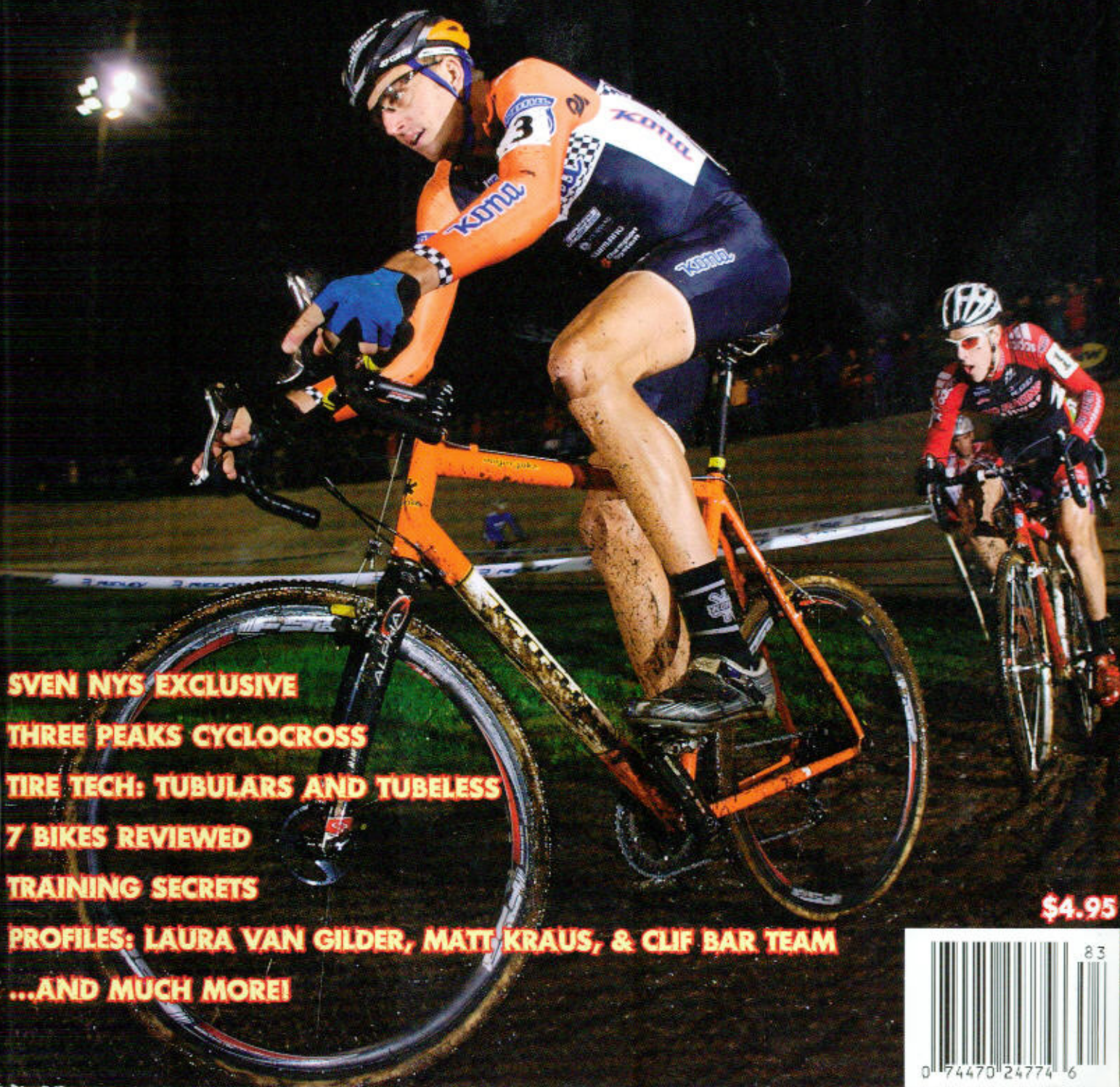


CYCLOCROSS

MAGAZINE

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ELLSWORTH ROOTS



A 'cross frame for the roughest terrain

BY ANDREW YEE

The thing I love about cyclocross bikes is their versatility and simple mission: one bike to get you over any terrain that you encounter, as fast as possible. Hills or flats, grass, pavement, dirt, snow, sand, ice, rocks, roots—it doesn't matter. Your 'cross bike should handle it, and if not, you just pick up the bike and start running.

With large fields, UCI and USA Cycling rules, and the explosion of expensive 'cross equipment, race promoters tend to avoid risky course elements nowadays, and rocks and roots on a 'cross course have become endangered. The days of hard-core "jungle cross" are all but gone, and bikes have evolved accordingly with lower bottom brackets, shorter wheelbases, and steeper angles, to optimize handling for the common "grass criterium" (see our related article on bottom bracket heights in this issue). Come race day, you'll likely appreciate these characteristics on most courses.

But for many of us, racing 'cross is just one way we ride our cyclocross machines. We commute on them, ride them on the road, and even hit the mountain bike trails. If you fall into this category, perhaps the modern day, race-specific 'cross bike isn't for you. And if you spend a lot of time on your 'cross bike on technical trails, the Ellsworth Roots just might be exactly what you're looking for.

Ellsworth, a southern California company known best for its full suspension mountain bikes, has a history of producing unique 'cross bikes. Back in the mid 90's, the company produced a Roots model that was offered with complete with a Rock Shox Ruby and Paris Roubaix forks and Sachs New Success Ergo Levers for \$3k. While that bike was short-lived, the company has seen the growth of 'cross (including in its Southern California backyard) and has gotten back in the market with the reintroduction of its Roots frame, 10 years after its previous Roots model. The new version of the frame has been produced in a very limited run, and we've been fortunate to have one for several months of riding and abuse.

Frame

The Roots comes as a frameset with a full carbon fork for \$999. The fork looks identical to the Ritchey WCS cyclocross fork and, at 450 grams, weighs the same as well. An internal headset is required but can be installed without tools.

Out of the box, at a glance, the Ellsworth Roots looks like many modern-day 'cross frames with its multi-shaped aluminum tubes and carbon seatstays. It's clearly a serious frame, as its price



would indicate, and at 3.4 pounds for the frame, it's a reasonably light foundation for a lightweight bike. A closer inspection reveals a few features that make this bike unique. The first is a full carbon rear triangle, not just carbon seat stays. The carbon rear triangle is bonded to the aluminum main triangle and offers generous mud clearance down at the chainstays.

The bike also offers an interesting cable routing option, with fittings to secure a full-length hydraulic brake hose for the rear brake. It's a curious choice though, as the frameset does not have front or rear disc brake mounts, narrowing the hydraulic brake options down to only the Magura HS33 and HS11 mountain bike rim brakes, which Ellsworth says are popular in Europe. Getting a drop bar brake lever may be the trickier part. Magura made a few back in the day, but now only has hydraulic mountain levers. Regardless, the hose clamps work fine for either standard brake or derailleur housing, though, and offer the added benefit of less contamination—a poor man's Gore Sealed Ride-On cable system. We actually ran the front derailleur housing this way without any problems and moved the brake cable housing to the front derailleur cable's spot.

Build

The Roots does not come as a complete bike, so it received a mix of new and used components from the CXM warehouse. Highlights included an aluminum cockpit (courtesy of BBB), wide-profile cantilevers from Spooky, and 10-speed Showtime derailleurs and shifters from Sampson (also reviewed in this issue). The mix of components certainly contributed to the bike's uniqueness. Without pedals and anything fancy, but with a carbon Truvativ Rouleur crankset, older Ritchey DS wheels, and an American Classic seatpost, the

complete bike weighed a very respectable 18.5 pounds.

The Ride

It's not until you build up the bike and literally swing a leg over it that you notice the Roots' most unique attribute. You have to swing your leg pretty high to get up on the saddle! With a 4.5 cm bottom bracket drop, my saddle was an inch higher than that of my normal 'cross bike. You notice that when getting on and also when doing a 'cross mount. An inch may not seem like much, but when you're fatigued and ready to vomit, it can be significant.

But how does that translate on a real 'cross ride? On flats and straights, it really wasn't noticeable. The bike's short chainstays (barely over 42 cm) and steep head tube angle (72 degrees, with a 73 degree seat tube angle) create an agile, quick-accelerating bike. In climbing, the Roots had great traction and handled technical single track and loose dirt climbs well. And with its high bottom bracket, when you venture into terrain more appropriate for mountain bikes, the geometry really shines, as the pedals and big chainring clear rocks and roots with ease. It's no wonder Ellsworth kept the Roots name, since it's this type of terrain where the bike proved most capable. When living in Boston, I would regularly ride my cyclocross bike on root-filled singletrack in the Middlesex Fells. I wish I had had this frame back then.

This frame's strength in slow, technical terrain comes at a cost, however. In fast corners and steep descents, your higher center of gravity makes riding this type of terrain more challenging, and your full attention is required on loose surfaces. On the road, it's also not the frame I'd want for chasing after roadies in a criterium or a long road descent, even with slicks and a bigger gear. And it also does not make a stable

BIKE GEEK VITALS:

BRAND: Ellsworth

MODEL: Roots

MSRP: \$999

SIZES AVAIL: S, M (tested), L

FRAME: Aluminum with carbon rear triangle

FORK: Full carbon with carbon steerer and aluminum dropouts

platform for loaded touring or commuting.

With a relatively long 56.5 cm top tube on our size medium frame (semi-sloping top tube, with a 52 cm seat tube, center to center), the frame has enough room to make a fun, flat-bar 'cross bike, similar to the old Ritchey Mount Cross. I own one of these old Ritchey frames, and although it never sees the sun for a 'cross race, it's a fun choice for the trails and an occasional mountain bike race. Find yourself a pair of the Magura hydraulic rim brakes, and you'll have a tricked-out skinny tire trail bike.

One note worth mentioning...although most Ellsworth frames are made here in the USA and the company remains committed to producing its product in the states, the Roots frame is made in Taiwan. By mistake, ours had the wrong badge, and it should have said "Designed in the USA" instead of "Made in the USA." Ellsworth produced a very limited run of these frames for the '08 season, but will continue this model unchanged for '09.

Who'll be psyched:

- Those who love riding skinny tires through rocks and roots.
- Old-timers who yearn for the old days of jungle 'cross.
- Bike hackers with a pair of vintage Magura hydraulic road brake levers.
- Michael Jordan and Spud Webb.

Who'll be bummed:

- Grass crit specialists.
- Brooke Hoyer.
- Woody Harrelson (and other white men who can't jump). ◊