

# COMPLETELY CUSTOM **MERIWETHER TITANIUM**

*When a writer puts his money where his mouth is*

By Zach White



# HARDTAIL



It's almost laughable that a longtime bike reviewer with an often critical opinion of products has never actually designed or built a bike. Granted, frame building generally equates to hardtails, and while I can't deny racing a few World Cup Downhills on steel hardtails, as soon as full-suspension bikes were available, I was all in. But, after a few decades of gravity-biased racing on bigger and more capable bikes almost every year, typical rides these days are less sendy and more trendy. That is, they include smoother and flowier trails, as well as overnight bikepacking adventures.

Enter my old buddy, Whit Johnson. Since starting Meriwether Cycles in 2013, his frames have been geared towards the all-day mountain bike rides he was known to do in between pro podium cyclocross race appearances, always wearing Nema "baggies" amidst Saturn skinsuits. Johnson was a legend in the '90s, a true-to-his-roots mountain biker with enough talent to crush proper professional cyclists, but, he ultimately felt more fulfilled out on the trails than between the tape. His love for mountain biking translates directly into his frames, and after a few years of drooling over the details of his builds displayed on Instagram, I finally talked myself into ordering a frame.

MBA contributor Zach White riding near his hometown in Salida, Colorado.



Truth be told, I've owned more than a handful of hardtails over the years, but none of them felt like they were completely on point, so they often collected more dust than miles. It was usually a combination of poor fit, funky geometry and not being the optimal choice for bikepacking that would keep them out of rotation. Specific to the latter, paint would get scuffed from packs and straps. Hardtails with fun, modern geometry would only have one or maybe two water-bottle mounts, and most front triangles were too small to offer space for a high-volume frame bag. On the other hand, bikepacking-specific frames tended to ride like the antiques I grew up on.

Whit and I bounced a dozen e-mails back and forth before finally agreeing on what would become the "Slackpacker"—a titanium hardtail with geometry and fit similar to that of current full-suspension trail bikes, plenty of water-bottle bosses, and rack attachment points for multi-day adventures built to fit my exact size.

**FRAME**

Using 3/2.5 titanium, we opted for roughly 10-percent-larger and -thicker tubes all around to add a bit more stiffness and durability for my 210-pound weight and roughly 25 pounds of pack weight, as well as my somewhat aggressive descending style. The slightly larger



Although the frame's titanium tubeset is thicker and larger in diameter than standard builds, they still look small compared to most carbon and aluminum frames.

tubeset still looks tiny compared to that of just about any carbon or aluminum frame, but it rides incredibly well.

While the head tube angle is a pretty standard 65 degrees with a 140mm fork, the seat tube is somewhat slacker than current trends at 74.6 degrees. A bent seat tube in conjunction with a machined

chainstay yoke and T47 94mm bottom bracket shell allows for relatively short, 16.9-inch chainstays while still leaving enough room for a 2.6 tire.

We ran external housing routing, save for an internal port to accommodate the dropper housing. The shifter and rear brake housing are run along the top tube belly to

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keep them tucked away, and the housing clamp bolts can double as strapless frame-pack mounts. There are two standard water-bottle mounts on the top of the downtube, one on the seat tube, and one bottle mount on each seatstay for a grand total of five standard bottle-mounting options. On the downtube belly is a three-bolt mount that’s perfect for King Cage’s Anything cage, which usually carries gear instead of a giardia scoop (bottom-of-downtube-mounted water bottle). And last, there are rack mounts on the rear triangle that offer a lower and more stable pack alternative to the usual saddlebag.

## SUSPENSION

Are hardtails a party in the front and business in the back or the other way around? Regardless, a 2022 Fox Factory 34 makes for a short story on suspension. I opted for a rather long, 140mm-travel fork to keep the front end as familiar as possible when jumping back and forth between modern full-suspension trail bikes and the Slackpacker. The FIT4 damper allows three positions to set appropriate squish to. As for the rear, the only real adjustment to ride quality available is to run up to a 2.6-inch tire for a little more cushion.

## DRIVETRAIN

The 175mm Hope EVO cranks with the 30-tooth ring that I chose fit this build quite nicely, offering impressive stiffness and durability, as well as a touch of English class. The smaller ring is specific to long, slow mountain grinds when the bike is fully loaded, but is still bearable for lunch-hour rips. A SRAM GX shifter, derailleur, chain and cassette were a last-minute backup plan when the Shimano XT wasn’t available. It’s been working fine, but eventually all the SRAM stuff will get replaced.

## WHEELS

A polarizing choice for many, I opted for Hunt All-Mountain Carbon H\_Impact wheels over alloy options. While I’ve had a few carbon catastrophes, I’ve never owned more maintenance-free wheelsets than ones with carbon rims. They just seem to hold tension and true better than alloy rims



An additional set of downtube bottle bosses adds options when the frame bag is not in use.



Zach runs a small solar panel on top of his handlebar bag to charge small electronic devices on longer trips.

that can be tweaked back into shape out on the trail but always need to be tinkered with. The Hunt rims also ride impressively smoothly, and any added comfort on a hardtail is a welcome feature. With several hundred miles of trail use and abuse, these wheels are as round and true as the day they were installed, and they were set up tubeless with a floor pump.

## TIRES

After trying several tire combos, I found Maxxis’s new Forekaster 29x2.4 feels the most at home on the Slackpacker. The tires roll very well on typically dry and rocky

Colorado trails, as well as on the loamier and rootier trails of British Columbia. So far, they’re flat-free, too, and seem to be wearing impressively slow.

## SEALANT

WTB’s TCS sealant has been working well, and the bonus is that it’s ammonia-free. In combination with Reserve Fillmore valves, the setup has been completely painless.

## BRAKES

Hope Tech 4 E4 brakes offer incredibly consistent and predictable performance

## WRITERS' RIDES

and have the easiest adjustments out there. I briefly thought of opting for either a set of single-piston brakes or just running a double-piston caliper on the front, but the reality of keeping a fully packed bike in check on long descents made me opt for more power. It was a great choice, and they've turned into my favorite brake set these days. What's more, the housing ports on the levers are relatively low profile and don't get in the way of handlebar bags like some levers do. They're matched with Hope Standard rotors, 180mm up front and 160mm in the back. More form than function, the chosen rotor sizes allow for direct caliper mounting without spacers.

### AT THE BARS

Chromag's Cutlass carbon bars in the 31.8mm clamp diameter offer strength that goes well beyond ISO standards, but, more important, they aren't nearly as stiff as the usual 35mm clamp diameter options out there. It's a nice touch for long rides on a hardtail to have just a bit less trail chatter rattling my bones. Matched with a pair of Ergon GFR1 grips and a Chromag Ranger V2 is a compact stem. The combo is clean and simple.

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### DROPPER POST/SADDLE

Contrary to almost every other brand, Fox's Transfer dropper posts have yet to fail me, so that was an easy choice. This 175mm Factory Transfer left a mere 6mm of exposed post, so we basically nailed the frame fit. It also has enough recoil power to not have issues when a big bikepacking saddlebag is attached to it, which has been a problem with a couple of other post brands. The stock lever was swapped out with a Wolf Tooth ReMote BellTower kit. I run bells on every personal bike, and this is a clean way to mount a Spur Cycle bell. The only complaint is that there's not a whole lot of ergonomic adjustment in the kit, so it's a little off target from the ideal position.

A longtime personal favorite for long rides is WTB's Pure Ti saddle, and it's low profile enough to be great on livelier laps as well. It's a softer saddle with more padding than what most bikes come equipped with, which is a bonus in my book.



This bike isn't just for bikepacking. Zach also built it to be a good time on the trails without the baggage.



Fox's Transfer dropper post has enough return force to lift a loaded seatbag.

### PEDALS

Shimano SPDs are my go-to, and for this build an older set of XTR M970 pedals seemed appropriate. Consistent, bomber and essentially maintenance-free, it's hard to imagine riding on anything else.

### ACCESSORIES AND ADD-ONS

Titanium King water-bottle cages seemed like a no-brainer for the Slackpacker. They're light and strong, and the Side Loader cages offer multiple mounting positions. Their Manything cage is perfect for the downtube belly, and its simple design lends itself to, well, carrying many things.

Oveja Negra's XL frame bag happened

to fit like it was custom cut for the Slackpacker, and the fact that it's XL means there's quite a bit of real estate. Their Bootlegger bags with SKS Anywhere straps work great on the fork legs, and Oveja Negra's Gearjammer seat bag has been a go-to for years now.

Up front, I run Big Agnes' Fly Creek HV UL2 Bikepack tent, which has a direct-mount bag that fits nice and snug on the bars. The tent poles are shorter than those of other tents when stowed, which makes a notable difference in cockpit compatibility.

**Estimated value:** \$8,000ish complete (\$3,200 frame only)

**Weight:** 26.8 lb.

**Contact:** [www.meriwethercycles.com](http://www.meriwethercycles.com) □

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# TRAIL ROC +

Developed with top tier athletes such as Thomas GENON, the TRAIL ROC + pedal raises the bar when it comes to grip and handling. Best grip and traction with concave platform and 10 pins per side. High durability : forged aluminum body, premium dual bearings on a sealed, serviceable system. Made with pride in France - US based service and support.

photo : Boris Beyer

