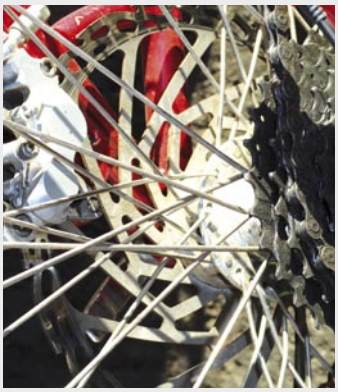
(Left) Dylan with his prototype, which fits riders from 5ft 3in to 6ft 5in. Production versions are custom built for the rider. They won't fit riders smaller than that but can, of course, be designed for taller riders (Below) The prototype uses 48-hole tandem hubs laced to 36in rims designed for unicyclists



MY BIKE

DYLAN THOMAS'S 36ER

WHILE MOUNTAIN BIKERS ARE DEBATING HOW MUCH DIFFERENCE AN INCH OR THREE MAKES TO WHEEL SIZE, DYLAN THOMAS HAS ADDED TEN. ROB AINSLEY SPOKE TO HIM

Dylan Thomas's 36-inch wheel mountain bike certainly turns the heads of tourists strolling York's medieval streets. What started as a technical exercise – a wall display for a wheelbuilder to show off his craft – has turned into a different niche business. As far as he is aware, Dylan was the world's first commercial maker of 36-inch-wheel MTBs. He knows of only one other maker, in San Francisco.

The 381mm-long spokes are made for him. Dylan's lacing pattern at the front is 3 leading, 3 trailing; and at the rear, 4 leading, 4 trailing. The prototype runs 46 spokes front and rear, while the production wheels have 36. That means more choice of hubs.

With the giant wheels built (on rims manufactured primarily for unicycles), the frame and fork are custom made around them. Dylan uses overlong sections of Columbus tubing – 'an expensive process given the amount of waste'. The rest of the bike, though, can be assembled off the shelf. Componentry is standard, with innertubes and tyres available commercially.

The prototype Dylan rides weighs 18kg, compared to 13kg for production models. Much of that comes from the wheels: 7.5kg compared to 1.7kg for two 700Cs. That comprises 3.5kg of hubs, rims and spokes, plus 4kg of rubber (1kg for each innertube and each tyre, although lighter, if less bombproof, innertubes are available).

Gearing presents no problems; standard MTB groupsets work fine with the larger

"You can go right over steps, drop-offs, rocks and boulders"

wheels. Not so the disc brakes: 'I initially fitted 180mm rotors. The first time I tried to stop on Clifton Bridge, it clearly didn't want to! So I fitted 203mm rotors, which do the job.' There was also a seatpost snap on the prototype, an issue corrected for the production models.

The gyroscopic momentum of the huge wheels takes a little practice. 'With a couple of rides, you get the hang of the bike, and you find they smooth out lots of bumps. I took it round the red MTB circuit in Dalby Forest and took half an hour off my 26-inch bike time, because you can go right over steps, drop-offs, rocks and boulders. Once you get used to it, it's reasonably agile. Cornering is something you have to relearn – you lean into corners and then turn, more like a motorbike at speed.'

It's not merely a novelty bike. Dylan recently did a 65-mile day loop up to Castle Howard and back on the 36er. But for most daily commuting, he uses a 1946 Phillips that he's converted to a three-speed with a coaster brake: 'Nothing to go wrong!'

Building 36ers has some curious side-effects. 'I can find it hard to distinguish between 26-inch wheels and 700Cs just looking round the workshop, so I have to label the racks. If I've just built a 36in set, I need to go for a walk and have lunch so my eyes can reset!'

TECH SPEC

Dylan Thomas's prototype 36er

Frame and fork: Custom Columbus Gara and Zona tubing

Wheels: Custom made at Yourspokes, with Nimbus 36in rims, Night Rider 36×2.25in tyres, Novatec tandem hubs, custom spokes

Transmission: Prototype uses a mix of Shimano Deore and XTR. Production models are built to customer spec, using standard 3×9 or 3×10 MTB gearing. (You'll want a 22-tooth inner ring to ride off-road.)

Brakes: Hope M4 Downhill hydraulic disc with 203mm rotors

Steering and seating: Carbon fibre Salsa MTB bars, Extralite Easton downhill stem, Cane Creek S6 headset, Kilroy seatpost

Website: pimcycles.co.uk