Cannondale Scalpel | 2015 Bible of Bike Tests
Cannondale's race-oriented rocketship lives up to its namesake

By: Bike

The Scalpel is a steep, fast and sharp-handling race machine. With more riders opting for bikes in the mid-travel range, though, the market for XC bikes is becoming increasingly competitive. Is the Scalpel ready for the competition? Watch the video to find out:

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For the past 13 years, one bike has been synonymous with cross-country racing: Cannondale’s Scalpel. As its name suggests, the Scalpel is a fine-tuned instrument with razor-sharp handling.

Cannondale offers five 29er Scalpel models, ranging from the $11,920 Carbon Black Inc. model to the entry-level Alloy 4 version, which sells for $3,250. Our mid-range test model sports an all-SRAM X01 single-ring drivetrain, Magura MT4 disc brakes and Stan’s ZTR Arch EX 29 rims mated to a Cannondale Lefty front hub and a Formula rear hub. The Scalpel offers up 4 inches of progressive suspension courtesy of a RockShox Monarch XX rear shock and Cannondale’s own Lefty XLR 100 29 fork. Last, but not least, the bike sports a full carbon frame.

Cannondale is the standard bearer of ‘systems integration,’ a philosophy which holds that the biggest performance gains are realized when each component on a bicycle is designed to work together. While systems integration, with its raft of proprietary widgets, can make simple tasks like swapping stems a bit of a pain, the upside is clearly felt on this bike: The Scalpel weighs about as much as a pile of fly spit, yet boasts all-mountain-style frame stiffness. Stand on the pedals and the bike rockets forward. Big climbs are no big deal. Flex under hard cornering is nearly non-existent.

The flip side to those glowing comments is, as one tester put it, “If you slack off, fail to hammer or just sit and pedal, this bike can really bite you in the ass.” The Scalpel is in its element when ridden aggressively and at race pace. Sure, Cannondale sells a lot of Scalpels to riders who’ll never actually compete, but let’s be clear: If you dream of spinning lazy
circles while meandering through meadows full of wildflowers and butterflies, you’re barking up the wrong tree here. The Scalpel isn’t a sketchy handler, but its steep head angle, short wheelbase and razor-tight frame don’t tolerate inattentive pilots.

Cannondale sells pricier, spare-no-expense versions of the Scalpel, but it’s hard to see why you’d need to upgrade. This bike is ready to pummel the competition right out of the box. —Vernon Felton

Q&A with Cannondale PR Manager Bill Rudell

We had questions about the new bikes before we even got our test rigs, so we sent out a few queries—the kind of things we thought you might be asking yourself when you’re looking at this bike. Then we sent out another round of asks if any major questions or issues came up during testing. Here’s the feedback we received from Cannondale public
relations manager, Bill Rudell.

Consider this a bonus feature—just a little something extra to chew on if you’re still hungry for information after you’ve watched our video reviews and flipped through the Bible of Bike Tests.

—Vernon Felton, Bible of Bike Tests Moderator

VERNON FELTON: Who’s the ideal rider for the Scalpel? Do you see it strictly as an all-out race machine? That’s always been the common perception of the bike.

BILL RUDELL: Well, the Scalpel certainly has a long and storied history on the cross-country scene and it is still one of the absolute lightest XC full-suspension machines available. But what makes the Scalpel such a compelling bike is that, despite its feathery weight and racer pedigree, it’s also a hell of a fast and fun trail bike.

Cross-country race bikes usually sacrifice a solid feel and confident handling on the altar of lightweight efficiency. They can be lightweight, flexy little whippets that might be fast, but aren’t much fun. With Lefty System Integration and BallisTec Carbon construction, the Scalpel manages to be ridiculously light, its razor sharp handling is definitely racy and keeps you on your game while begging to be pushed, both up and down.

The Scalpel is a great bike for the hardcore XC racer to an everyday rider looking for an edge when things get rough; that’s why we offer five Scalpels in the line ranging from the Black Inc at $11,920.00 to the Scalpel 29 Alloy 4 at $3,250.00

VF: What sets the Scalpel apart from other contenders in the cross-country race niche, such as the Specialized Epic or Niner Jet 9?

BR: Both of those bikes (as well as many other contenders for the XC crown) are amazing machines – really well thought out, great riding bikes, but the Scalpel has an ace up its sleeve that none of our competitors do—our Si (System Integration) approach to bike design.

Rather than simply building a frame and then kitting it out with other companies’ stuff, we look at the bike as a complete system. Our frames are designed specifically around components like the Lefty fork, OPI stem/steerer, and HollowGram SiSL2 cranks, so we can optimize the entire system for weight, stiffness and ride-feel benefits, and it shows. The Scalpel has end-to-end system stiffness and a rock-solid feel that no other ultra-light XC bike can match, which explains why it appeals to both racers and trail riders alike.