

# WHEELS OF CHANGE

*The search for the perfect wheel size*



**W**hen the first production mountain bikes rolled off the massive assembly line of Joe Breeze's Breezer bicycle factory (and by massive, we mean around eight bikes), 26-inch wheels were the number-one choice of mountain bike designers. The 26-inch wheel diameter remained unchallenged for the next 20 years, until bike designers started toying with the idea of utilizing a larger, 29-inch diameter wheel.

The 29er almost died at birth due to limited support from tire companies and even less support from suspension suppliers. And it didn't help that frame geometry was intended to work around 26-inch wheels. But the big wheels were saved from the mountain bike junk pile because all three of these problems were solved. Today, 29ers enjoy plenty of wheel and suspension choices, and geometry has been dialed to take full advantage of the 29-inch format while minimizing the weaknesses of the big wheels. There are companies like Niner that only produce 29er bikes. And, Fisher Bikes announced that for 2010, all their upper-end bikes will only be available with 29-inch wheels.

A third wheel diameter, not new to cycling but new to mountain bikes, was recently introduced and championed by frame designer/builder Kirk Pacenti. The new wheel size with a two-inch tire works out to 27.5 inches, about halfway between the 26er and the 29er wheel. The draw to the mid-sized format (also referred to by bike geeks as 650b) is that the slightly larger wheel will fit some existing forks and rear suspensions engineered for 26-inch wheels. The extra space that the 27.5-inch-diameter wheel affords makes it easier to eke out clearance for rear suspension travel and for the action of the front derailleur, which is quite cramped by the placement of the 29-inch tire.