

Niner Bikes was selling T-shirts at the Sea Otter Classic espousing that this was the “Year of Niner,” which got me thinking, on the long drive home, about the inevitable restructuring that results when a perceived fad within our sport becomes a scientific reality. A pivotal teacher of mine said that when a new concept presents itself, it’s like an important guest entering a room where all are seated and there is no additional chair. Everyone must rise to greet the guest, all must reconsider the new seating arrangements, and ultimately, one person will end up without a seat. Niner’s prediction is accurate. The 29er has entered the room, the cross-country guests are all scrambling, and it appears that the 26-inch wheel hardtail will be left without a chair.

Blasphemous words, no doubt, but the truth is impossible to ignore—the 29-inch hardtail is superior to its smaller-wheeled cousin in all corners of the cross-country performance envelope. It rolls faster, climbs better, descends with a measurable improvement in control, and the larger-wheel format nearly approaches the rough-terrain capabilities of a four-inch-travel, dual-suspension 26er. In short, if you prefer a hardtail, your first and only choice is a 29er—unless you are simply too short to fit between two 29-inch wheels and maintain an ergonomic pedaling position on the bike.

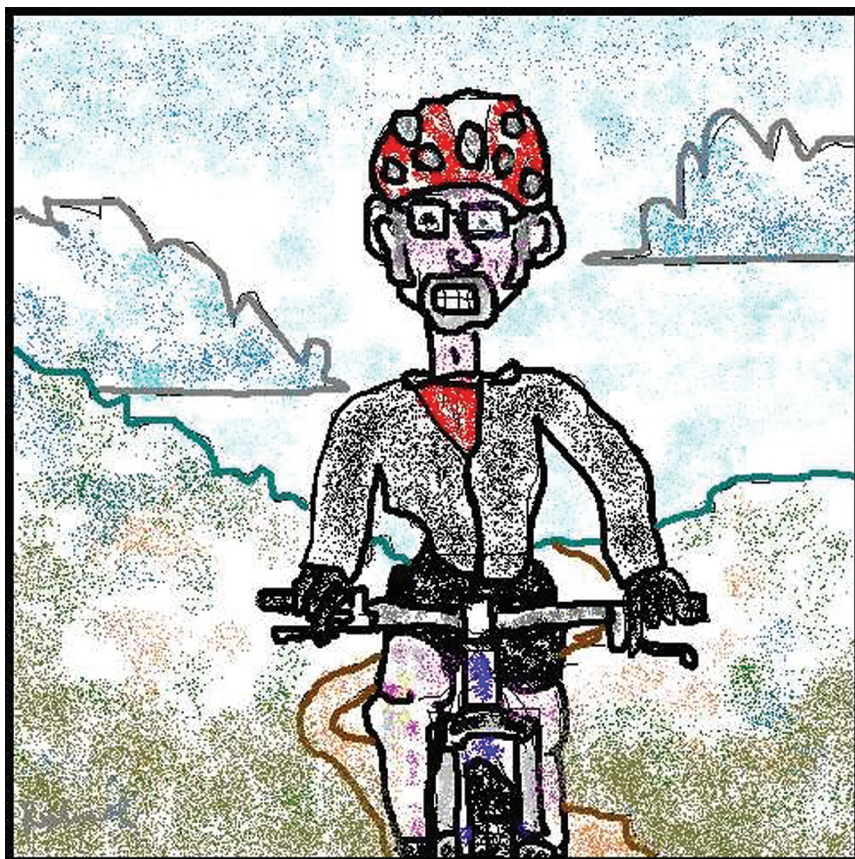
Don’t bother pointing the crooked skeletal finger of accepted tradition and spouting with your toothless mouth: “If 29ers are superior, why is the 26-inch wheel hardtail the first choice of World Cup Professionals?” We heard it all before when suspension forks appeared, and then dual-suspension, and then disc brakes. Professional racers resisted low-pressure tubeless tires after that, and yet, all of these “nevers” fill the start line at World Cup cross-country events today. The overwhelming evidence exists in North America’s amateur cross-country ranks, where 29ers will soon outnumber 26ers in marathon events and are a rapidly growing presence at traditional cross-country venues. As they say in Montana: “Eat more lamb—10,000 coyotes can’t be wrong.”

Will cross-country phenomenon Julien Absalon abandon his 26-inch-wheeled Orbea Alma and opt for a 29er? Probably not—but the man who ultimately dethrones him may well be sporting big wheels. All of the 29er’s technical barriers have been flattened. Folks like Niner have ironed out weight, wheel-strength, tire design, geometry issues and proper gearing. Perhaps the only hurdle that stands between the 29er and the pro peloton is the fact that the sport’s top racers hail from Europe, where 29ers have been summarily rejected by both industry pundits and enthusiasts alike. Once Europe gets its head around big wheels, however, the simple fact that a 29er hardtail can approach the downhill performance of a complex, short-travel, dual-suspension bike will eventually turn the tide. I am sure that Absalon and friends would rather race a big-wheeled hardtail than accept the reality of rear suspension—ever.

And what about rear suspension? How will the new seating arrangement upset the status of dual-suspension cross-country bikes once the 29er hardtail is comfortably in its chair? The reality is that bike makers are lost on this one, so don’t seek

leadership from the big brands. The first victim of the 29er shuffle will be every dual-suspension trailbike with less than four inches of travel—easy matches for a big-wheeled hardtail. Add a few inches of rear suspension to the 29er equation and it will mock any 26-inch suspension bike with less than five inches of travel. After that point, however, physical complications related to swinging a huge wheel into the seat tube block the 29er from further encroaching into the territory of the 26er. The foreseeable conclusion to this game of dual-suspension musical chairs is that the realm of the 26-inch wheel cross-country bike (strictly from a performance standpoint) will begin at five inches. Anyone who can read the wind will agree that this is already happening.

What does this mean to cross-country enthusiasts? Well, nothing immediately, because we already own bikes that fit our riding style. But the year of the 29er will surely affect our next purchase. If you belong to the 26-inch-wheel establishment, ride a few 29ers (really ride them) before you throw down for a same-old, same-old—you’ll be pleasantly surprised. Ignore this advice, and you may be left standing. □



R. Cunningham illustration