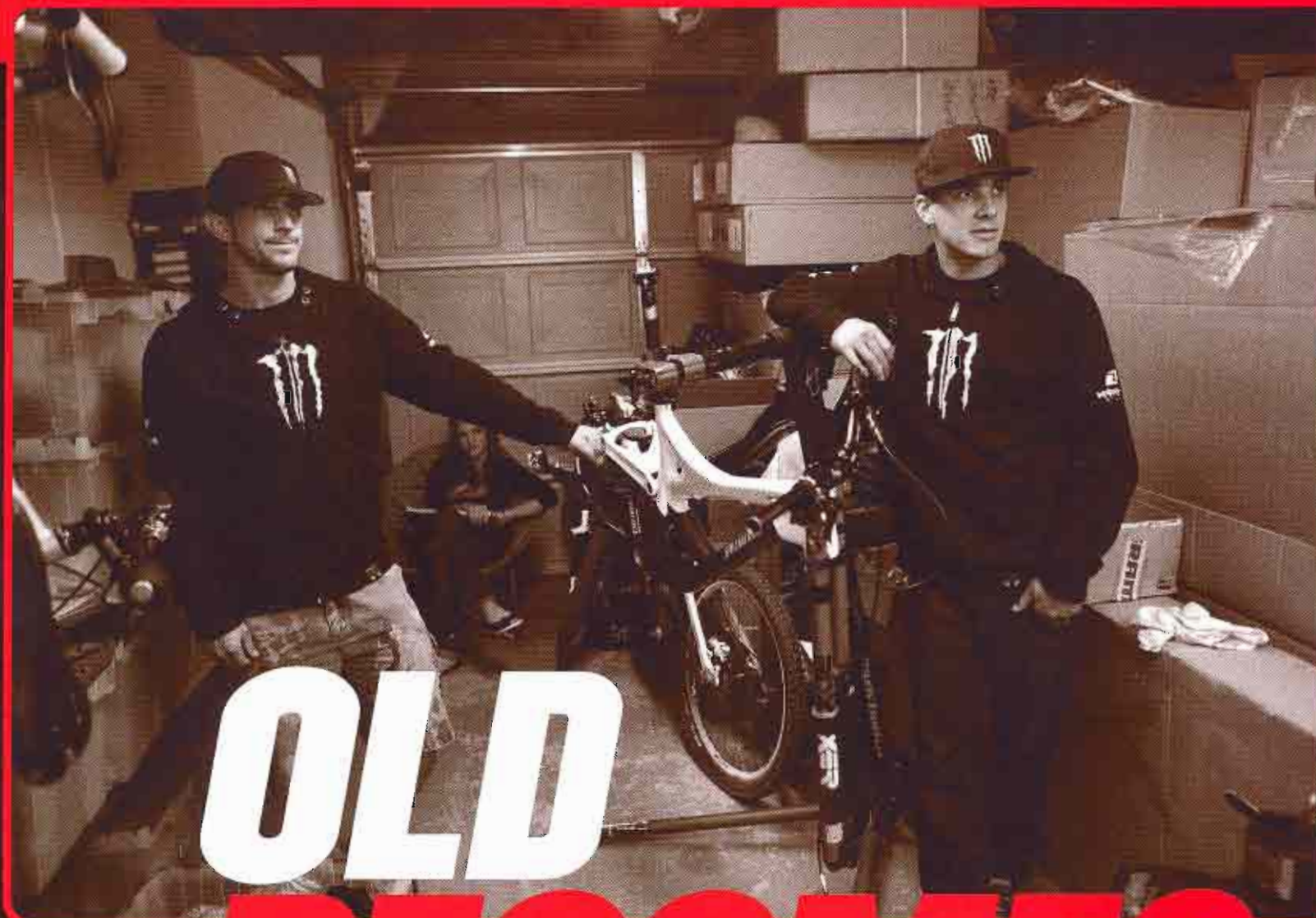
CHRIS BALL



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If you'd asked me 12 months ago if I could see Sam Hill riding for Specialized, I most probably would have said 'no'. But as rumours started to circulate all the various pieces dropped into place, and then the Monster/Specialized team was born. The team would stay the same: Jacy (above, mechanic), Brendan Fairclough (above right, rider), and Sean Heimdal (team manager) and Sam Hill (opposite page, far right, rider). All that changes is the frame they are riding and the name of the team.



# OLD BECOMES NEW

**THE JIGSAW IS COMPLETE  
FOR SPECIALIZED'S RETURN TO  
WORLD CUP DOWNHILL**



If the mountain bike racing world was to have its own special version of Santa, he would be crawling up a chimney with a bag full of new sponsors and fancy new team bikes. The festive build-up usually starts at the glitzy Vegas bike show, where racers shine-up their resume and give sponsors the hard sell. If they don't have next year's ride sorted by December, then the possibility of a 'proper job' starts to set in. But if you're one of the talented few that gets on the podium like Sam Hill and Brendan Fairclough, then you don't have anything to worry about, Santa comes early, knocking on your door with plenty of options.

So in mid 2008, when the news got out about changes at Ironhorse and that there would be no more DW link Sunday after 2009, the internet forums went into terminal meltdown, while the gossip mongers had a merry old time pontificating over who Sam Hill and Brendan Fairclough would be riding for next year.

Besides all the hot air on the web, the first grains of truth were in some not-so-subtle and un-official hints in Vegas, then some shots appeared of Sam racing a Specialized in Australia. Some folk that know Todd Seplavy from Ironhorse said 'I told you so' and I'll explain that in a minute. But most other people were surprised to see Sam off the Sunday before Jan 1st. Many people were thinking questions like... 'Why Specialized? They don't have a big DH team?' and then 'Is he really going to race on that freeride bike?' or 'there must be a new race bike in the works soon' and 'did he fall out with Ironhorse?'

Being as Billy the Dirt web guy is the only one who looks on the internet forums, we thought the best way to answer all of these questions was to take a 12 hour plane trip and spend a week driving all over California to meet the people who could really answer these questions. The whole story seemed like a jigsaw that could only be put together when you have your hands on the pieces. Well, at least petrol is only \$1.65 a gallon.

First, a little history for the under 18's... Specialized have been going to mountain bike races since 1985. That's right, before you were born. They had a race truck, mechanics and fixed anyone's bike, often for free. It was their way of helping the sport grow and also finding out first hand what needed to be improved on the bikes they made. And that has always been how Specialized do things - as company founder Mike Sinyard says: "We are ecstatic about getting Sam and Brendan, because you know it's really our way, that the top riders always push us to make better products. Years ago we worked with Shaun Palmer and we learned a lot from him! We were just waiting for the right time and the right person. Sam is definitely that guy. It is a dream team, and that's always what we try to do, to have the best people. Our focus now is to make the very best tool for the job, to win the big races. To learn and improve what we are doing."



The man behind the brand, Mike Sinyard is Mr. Specialized, and he is all about bikes. You can be sure that he will be hoping for glory, and of course the Men's DH rainbow stripes and World Championship title, a title that the company does not yet have.

Downhill racing has certainly been in the blood of Specialized. It's just that for the last few years, they have been putting a lot of effort into the freeride end of things. Jason Chamberlain is the senior frame engineer at Specialized, he lives, breathes and rides long travel bikes in all their forms. He is the brain behind the design of the Demo. "I think people get the impression that the Demo 8 is a freeride bike because that is what they see in the media and videos the most. Matt Hunter, Bearclaw and Kyle Strait are known for freeride filming, Rampage and slopestyle. Specialized has not really put a big emphasis on DH racing until now, even though we sponsor Team America which is the top collection of US DH racers, and Kyle Strait is often the top American in the World Cup events. It all started with the Demo 9 in 2002, when we wanted to build the mother of all huckers. Brandon Sloan and I went to the North Shore to really understand the scene. This was long before it became trendy to test up there. Once we saw how bikes were being ridden, and what terrain they had built, then it was clear what the Demo 9 had to be. Immediately after we introduced the Demo 9, we came out with the Demo 8, which was a lighter weight race version of the platform. In 2007 we made significant advances in the platform and that is the Demo 7 (freeride version) and Demo 8 (DH race version) that you see in the marketplace today. The newer bikes are even lighter still and have improved bump eating ability. If you look closely the Demo 8 is absolutely a race bike."

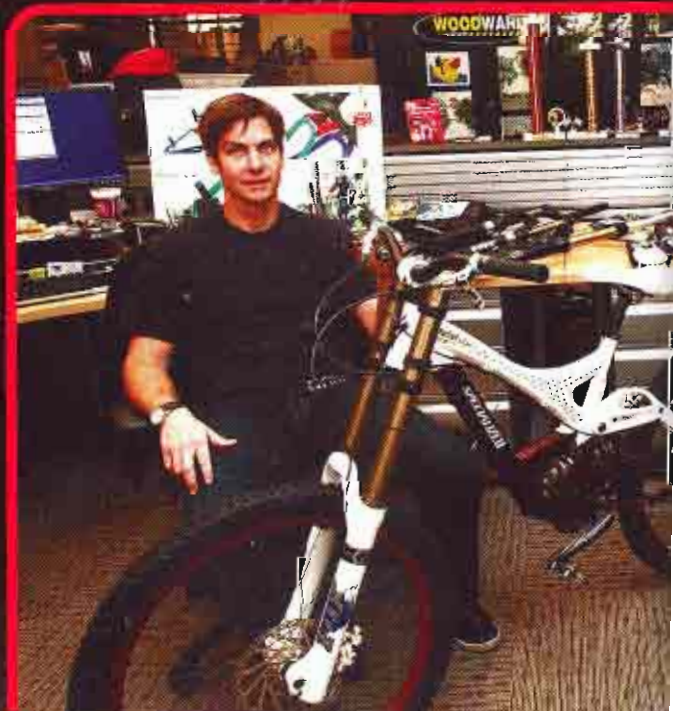
Ben Capron is the guy in charge of Global Marketing at Specialized, so I guess that kind of covers everything, and he says: "We're pretty confident in the FSR suspension system. It goes a long way back. The first FSR was in '93, and we worked with Horst Leitner prior to that. The challenge for us is that it's not the new kid on the block that people are talking about. But it's versatile, and we know if the riders want a certain thing, we can tune it to do that. We're also confident in our engineering and production capabilities. Nobody else is making bikes with the level of sophistication that we have. And we're open to new ideas and the insights we get from Sam and Brendan. So watch out, the bikes are going to get better and better."

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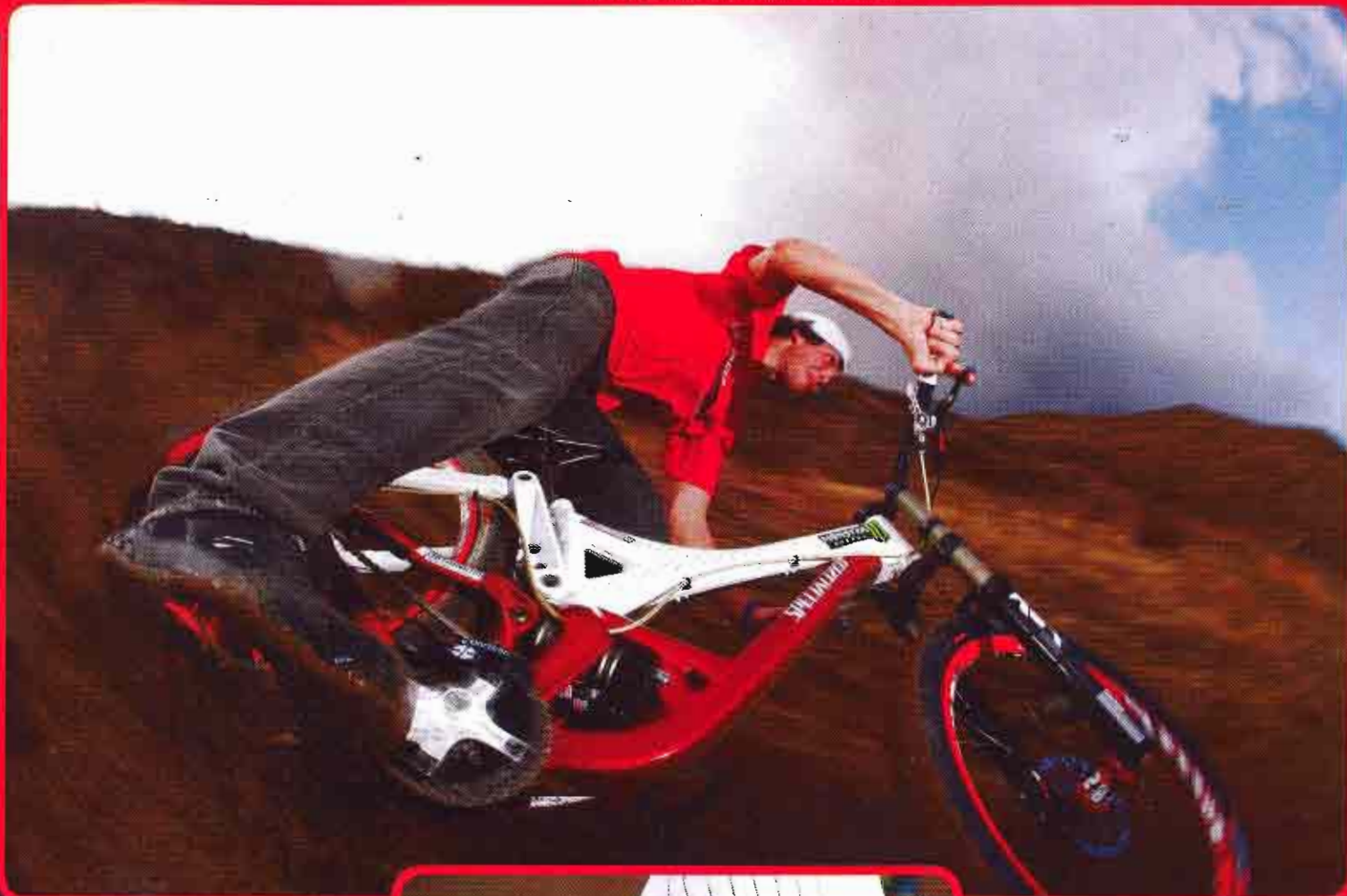
In fact, it's interesting that the Specialized FSR rear linkage is a similar design to the Ironhorse SGS that Sam won the 2002 and 2003 Junior World Championships on. So the system obviously worked for him in the past. Just by looking around the Specialized HQ in the small town of Morgan Hill, California, it's obvious that the Demo 8 bike is the result of a simply massive amount of research, thought, creativity, experimentation, expertise,



Ben Capron is in charge of Global Marketing at Specialized. He knows the selling power that Hill and the Monster team will have for the company over the next three years.



What a career the young British rider has had so far. When your team mates have included Steve Peat, Greg Minnaar and for the last 12 months, Sam Hill, then you know that you are in good company. 2009 could be the year for Brendan Fairclough. After his performance at the final round of last year's World Cup in Schladming, then a podium (or even possibly a win) could be on the cards.



Jan Talavasek works out all the nitty gritty details as part of the engineering team.



(left) Brandon Sloan and Joe Buckley (who was interestingly Shaun Palmer's mechanic back in the day) work on the R&D of high end bikes like the Demo.

technology, testing and a relentless desire to improve. There are a lot of people working here, they all love bikes and they want to build better ones.

"If you're not a bike rider, you don't fit here! Ha ha" says Brandon Sloan, who runs the R&D of high end bikes like the Demo. "I've been racing downhill for over 12 years and XC, enduro events. But we're not going to get here and say we know what Sam needs, or tell him what he has to ride. We have the whole team to learn from and improve the bikes. I'm excited because every time we make a bike for Sam, I get one made as well so we can test it too. I'm just as excited about riding it as anyone else!"

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Ben Carson says, "With Palmer, we were involved in a very visible way. People here like Brandon and Buck (Joe Buckley, who was Palmer's mechanic back in the day) are big into downhill. What we are always looking for is a rider who can help us develop better bikes, and also can really push things to the limit. What's interesting about the Monster Specialized team is the four person package that can do that. Sam and Brendan are obviously capable of riding really fast, Jacy is a great communicator and really into the product and Sean holds it all together."



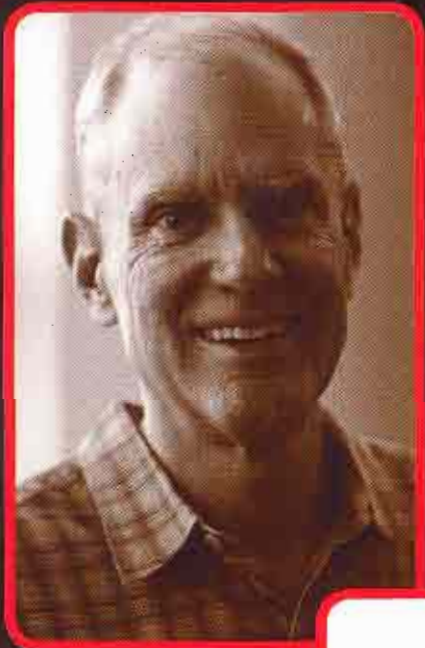
Much has been said about Sam Hill's move to Specialized and the effect that it will have, not only on bike sales, but also on his performance. A good rider will adapt to any bike, and Specialized technology is proven, so there should be no problems there. Is there an all-new, redesigned bike in the pipeline? Your guess is as good as mine...but I'd like to think there is.



There are at least two more pieces to the jigsaw of people that made this happen. The first is Todd Seplavy, who was a key figure in the rise of the Ironhorse Sunday while Sam Hill was riding it. In mid 2008, Todd came to work for Specialized after leaving Ironhorse and he was instrumental in setting up things for Sam and Brendan to ride for Specialized. But Todd had another project to move on to, leaving an important spot to be filled.

Which brings us to Scott Sharples - a modest guy with a big history in downhill. He was one of the first Australian racers to move to California in the mid 80s. "It was a good time to be in racing, because it went from riding single crown 3 inch forks through to what they are now, basically. Things changed dramatically over the years I raced." He says. "My racing highlight was probably winning Mammoth in 1998, on a Trek. It was just one of those moments where it seemed I couldn't do anything wrong, I was riding well and didn't have to take risks. I just knew I had it on everybody at that race."

Since then, Scott has been always there in the background, helping the younger Australian riders at World Cup and World Champs. "I finished racing in 2000. And I had started doing some coaching and there was some drive in Cycling Australia to have a coach for the DH riders, so I started doing that part-time in 2001. The first time I had any idea who Sam Hill is, was on a chairlift in Thredbo, at an Australian national round in 2000 I think. There was a stream of riders under the lift and one guy was just cutting through. I was watching going 'anyone know who that kid is?' You could just tell he was gifted on a bike. It was that clear, he just rode the bike differently. So I tracked down this young kid Sam with his dad Merv, who did most of the talking. He said he wanted to win the World Championships. Basically that's where it started. So from 2002 to 2006 I did the DH coaching thing fulltime for Cycling Australia, then in '07 I got involved with the Olympic BMX program which meant I got pulled away from downhill."



The main men, the ones that 'make it happen'. Working relationships, trust and belief in dreams and goals are what running a team is all about. Team manager Sean Heimdal and Specialized owner Mike Sinyard know that together they can have it all. They want to win, and in Hill they now have the capability.



The weapon of choice, the Demo 8, which (as we go to press) is currently not available here in the UK.



Where the old Monster Ironhorse team was a tight four man crew with just two riders. Jacy on the spanners and Sean Heimdal keeping track of everything, the new Monster Specialized team will be

Ben Capron explains how things fell into place, "It's funny the way things happen. From the outside it might look like it was all planned. We had hooked up with Todd, and there were no hard feelings when he left, but we needed somebody to replace him and to be the right person to work with the Monster team. Literally the same day Todd decided he was leaving, I got a call from Scott, who I knew from '93 when he came over here first. I just told him, 'I'm going to hire you, I've got the perfect job for you.'"

Without doubt, Scott has been an important coach and mentor throughout Sam's career. I get the feeling that things could have gone better for Sam in '08 if Scott had been around. But now they are back working closely together and planning to continue the previous success story. Scott says, "Sam and Brendan will be my main focus for sure, but there's more to my job now. Basically, less coaching and more marketing. I'll also be working with Specialized, Decline Team America and the guys on the freeride and BMX side - Kyle Strait, Darren Berrecloth, Trond Hansen and Matt Hunter. I'm the main contact for all those guys now. Obviously we're hoping that Sam will go out and win everything! And Brendan second. But it is going to be hard. Sam's been in front for a while, but people have worked out what they have to do to get close. And Sam has maybe felt the pressure a bit. But now he's in a stronger team with more support behind him, it should be back to 'Sam, just ride your bike' like he used to do."

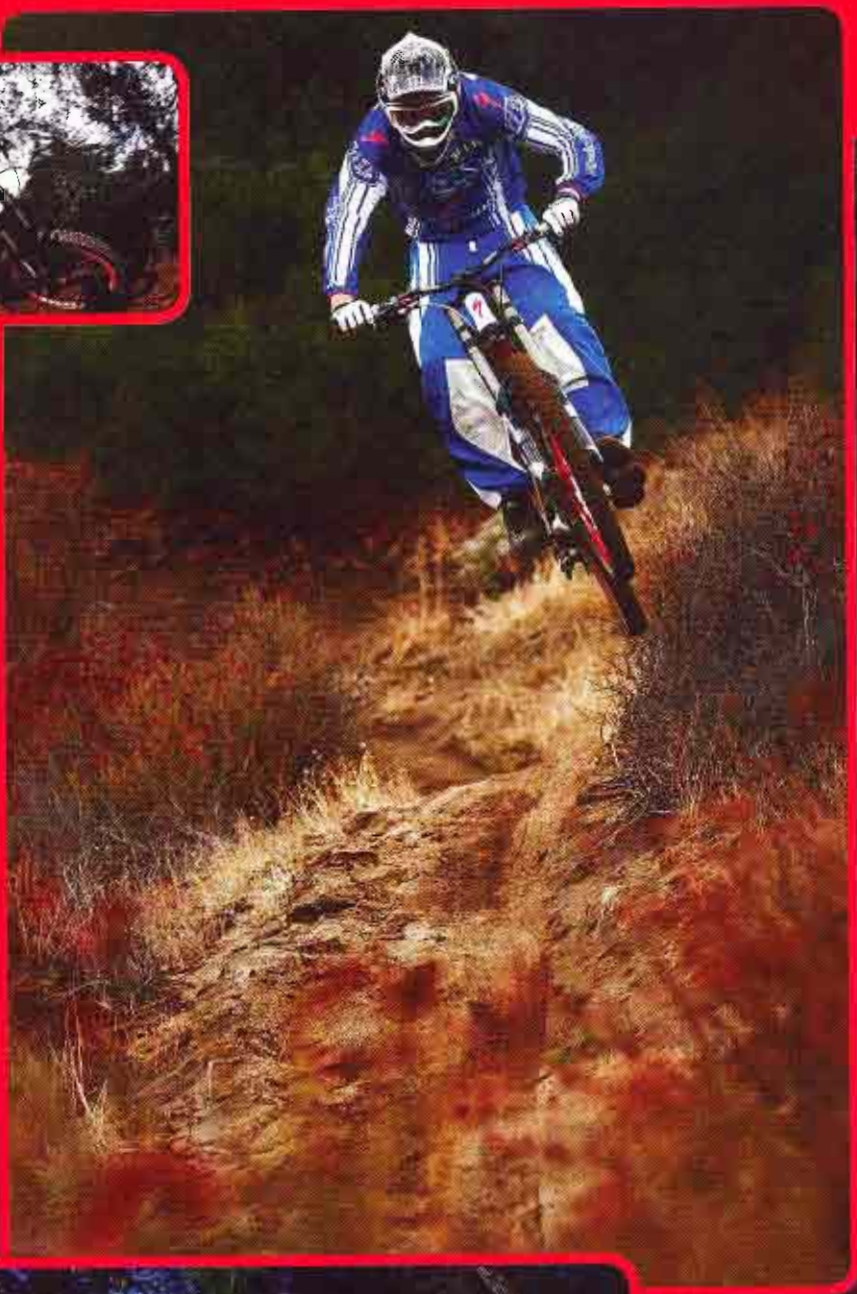
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a much bigger deal with more people in the background to provide whatever help is needed. As Sean puts it, "We had reached a limit where we were before and now we're really looking forward to taking things to the next level. We didn't leave Iron Horse on bad terms, it was just time for a change for everybody. Six years on Iron Horse, that's not a bad run. Actually all the contracts are new for 2009, most other sponsors are the same. We'll be sticking with Specialized and SRAM for another three years, we're committed to them and I think they're committed to us. It will be interesting using the Specialized tyres. We've been





Telemetry plays its part when it comes to design and engineering. Sam Peckman runs the test lab for Specialized.





trying out the Clutch and Chunder models, and there's some new prototypes coming along too for a mud tyre and other things. We can use whatever brand we want, but I'm pretty confident they'll have a tyre before the season starts."

Specialized are certainly keen to give their new star riders whatever they need to get the job done. It's not just a case of 'here's the bike, now go bring back the medals'. With Scott Sharples as the middle man, the riders will be able to get more or less any bike they want. The Demo is really just a starting point, but as it turns out, not a bad one at that. Brandon Sloan explains how things have evolved so far. "Sam rode a completely stock Demo 8 first, then he and Jacy sent a list of things they wanted. The top tube length happens to be our small size, the head angle is standard. The biggest change was the BB height. He likes it crazy low. He's all about the corners and carrying speed through them. The Demo has a low and centralized centre of gravity which helps too. We made two different rear ends for him, a stock one at 18.5" and a long rear-end at 18.75" which is closer to the Iron Horse. He tried both and right now he prefers the shorter stock one. I wasn't expecting that. Another change is the shorter 1.5" head tube with integrated bearings for a really low handlebar height. The FSR linkage is the same, we'll see how that goes depending on the feedback we get. People see the extra tubes and get worked up. Basically we separated shock actuation from wheel path, so we can tune them independently. If we want progressive or regressive, pedalling, braking, all that stuff can be tweaked around a little more with this layout."

The other hot issue for race bikes these days is weight. Everyone wants a light bike. And with the new Trek being flaunted about as one of the lightest ever, how does this reflect on the Demo? Brandon answers, "Some people think there is a lot of weight in the rear of the Demo. Sam and Jacy were worried about that too, but instead of having a massive swingarm like some single pivot bikes, we can have smaller tubes that are triangulated, that makes it very stiff and light. The top link is magnesium, it looks huge and it is wide for stiffness, but it is surprisingly light. People talk about



this a lot, especially on the internet, but the funny thing is our standard Demo 8 is under 40lbs out of the box. That's with real DH tyres and wheels. Not single ply tyres. With a World Cup BoXXer, Elixir brakes, and a few other changes, it's easy to get a bike like this down to 38lbs."

Brandon makes it pretty clear that there is no new secret prototype hidden away for Sam to jump on once he leaves the building. For now, the plan is to evolve the Demo into the ultimate race bike. "But if their feedback leads to something new coming along, we could do anything. We can bust out prototypes and new bikes really easily. It's good with Trek also coming in with a big team. Competition is good. Downhill has got quite a buzz going on right now. It will be good to get out and battle with everybody."

Now I understand where the ideas evolve from. But how can they be sure the bikes will handle the abuse that a season of World Cups will deal out? That's where the prototypes get dragged down to the basement for torture at the hands of Sam Pickman. It's top secret stuff down here, not too many photos allowed. There are several large machines set up to bend and twist various parts of a bike frame thousands of times till it breaks. But what does it mean? Sam explains, "First we determine what the loads on the frame will actually be. We had some idea for front wheel loads, but we had to do a lot of testing to get rear wheel loading in vertical, lateral and twisting movements. We did this with strain gauges and accelerometers fixed all over a bike. We had Matt, Hunter, Brandon and Buck riding and also some amateur riders. It was all types of terrain from our local stuff to a weekend at Whistler."

I can remember a friend of mine coming up short on a jump and ripping the head tube clean off his XC bike, I expected to see this sort of thing in the torture chamber, but I was disappointed. Sam explains again, "The ultimate loads we test for are really not achievable in normal riding, there's an ejection point where you just can't hold on. But what we do test for is if the rider let's go and the bike falls from a long way up, say directly on the front wheel, that it's still going to be OK. The main thing for riding the bike is the fatigue testing. Those guys can really punish the bikes, doing big drops

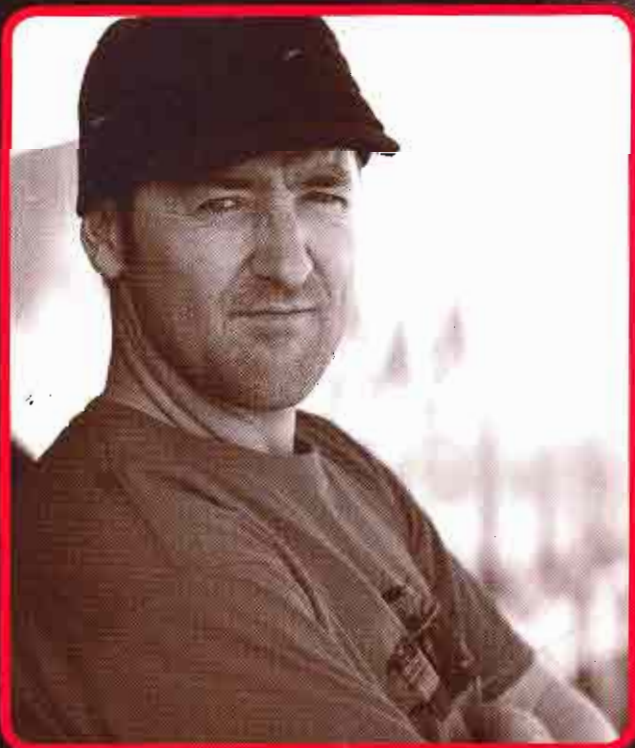
over and over at high speeds. The target we aim for is if a good rider was doing 10 runs a day in Whistler, three days every week, that the bike would last 10 years (that's 15600 runs!). Mainly we are making sure the bike is strong enough, but we do also test steering stiffness and frame torsion."

As you can see in the photos, Sam and Brendan already have their first prototype bikes, and they could have another new version in a few weeks if necessary. I've heard of some riders not getting their new bikes till a week before the first World Cup. Competition is a funny thing, often it's the evolution of something tried and trusted that wins out, not the last minute flash of genius. I'd say this is a shrewd move. The best thing about all of this is that it won't be long before you and I get to ride Sam's bike if we want to. As Brandon promises, "the geometry changes we are making for Sam and Brendan, we'll be putting those into the production bikes for 2010."

So there we have it, the facts from the horse's mouth. Specialized have been waiting for the right time, but now they're back, and they want to make a big splash. Things just seemed to fall together at the right

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and now they've got some amazing talent both on the bikes and behind the scenes. The team are looking forward to a whole new level of support from Specialized, but unless something drastic happens, the bike Sam and Brendan will be racing is surprisingly close to what you or I can buy. There's no secret bike waiting to be unveiled at the first race. As you'd expect, they are all confident that the bike will work. Guess we'll have to wait till that first in South Africa to find out for sure."



The glue? The missing link? The catalyst? How should we describe Scott Sharples? He is key in this new relationship between Hill and Specialized. He cannot be overlooked, his role is vital.