



Barkly was the complete package for a coach in a decade where attitude meant everything. He was agile, cunning and dependable and these traits endured for a career of dunks, brawls and rebounds. Although Barkly never won a Championship, his way of playing the game survived. And with the legacy of many of these impressions in mind, I now find it easy to make the connection between former and present passions of my own.

Firstly, I'd like to make it crystal-clear that I see no comparisons between Barkly and myself (he has less hair and bigger feet for a start), but more realistically I see a strong link between "Sir Charles" and the bike on review here, the Santa Cruz's Bullit. In fact, I'd go so far as to say that if Barkly rode mountain bikes, he'd

ride one of these. Back in high school, I was more than just a little enraptured with the United States pro-basketball competition, the NBA. I lived the game. Had the shoes. Had the socks. I even had the walk, down pat - a kind of cool swagger somewhere between a case of patella tendonitis and James Dean on the prowl - which instantly identifies you as a wanna-be something. Within that not-so-humble League, I had my favourites. I followed the Detroit Pistons. A team with superstars like Isiah Thomas, Joe Dumars, John Salley and Dennis Rodman. Throughout the 80's the Pistons were one of the powerhouse teams of the competition and took their share of championship titles. Each year in the play-offs, the Pistons always seemed to wind up going head to head with the Philadelphia 76ers, and it was in that team they faced one of the most-feared, most versatile and most exciting players in the history of the competition - Charles Barkly.

The 2002 Bullit addresses every single issue that has arisen out of the freeride scene and then goes a step further. Where most manufacturers would stop at the point where they feel they've done enough, Santa Cruz seem to have adopted a design policy almost verging on a "worst-case scenario" - think of the most demanding situation this bike is ever likely to be in and double it. As for the Sixers, they acquired probably the best power-forward of the 80's in someone who didn't just post-up and get a few rebounds, but could also lead the fast break, block shots, shoot from long range and dish off assists when required. The same philosophy applies in both cases - don't do things by halves.

Let there be no mistaking it, though, this bike is definitely not an all-rounder. It won't weave silently through uphill singletrack switchbacks nor nimbly traverse near-invisible lines between handlebar-width trees. Rather,

you opt for a Bullit if you're the kind of rider who doesn't mind admiring flowers while passing them on the climb at a jogging pace, before ploughing recklessly over or through anything on a flat or downhill gradient.

By all reports, Santa Cruz are planning to discontinue their perennial favourite, the Super-8, and so in order for the down-hill-specific V10 to have a sibling, the Bullit had to be bolstered. Re-enforcing gussets now adorn either side of the down/top/head tube union, while the seat tube has been straightened out to facilitate uninhibited seat post movement. Further, both the bottom-bracket height and the head tube angle are adjustable, by use of a simple intermediate connector which joins the forward shock eyelet to the frame at the down-tube, and rear wheel travel is now 7 inches. The most outstanding aspect of all the changes would have to be the inclusion of the new mind-boggling 5th Element rear shock from U.S. designer /manufacturer Progressive Suspension. The tuning options of this shock are almost endless. For those with a potential interest in bikes sporting the new shock, this may sound a little daunting. However, the reality of this tunability is that Progressive have at last offered motorcycle-like dampening features in a shock that is principally straight-forward with which to work. Its' strength lies in that you can be as creative and adventurous as you've ever wanted to be, yet not be overwhelmed and intimidated by the possibilities. The designers are encouraging when it comes to experimentation, and I would urge any owner to exploit this. In fact, it would not be remiss of me to suggest that the 5th Element shock makes this bike what it is - after all, the Bullit's suspension design is basically a single-pivot swingarm canti-lever.

Sitting aboard the Bullit for the first time is enough of an experience in itself to tell you that it is something quite different. The 19" (C to T) frame on review sported a 23 and a half inch top-tube, so even with the seat post almost fully inserted, there was ample room with which to steer and pedal while seated without knees and elbows getting entangled. To further accentuate the aggressive nature of the bike, it was fitted out with a 24" rear wheel, 7-inch travel Marzocchi Super-T forks and Hayes hydraulic brakes with 8" rotors

front and rear. All up, around 19.5kg – not a lightweight!

To get just a tease of the potential, you need only mash hard around a parking lot for 5 minutes. After adjusting the shock to the recommended settings (as suggested in the "Quick Start" guide), any response by the suspension to pedalling is almost non-existent, to the point where you could be forgiven for thinking it's been grossly over-dampened. In summary, the 5th Element shock offers 5-way adjustability (independent speed- and position-sensitive compression dampening for both the beginning and end of the stroke, as well as rebound dampening) plus external preload. Due to the huge range of possible adjustments, probably the best way to describe the set-up of the shock for a test-ride would be that it should bob minimally while pedalling, yet absorb small to large objects at medium to high speeds, offer a "plush" feel in its' first stage on big hits then ramp up to avoid bottoming on big impacts (eg vertical drops).

With the shock aside, other physical attributes deserve a mention. Firstly, the tube-set on this bike it's big. Chain-stays, seat-stays, down-tube...you name it, it's all BIG. This adds up to lots of weight, but awesome rigidity. Diagonal and off-camber landings don't make weird noises, the shock doesn't bind and the entire stroke is smooth. Like all swing-arm designs, though, the shortening of the rear-axle-to-bottom-bracket under compression is noticeable and the chain occasionally had a tendency to sporadically jump on the rear cassette when pedalling through rough and choppy terrain. On the positive, though, the cable routing for a front derailleur offers the option of granny-gear bail-outs, while tyre clearance is good for anything up to 2.7 inches.

On the trail and street, the ride could best be described as stable. For the first time, a rear-end suspension unit didn't feel just like



a coil spring that only absorbed bumps. The feel was controlled in a freakish way that literally lets you get back to the job at hand of seeking out new obstacles and challenges. Although the forks bottomed on a few occasions, the rear end never even felt like coming close, as the deadening feel of the steep rising rate at the very end of the stroke consumed even vertical drops to flat landings. A testimony to the performance of the compression dampening is in the fact that the 2-inch stroke shock runs only a 325 pound spring!

In spite of the "indestructo" image the Bullit has garnered over the past few years, those contemplating a purchase needn't feel as though they're committing themselves to a career of death-defying back-country manoeuvres. It's versatility goes well into the realm of all-day play-bike and hard-core recreational XC. To date,

many riders are choosing to spec' their Bullit with single-crown forks, front derailleurs and lower profile wheels and tyres. Its' adjustable geometry lends itself to a variety of uses, all, however, based around a high-quality, durable frame. Make no bones about it, though – this is a bike for harsh riding that wants and needs to be pushed to the limit to appreciate its' potential. Saddle up! Do your worst! The Bullit is ready.

[fw]