Softride FasTT

By Jay Prasuhn

The FasTT frame, including frame and beam, retails at $2,299.

In a tri bike market in which everyone, it seems, is offering cutout seattubes and carbon this and titanium that, Softride is one brand that has remained viable throughout it all with a product so very different. Which really isn't surprising. When Mike and Jim Allsop debuted the first "beam bikes" at Interbike in 1989, they stood cycling's conventional wisdom on end with a product that looked like nothing else the industry had ever seen.

More than 15 years later, Softride is still putting out a worldbeater bike in an increasingly competitive market. The new FasTT is the next generation of the discontinued Rocket TT and represents the pick of the litter among long-course athletes who value aggressive positioning, understand the biomechanical advantages the FasTT's unique design presents, and love a ride that maintains speed for hours like a metronome.

The FasTT—and for that matter, any Softride—sits in a niche within a niche. Since it doesn't conform to the UCI's "double diamond" requirement, it has been banished from road racing as well as ITU triathlon events. Fortunately, it's legal for non-drafting long course racing, the arena where it best shines.

My experience with Softride is somewhat tainted. I've ridden this bike's previous incarnation, the Rocket TT, in Ironman training and racing the last few years, including one of my best bike rides in an Ironman, which I have attributed heavily to the Rocket's design. So my test of the FasTT was eagerly anticipated. How could they improve on one of the best designs tailor made for mid- to long-course racing? Somewhat arrogantly, I began building the bike, thinking there won't be much difference. I would soon be pleasantly corrected.

I committed my first faux pas when putting the rear wheel into the dropouts. It took me a second to figure out why they weren't dropping in; the dropouts are now horizontal. I've said horizontal dropouts are one of the smallest details that make a big difference, shortening the wheelbase and stiffening the entire frame. In the case of the FasTT, there is no seattube to tuck the wheel into, save for the bottom bracket and front derailleur. Will it stiffen the ride on new chainstays?

The frame's downtube/headtube juncture takes on a smooth new taper as well. But the most visible change is the move from double wishbone chainstays to a set of aero aluminum stays that extend back to the dropout brackets. Clearly, it's those new stays that are the thrust of Softride's fastest bike campaign. But would they allow a ride that was stiff out of saddle on climbs?

Of critical importance in bringing about good ride is fit to the beam. While tricky at first (you have to account for beam sag under your body weight when figuring beam height and saddle fore/aft), the end position is what you choose. The angle of the FasTT's carbon beam and saddle bracket can be adjusted from as slack as 73 degrees to as steep as a Jürgen Zäck-esque 81 degrees. Despite the massive range, handling and stability are best optimized in an aggressively steep (76-78 degree) position.

Once the position is dialed in, it stands to reason that this unique riding platform will ride, well, uniquely. Indeed it does. Yes, the beam does bob, very slightly (much less than Softride's "classic beam" bikes, in fact). And yes, it takes only a few hours to learn to minimize that bob by pedaling in efficient circles instead of driving the legs like pistons. There's no other bike on the market that teaches you, by default, to become a better pedaler like this FasTT.

The beam doesn't bob so much as swing in a very slight u-shaped arc underneath you, allowing the beam to move slightly horizontally during each leg's downward stroke, thus bringing the leg into a straighter plane to the pedal. After three hours in the saddle, the effect of a more direct, linear pedal stroke is certainly noticeable.

Once the bike winds up to speed, it seems to want to stay there, indefinitely. On flats, the FasTT requires little leg driving once you've attained "cruising speed." Perhaps this is a result of the frame's biomechanical effect, position, and wheel selection. I've had a difficult time replicating the effect on traditional bikes. The beam, without question, sucks up heaps of road vibration, big and small, saving your body energy over six hours, and the lower backs of many with flexibility or fatigue issues. In terms of weight, it's no billy goat but holds its own with stays that aere stiff, which is surprising given the absence of any added support brackets.

Granted, the FasTT makes strides over its earlier versions with those aero seat stays (and we love those horizontal dropouts), but the biggest advantage still comes in that familiar absence of a seat tube. Sure, it's aero, but there's that bonus comfort element Ironman athletes cannot deny. Fast age groupers, especially those feeling the effects of the years and miles, can expect to tack on a few more podium seasons aboard this bike. And anyone who likes the feel of a bike that holds its speed on the flats (think Kona, Florida, New Zealand, Australia) will certainly dig it as well.

You can find more on the FasTT at www.softride.com s