

SAGE

DROPTIMATOR

Getting the drop on the competition

Anyone paying attention to racing over the last year has probably noticed an interesting trend that has reemerged after a few decades of dormancy—drop handlebars. Drop-bar mountain bikes were common in the earliest days of the sport. However, it was John Tomac who made them famous on mountain bikes back in 1990 to keep his position the same as his 7-Eleven team road bike. Curly bars quickly faded away as he transitioned back to mountain bikes full-time. Then, like a blast from the past, we started seeing racers, such as Keegan Swenson and Dylan Johnson, putting drop bars on their mountain bikes for longer events like Leadville, where average speeds tend to be higher than your typical race. Founder and CEO of Sage Titanium Dave Rosen wondered what a drop-bar mountain bike would look like if it were actually designed with that cockpit and short-travel fork in mind. So, he created the Droptimator—a bike purpose-built for going really fast over rough terrain.

CATEGORY

Cross-country

SUSPENSION

120mm
front

TIRE SIZE

29"



FRAME

The Droptimator's frame is built from Sage's 3/2.5 titanium tubing with 3D-printed titanium dropouts and chainstay yoke. It is based on Sage's current Optimator cross-country hardtail, but this was born out of the necessity to run a mountain bike fork. Sage could have started with a clean slate and created more of a monster gravel bike, but gravel suspension fork tire clearance limitations and the desire to use a 2.2-inch tire steered them back to using a mountain bike fork. And, Sage quickly realized that with a few tweaks of the Optimator's geometry, it would get them exactly what they wanted.

Geometry features a 69-degree head angle, which splits the difference between the Optimator's 67.5-degree and Storm

King gravel bike's 70.5-degree head angle. Compared to the Optimator, a shortened top tube and head tube gave the Droptimator appropriate reach and stack figures to go with the drop-bar setup. This bike will be offered with custom geometry and as a special order only. Other custom options include anodizing and Cerakote finishes.

SUSPENSION

Sage designs the Droptimator around a 100mm-travel fork. Customers will have a choice of various RockShox and Fox suspension fork options. Sage says that because of the unique nature of this bike, not all frame sizes will clear a 100mm mountain bike fork crown, so appropriate substitutions will be offered.

The Droptimator's large tire footprint lets it carve corners surprisingly well.



Custom painted frame and components can give the Droptimator a one of a kind look.

Our test bike came with a 100mm-travel RockShox SID SL Ultimate Flight Attendant fork. RockShox has recently introduced a software upgrade that allows the Flight Attendant to work on hardtails with just the fork and power meter crank.

COMPONENTS

The Droptimator will be sold only as a frameset with the frame, fork and headset. Select drivetrain, cockpit and wheel options are also available for customers wanting a complete bike. Our test bike was built with primarily mountain bike parts until you get to the handlebars, where you see more of a gravel spec. The drivetrain consists of SRAM's XX Eagle AXS T-Type derailleur, chain and power meter cranks with a 38-tooth chainring. It's all controlled by SRAM Red eTap AXS road and gravel levers. Those same levers are paired with SRAM Level mountain bike brake calipers. Both combinations work extremely well, as if they were made to work as a group.

The wheel and tire spec is completely mountain bike-oriented with Enve's M5 Pro carbon wheels and 2.25-inch-wide Schwalbe's Rick XC Pro tires. Both are what you'd expect to see on a high-end cross-country race setup. The cockpit is where things get very different, particularly in the front of the bike. Here, Sage utilized 44cm-wide Zipp SL 70 XPLR carbon drop bars matched to a 70mm-long, minus-17-degree Zipp Service Course SL stem. Both are custom-painted to match the frame graphics on our test bike.

CLIMBING

Most of our test riders have either a lot of past gravel experience or are still hard at it, and they were very curious where the Droptimator fits into things. It fits and feels just like your average gravel bike in terms of cockpit setup. It has more of a sit-on feel of



The Droptimator was capable of clocking some air time, too.

a mountain or cyclocross bike than sit-in of a gravel bike, though, because of a slightly higher bottom bracket. Compared to a flat-bar setup, the biggest difference is the multiple hand positions that the drop bars provide. Not only do you have three positions to choose from, which is nice on really long rides, but the drops and hoods put you in a lower, narrower and more stretched-out position than flat bars.

Out on gravel roads and trails, pedaling uphill is very similar to that of a lightweight hardtail. That more aero position offers an advantage when speeds pick up, and you can really feel it on faster gravel roads. On steep climbs and slower singletrack, the difference in speed is not there, and it's very similar to a flat-bar hardtail mountain bike. Ride quality is identical to the Optimator—smooth, lively, yet very efficient in power transfer to the rear wheel. This was our first time testing the RockShox Flight Attendant with the new software update for hardtails, and it works just as well as the full-suspension version. The fork magically stiffens based on your power output, and you can override the system to go into the open, pedal, or locked modes with a press of a button. In this case, it was programmed to use the button on the top of the left hood.

DESCENDING

It was on the descents where we felt an advantage over your average gravel bike. Between the larger tires and the increase in fork travel, we were able to more comfortably attack trails that we rode more gingerly on a purely gravel setup. More often than not, we were surprised with what we could get away with on this bike. Greater dropper-post travel than typical gravel setups helped bump the rowdy factor up a few notches, too. Its operation is very well integrated into the AXS wireless system as well. It was programmed to operate when both shift paddles were pressed at the same time. This made more sense than utilizing one of the hood's top buttons since you can operate it from either the hoods or the drops.



The SRAM XX Eagle AXS wireless drivetrain came with a 38-tooth chainring and a 10-52 cassette.

The ability to ride technical trails is really based on rider skill. Our younger, more aggressive test riders basically rode the Droptimator like a hardtail mountain bike. There was very little that they didn't feel comfortable taking on. Our older, maybe wiser, but definitely more conservative test riders felt more limited on the drop bars. Because of the different weight bias, we found ourselves transferring our weight back a bit more to compensate. The lower and more forward rider position made some of them skip some of the very same trails that they previously rode our Optimator test bike on. However, they rode more trails and felt more confident on the Droptimator than their gravel bikes.

WHAT DID WE LOVE?

Everybody was thoroughly impressed with the SRAM and RockShox electronic component integration on this bike. Their road and mountain bike parts work in harmony when paired together. And, it's these parts that give this bike a cohesive look, function and feel rather than a cobbled-together, random assortment of components.

WHAT DID WE HATE?

We experienced a bit of chain slap on the chainstay when in the cassette's smallest cog on really rough terrain. It was not common, but we would add some sort of rubber guard here.

BOTTOM LINE

Sage is on to something with the Droptimator. For those wondering if it's a mountain bike or is it a gravel bike, the answer is yes. But, it's more than just a set of drop bars on a hardtail. It's uniquely positioned between most gravel bikes and hardtail mountain bikes, blending the best of the two together. After testing it, we can see why some racers are choosing to put drop bars on their mountain bikes for certain events. It's not for everybody, though. For pure gravel road riding, a traditional gravel bike is faster and more efficient-feeling. But, for those who ride and race on faster flowy and doubletrack trails, or whose typical gravel ride includes a healthy dose of real mountain bike singletrack along the way, the Droptimator is a superior setup and a lot more fun for the average rider. □

Our test riders had no problem riding the Droptimator at high speeds on their local trails.

SAGE DROPTIMATOR

www.sagetitanium.com

Price	\$13,099 (as tested, excluding paint)
Weight	22.2 pounds (without pedals)
Sizes	Custom only
Frame tested	3/2.5 titanium
Fork	RockShox SID SL Ultimate Flight Attendant, 100mm travel
Wheelset	Enve M5 Pro 29" carbon
Tires	Schwalbe Rick XC Pro 29x2.25"
Seatpost	RockShox Reverb AXS (150mm travel)
Saddle	Sage Beccus 155mm
Handlebar	Zipp SL 70 XPLR, carbon, 44cm
Stem	Zipp Service Course SL, 70mm, 17°
Headset	Chris King Inset 7
Brake calipers	SRAM Level Ultimate Stealth four-piston f/r
Rotors	SRAM HS2 Centerlock 180mm f/r
Rear derailleur	SRAM XX Eagle AXS T-Type
Shifters	SRAM Red eTap AXS E1
Crankset	XX SL Eagle Transmission AXS w/ power, Spider, 170mm
Bottom bracket	Chris King T47 30X
Cassette	SRAM XX SL XS-1299 T-Type, 10-52T
Chain	SRAM XX SL T-Type
Chainrings	SRAM 38-tooth

GEOMETRY

Head tube angle	69°
Effective seat tube angle	73.75°
Reach	417mm (16.4")
Stack	610mm (24")
Bottom bracket height	317mm (12.5")
Chainstay length	425mm (16.7")
Wheelbase	1099mm (43.3")



ON THE RIDER

Trek Trek Velocis MIPS helmet (\$330)
Contact: www.trekbikes.com

100% S3 sunglasses (\$139-\$169)
Contact: www.100percent.com

USWE Scarp jersey (\$170),
Scarp bib short (\$260)
Contact: uswe.com

Swiftwick Enve compression socks (\$25)
Contact: enve.com

Specialized S-Works Recon shoes
(\$500)
Contact: www.specialized.com

