

FUEL

[2009]
HOT NEW
BIKES

Epic proportions

→ We joined Specialized in the US to ride the new improved Epic S-Works. It's the best yet

When Specialized committed to the use of integrated own-brand forks and shocks in 2007, it seemed like a brave move. If first impressions of the new range are anything to go by, though, it looks like 2009 will be a very special year for them.

We spent a few days in the US riding a bunch of Specialized's new bikes and kit, with a strong focus on the new World Championship-winning S-Works Epic.

Epic achievement

There can't be many mountain bike fans who haven't heard about the Epic S-Works. When developing the bike, Specialized engineers made the mistake of letting it slip to their star racer, Christoph Sauser, that it was 'ready to race'.

Sauser then grabbed it from the sweaty-palmed boffins and promptly won the Worlds on it. Not bad for an

unproven bike, and an incredible risk for Specialized to take. Anything less than a win would have ruined the product, and a public breakage or frame failure would be a PR disaster.

As it happens, they'd done their sums and Sauser rinsed the field to win gold, claiming the new bike was a massive advantage.

"The new Epic is more than just a race bike – it's a fast, well controlled trail bike, too"

So what have they done?

Specialized's technical progress is not a story of single groundbreaking achievements, but of lots of smaller, individually less spectacular iterative improvements, which all lumped

together create something very special indeed.

The pinnacle of the current development yearbook is the new Epic XC race platform. While highly successful in races, previous versions of the Epic had idiosyncratic ride qualities that split opinion. The good news is that, for 2009, Specialized has managed to keep the fast ride feel that pleases racers. At the same time, it has lost a little weight, added stiffness and made the unique Brain inertia valve suspension work the way they knew that it should.

The result is a bike that's way more than just a race bike. First ride impressions imply that it'll now appeal to anyone looking for a fast, well controlled trail bike.

The full carbon frame uses Specialized's AZ1 carbon process to create a structure that's laid up in pieces (for tuneability), but that works like one piece, 'as one' – AZ1.



If it's good enough for a world champion, then it's good enough for Steve

Carbon cranks are a component highlight



Increasing the amount of carbon meant designing new bonded drop-outs, a lighter bottom bracket shell and incorporating the new head tube to take a tapered steerer tube that's 1.125in at the top and 1.5in at the crown. This allows Specialized's 100mm travel E100 fork to weigh in at just over 3lb.

Also new are the FACT carbon cranks that have been seen on Specialized pro racers' bikes for nearly two years. Claimed to be lighter and stiffer, the left and right cranks are joined in the centre of the BB axle with a serrated join – a bit like Campagnolo road cranks. Oddly, Specialized hasn't chosen the new oversized BB30 standard for its new cranks, but runs them on a wider 84.5mm shell to add stiffness and also help extend bearing life.

Does it all work together? Ask Christoph Sauser after he's finished buffing his gold medal...



The new Rovals are 40g lighter

Something special

→ There's lots going on in Specialized's '09 camp...

For the bigger hitters, Specialized is launching a new Stumpjumper FSR XC for '09, which moves to 120mm of travel, up 20mm from 2008. The longer-travel, re-jigged rear shock layout and really nicely controlled suspension mean it's now more trail capable than ever before, although still able to turn in fast race laps should you so wish.

It's a similar story with the Women's Myka model, which gets the new positioning for the rear shock but not the extra travel, so it remains at 100mm.

The other big news is the work that has been done on the new M5-framed 170mm travel SX Trail bike. For '09, the SX has better standover clearance, more seat post adjustability, ISCG chain guide mounts and a brown anodised finish. One of a rare breed of genuine 'play bikes', you can jump it, drop it, rail it and hammer it every which way. You'll need surgical help to remove the smile. Despite a 'trail' label, don't expect the SX to offer XC performance on long rides. That's not its bag.

Bits and pieces

New SL versions of the Roval Controle E5 wheels trim a total of 40g, thanks to a carbon-shelled front hub – so the pair weigh in at 1385g. The Traverse trail wheel is unchanged, save for a set of optional 15mm thru-axle ends that go with the standard QR and 20mm options.



New BG Pro shoe is perfect for wet-weather riding

Saddles are unchanged, save for a new XC/marathon/trail model called Format SL. With a smooth profile, plenty of padding and hollow titanium rails, it weighs 230g.

The tyre line is being expanded, with The Captain now coming in a 2.2in width (for both 26in and 29in wheels). The Eskar is now available in a chunky 2.3in size for back-country adventures, while XC racers will enjoy a 2in Sauserwind to complement the existing (and awesome) 1.8in model.

A new Tactic full-cover helmet looks, feels and fits better than last year's Instinct, and there's a new BG Pro shoe with an S-Works sole, improved fit and a construction that retains less water when wet – ideal for a UK summer then. Defroster winter ankle boots now have sealed cleat slots and half sizing. It's also claiming full waterproof status, so stay tuned for that test!

The popular The Captain tyre is now available in a 2.2in width



→ Read our feature on Christoph Sauser's Epic on page 66

"Sauser is one of the most technologically minded riders in mountain bike racing"

WHERE TO GET THE NEW EPIC
Models should hit the UK this autumn/winter. Contact Specialized UK through your local dealer.

STRICT RESERVE
Team Epics only will feature the braze-on front derailleur mount – production versions make do with Specialized's Direct Mount. It is also unknown if the new Roval wheels will make production, either.

Sauser rode an untested bike at the World Champs



This was the shot the mechanics, sponsors and managers had dreamed of

CHRISTOPH SAUSER'S

Specialized Epic S-Works 2009

Creating a bike that attracts more attention than the World Champion rider is an outrageous claim, but this year Specialized achieved just that. When Swiss competitor Christoph Sauser crossed the finish line, journalists had eyes only for the bike. "It was like a naked pin-up girl was there," Sauser says.

The catchphrase 'It's not about the bike, it's the rider' is often used, but for the new Epic was totally ignored. For many, this was an unexpected surprise, and even for Sauser the road to getting on board the new bike was not simple.

Five days before the race, word came from head office that it was too risky to test a totally new build at such a big event. The reward was high, but the risks unthinkable. A snapped frame, blown shock or broken wheel were all possibilities on an Epic that had been pieced together and shipped especially for this race without any testing.

Any racer will tell you that testing something new on raceday is a cardinal sin, but for Sauser there was no other option. "When I heard the mechanics would not let me ride on the new Epic I went ballistic," he says. "All the hard work I had put in, helping to develop the bike leading up to this race – that's the pressure I relish."

Of course, Sauser also suspected that this bike would give him advantages on the Val di Sole race track. Having tested prototypes back in February, he reckoned it would be perfect on the World Championship route.

Eventually it was decided: Sauser could race the bike, and after two hours of suffering the risk had paid off. The Specialized rider led from the front, initially with Florian Vogel for company but later alone,

opening an unassailable lead. To win a World Championship is the highest accolade for any bike and the ideal way to introduce new product to the world. So what's so special about this new Epic?

In Sauser's words, the 19lb race machine "is a combination of having the best bike together with the best rider. It felt like air today."

Sauser is one of the most technologically minded rider in mountain bike racing, forever helping engineers test – whether that's a new tyre, shock or gearing set-up, no detail is left ignored. Indeed, this bike had been in development for nearly a year.

This shows in the design of the 2009 Epic, most notably with the amount of integration. Not only is there a revised Specialized shock, but Epics will now feature an E100 with Brain technology fork made by Specialized especially for the frame. A tapered steerer from 1.5in to 1.125in provides greater stiffness, and we wouldn't be surprised to see a small through-axle in time.

The bike also features new tubeless Roval wheels with Specialized tyres which are said to be a breakthrough combination of lightweight and rigidity. It also has an integrated front derailleur and an integrated bottom bracket with press fit bearings and a carbon crank that's set for general release.

This race technology is not the reserve of a top-end XC race bike, though – 100mm travel is enough for most trail centres. Expect to see integration or at least cooperation between major companies to become a big deal. After all, building a bike with parts that are suited to the task, rather than grabbing a selection of random components, makes a lot more sense.

1: USE YOUR BRAIN The new Specialized Brain fork is said to weigh close to three pounds and

features 100mm of travel, an oversized carbon crown and steerer and a new platform valve.

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2: SLIDE RULE
Prototype Specialized Roval wheels slide effortlessly into the drop-outs for fast puncture changes. Just don't take the Dremel to your own wheelset – it won't be pretty if you forget to tighten your skewer...

3: AMAZING BRAZE-ON
We've seen the integrated carbon cranks before, but the braze-on front derailleur is another new innovation on the '09 Epic S-Works – although it's one which is only available to the pro riders.

4: SHOCK TACTICS
The new Specialized Brain shock is a radical departure from the old chainstay-mounted system, and is where most weight has been saved on the Epic. The patented FSR suspension system remains, though.

