

MOUNTAIN

By Bill Parker
staff writer

Blues singer Willie Dixon once said that he was built for comfort, not for speed — a reference to his rather well-rounded physique.

That analogy also works well in reference to the newest trend in bicycling — the all-terrain bicycle or ATB, also known as the mountain bike.

The first thing you notice about a mountain bike are the large, seemingly oversized, tires. Compared to the thin, 10-speed tires, these thick, knobbed tires seem to be better suited for a mud bog.

The large, wide handlebars help keep the rider upright, a position much more comfortable than the bunched-over, tuck position demanded by the curled-under handlebars of the 10-speed.

The mountain bike's seat is larger, as is the wheel base, and more gears are available. Large seats are more comfortable over a short distance, and the larger wheel base adds stability and comfort to the ride. Mountain bikes are geared much lower than 10-speeds and usually have 15-18 gears because they are built for the variety of rugged terrains encountered in the backwoods.

That's right, the backwoods. Mountain bikes

are designed for comfort when riding over varied terrain including gravel roads, hiking trails, fields, stream beds, even abandoned railroad tracks.

WEST BLOOMFIELD'S Howard Stone has been an avid cyclist for the past 18 years, but the last three he's been strictly riding mountain bikes. Stone jumped into the cycling world by accident.

"In 1969 I totaled out my car in an accident, and I needed a way to get back and forth to work," said the 43-year-old owner of HKH Cycles in Keego Harbor.

"I started out with a 10-speed for the first few years. But about 10 years ago the mountain bikes started to come onto the scene. Gradually they have become more popular and more advanced. I like their overall versatility. You can go anywhere on a mountain bike. They're more comfortable than a 10-speed and a lot more convenient."

Stone did a few cross country tours in his 10-speed days and has more recently done some touring on his mountain bike. Although riders can usually make better time on a 10-speed, the mountain bike does have its advantages.

"Let's say you're riding along and you look at a map and see a shortcut that appears to be a



DAN DEAN/staff photographer

West Bloomfield resident Howard Stone tackles a backwoods trail on his mountain bike.

dirt road or a trail," said Stone.

"If you're on a 10-speed you don't really have the option of taking the alternative route because 10-speeds are more suitable for pavement. Especially if you're loaded down with gear. But if you have a mountain bike you can make the

bikes

turn and go for it. You can go places other than paved roads.

"MOUNTAIN BIKES are a lot more fun, too. We've ridden down stream beds, and on old logging roads that haven't been used 80 years. The thing is, you don't have to go around anything. We're really just big kids anyway. We go out of our way to find a mud puddle to play in."

Stone does most of his mountain biking alone, but he does occasionally ride with friends and associates Helen Kapaldi and Ken Kessler.

In 1982 Stone went on a five-month tour down the East Coast and through some of the southern states. When in town, the three like to ride on the Pottawatami Trail at the Pinckney State Recreation Area, Rouge Park in Detroit, the Pontiac Lake Recreation Area, Independence Oaks County Park and along the abandoned railroad tracks that run from Yates Elder Mill in Rochester through Goodison, Lake Orion and into Oxford. The trio also occasionally takes a trip to the Keweenaw Peninsula in the UP.

"Up north we sometimes go where there's absolutely no trail at all," said Stone. "We just watch for a place where it looks like we can get through the brush, and we go. That's when it gets really fun."

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DAN DEAN/staff photographer

Even a mud puddle can't stop Stone and his trusty mountain bike.

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So, you're in the market for a new bike.

You've sold your 1962 three-speed complete with fenders, basket and chain guard, and you're prepared to take that big step into the new world of all-terrain-bicycles (ATBs) — or mountain bikes. What should you look for? What's necessary and what's useless to a weekend rider?

According to Renee Loiselle, manager of the Pro Cycle Center in Troy, "You have to buy a bike which is best suited for the purpose which you are intending to use it for."

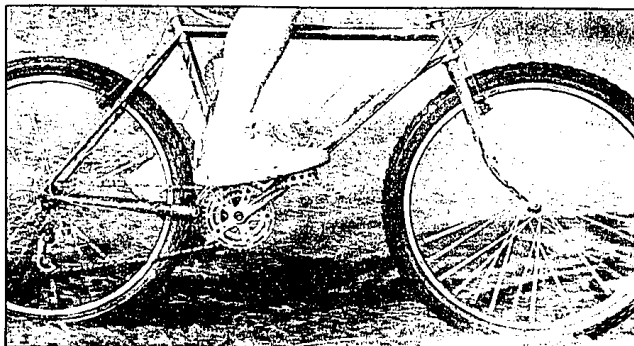
"Some people may want to ride on nothing but the most rugged terrain, and maybe they are going to ride three times a week. Others may only plan to ride on the weekends, and maybe most of their riding will be on dirt roads rather than through the woods. Depending on your needs, you can find a bike to suit your style."

Here's some features to consider.

● **FRAME.** The frame, along with the wheels, has the most to do with how the bike rides. The two most practical frames are made of either aluminum or chrome molybdenum (chrome-molly). The aluminum frames are best for weight and strength, but naturally the most expensive. Unless you're planning on riding on a daily, competitive basis, the chrome-molly alloy will be the best buy. For the price, it's the lightest and strongest combination available. Frames made of other types of metal tend to be heavy, weak or both. Frame sizes range from 17-23 inches.

● **WHEELS.** The wheels, and that includes the tires, are also a critical element in determining the smoothness of the ride. Generally, aluminum wheels are best suited for all-terrain riding. They're light and durable and react much better to wet brakes (caused by wet grass, muddy trails or shallow streams) than steel rims. Tire width should be determined according to the type of terrain. With wider tires you'll have to expend more energy to move the bike. But on sandy or soft surfaces the wide tires will give you more stability. Thinner tires are good for flat, smooth surfaces but tend to sink into soft surfaces such as sand and gravel. When riding, remember that low tire pressure will give best results on the trails while high air pressure

What to look for in a bike



DAN DEAN/staff photographer

Stone's Radline Conquest 18-speed mountain bike uses its higher gearing to make it through rough terrain.

will offer a smoother, easier ride on pavement. Wheel size ranges from 20-26 inches.

● **SHIFTING MECHANISMS.** With a possibility of 18 gears from which to choose, the best type of shifting systems are the ones that click into each position. Two of the best types are the Shimano Indexing System and the Accufine Sinter Tour system. Both are reliable and advanced and take the guess work of shifting from one gear to another. The derailleur should be quiet in each gear. Try to overshift and see if the

derailleur will allow the chain to jump off the sprockets.

● **BRAKES.** The most common type of brakes on a mountain bike is the cantilever type of caliper (much like the 10-speed brakes). These brakes are welded right to the frame, gaining the strength of the frame. Also available is the power-cam brake which is a little stronger overall than the cantilever. But because the power-cam is mounted on the bottom of the rear part

of the frame it often becomes caked with mud or dirt, reducing its reliability.

● **HANDLEBARS.** Handlebars give you the most control over where you're going. Select a pair of handlebars that will provide you with comfort and good response. If they are too wide, you'll be spread out too far and won't be able to respond to quick, sharp turns. If they're too narrow, you'll tend to feel cramped and often over-turn.

● **SEAT.** Mountain bike seats are generally wider than the 10-speed seats. Select a seat that feels comfortable but isn't so wide that it restricts leg movement. Most mountain bike seats are also adjustable since you may need to raise the seat when you require full leg extension for more power, or lower the seat for better control while coasting or cruising.

● **AXLES.** Quick-release axles and solid axles are both available. The quick-release axle is great for road riding and carrying your bike on a rack or in a car. But in the field, the quick-release lever could hook on a branch or log and the wheel may become loose, although it doesn't happen often. The solid axle is more durable and better for rugged riding.

ONCE YOUR individual needs have been outlined, compare a few models. Test ride each bike. Stand on the pedals and rock back-and-forth while listening for any strange sounds. Ride a short distance without your hands on the handlebars to see if the bike continues to roll in a straight line. Check the brakes. Shift through the gears. If something doesn't meet up to your expectations, don't buy the bike.

"The worst thing someone can do is to buy a bicycle below the standard of what you expect from the bike," Loiselle said. "Usually when you buy a bike you'll end up using it more than you planned so you'll want to buy a bike you can grow into. If you buy a bike for the price, you're buying for the wrong reason."

"No one kind of bike can do everything. Mountain bikes are usually not great for long rides, and touring bikes are usually not great for off-the-road use. If you plan to do both, buy two bikes."

Some local cycle shops which sell mountain bikes include Allied Bicycle Center in Redford, The Plymouth Trading Post, Bike and Tour Shop in Livonia, Pro Cycle Center in Troy and HKH Cycles in Keego Harbor.