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Underground 29 scene: Born out of North Hollywood's singletrack subculture, Niner Bikes is run by a small group of industrialists who only build 29-inch-wheeled mountain bikes. The big wheels love to flatten jumps.



Twenty-Nine Inch Nails

Niner Bikes' lethal Air 9 hammer



The bane of 29er existence is wheel weight. On every production 29er we've tested, you can feel those heavy wheels the instant you drop below a midrange speed. It's that bog that has mostly earmarked the big-wheel bikes for strong pilots and no one else.

Niner Bikes knows this best. They made certain that we would never feel the bog by spec'ing the world's second lightest 29-inch wheelset: American Classic's 29 Disc MTB 350. At 3.5 pounds it rivals many 26-inch lightweights. The crux lightweight moment really came with Niner's decision to wrap the rims in Kenda 29 Karmas. These 1.1 pound tires are what really take the muscle beach feel out of 29er bikes. While it takes their frame to make it happen, these wheels are what turn the Niner into an Air 9 hammer.

BASED ON OXYGEN

Niner uses aluminum that has been made lighter and more resilient because the scarce alloying agent scandium has been mixed into it. Then they design it with proprietary shapes from Easton to build a tighter, lighter and better-handling 29-inch frame. Together Niner and Easton developed a bent downtube that saves weight by doing away with the need for head tube gussets. The bent downtube also adds ample fork crown/cap clearance.

The frame tubes are butted everywhere, including the inside of the head tube and bottom bracket shell. Oval-shaped stay tubes are S-bent for maximum heel and tire clearance, so much so that the Niner has far and away the best tire clearance of any 29-inch bike we've ridden. Rectangular-formed chainstays put rigidity into the lightweight material.

While our medium-size test frame weighs a great 3.1 pounds, it's still almost a quarter pound heavier than the carbon frame of the Orbea Alma 29er tested last month. Still, the Niner is almost a full half pound lighter than the Gary Fisher Paragon's aluminum frame. Niner sells the Air 9 as a disc-only design. It's available in the metallic orange-gold "Tang" color of our test bike or with a raw aluminum look.



Immaculate: We have not tested a 29er with better tire clearance than the Air 9. The thinly shaped stays bend around the tire with a good half-inch of breathing room. It's very evident that Niners are built by real riders.



To the point: We were able to tune the proper saddle-to-bar drop without reversing the stem for a negative rise. Niner worked closely with Easton to develop the ultra-short and gussetless head tube junction.

Twenty-Nine Inch Nails

29-INCH BUILD

Right now the Air 9 frame is sold by itself for \$749. Or you can purchase the frame with American Classic wheels for \$1149. One more option is to buy the Air 9 frame with the AC wheels and a Rock Shox Reba Race fork for \$1499. Our test unit also touted the Niner Flat Top 9 Bar, custom DKG Seatpost Clamp and Niner YAWYD Steerer Top Cap. (Respectively \$49.99, \$20.00 & \$12.99.) Niner constructs the Flat Top 9 Bar out of 7000 Series aluminum with a nine-degree sweep and an oversized, 1.25-inch clamp size. The You Are What You Drink replacement headset top bolt assembly uses a special cap that is sized to snap-fit a twist-off or crimped bottle cap. There was a Full Sail Ale cap on our test bike.

Niner finished off our build with a Race Face Deus XC stem and linkage seatpost, and a WTB Silverado Niner saddle.

NINER'S CHASSIS HAMMERS HARD

Niner did a great job designing the frame. The compact construction minimizes standover, and the 3.5-inch head tube length places the bar at a normal height. The real key to its excellent turning performance, lively feel and instant bar response is the 72-degree head angle. So far only Intense Cycles and Niner Bikes are aware of this big-wheel secret. When leaned, 29-inch wheels cut a shallower arc and turn slower than 26-inch wheels. In other words, they are much more stable and accommodate steeper head angles very well. As long as the builder includes enough top tube for suitable toe clearance—as Niner does—the steep head angle replaces the workhorse feel with thoroughbred alertness.

The nastier, looser, rockier, and more cambered the singletrack, the better off you are on the Air 9. It eats up terrain that will stop a bike with 26-inch wheels in its tracks.

NINER COUNTERPOINTS

The Air 9 is the best-handling hardtail 29er we've ever ridden, although it does not have the same level of tuned forgiveness as the *quasi suspension* offered on Orbea's Four Point carbon hardtail. Aboard the Niner you feel the hardness of the hardtail as soon as you pass a certain speed threshold while bounding over rough ground.

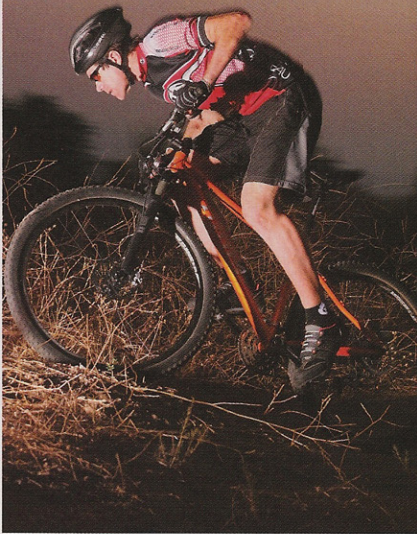
If you're under six foot even, it's impossible to get enough weight over the back tire for superior climbing traction. With a triple chainring, it's difficult to fit a 29-inch wheel with stays shorter than 17.5 inches. Until someone figures out how to do it, you can either grow half a foot more, practice dismounts and run-ups, or ride on flatter terrain.

We say this every time we test one of these, but 29 bikes are absolutely a blast to jump. Normally we have a problem with the tires peeling off the big hoops when landing crossed up. This never happened with the Niner's Kenda Karmas, although we did pinch-flat a tube landing hard on an off-camber surface. Which brings us to Kenda's claimed 2.2-inch tire size. The calipers read 2.0 inches.

We had two main product complaints: The American Classic skewers have too short of a handle, have too much closing friction, and are next to impossible to properly tighten. And the clamp-on WTB grips are absolutely terrible. It took safety wire to keep the center of the grips from twisting like a motorcycle throttle.

TWENTY-NINE INCH NAILS

With light wheels, the discrepancy between 26-inch gearing powering 29-inch wheels disappears. The gearing is still taller because the 29-inch wheels have more gear inches. On every 29-inch bike we've tested in the past, the ten percent taller low gear (when compared to a 26-inch bike) hurts on grinding climbs. With these light wheels, that negative sensation mostly disappears. While the gearing is still taller, the light wheels and tires turn so easily it feels like you're driving more tire into the ground when powering up the hill. Kind of like a bigger air hammer...an Air 9 hammer...for 29-inch nails... ☐



Night life: All it took was a one-degree steeper head angle to give a bike with big hoops a whippier, livelier feel. The Air 9 we tested is ready to win a cross-country race or to rule local singletrack.

NINER AIR 9

Price	\$3200
Country of origin	Taiwan
Weight	23.8 pounds
Hotline	(818) 888-1507
Frame tested	16.5" (Medium)
Bottom bracket height	12.1"
Chainstay length	17.5"
Top tube length	23.8"
Head angle	72°
Seat tube angle	73°
Standover height	31.3"
Wheelbase	42.7"
Suspension travel (front)	3.1"
Suspension travel (rear)	None
Frame material	Scandium
Fork	RockShox Reba Race 29
Shock	NA
Rims	American Classic 29 Disc
Tires	Kenda Karma (2.2")
Hub	American Classic
Brakes	Avid Juicy Carbon
Brake levers	Avid Juicy Carbon
Crankset	Race Face Deus XC
Shifters	Sram X.O trigger
Front derailleur	Sram X.O
Rear derailleur	Shimano XT
Chainrings	Race Face Deus XC (44/32/22)
Cassette	Sram PC-990 9-speed (11-34)
Pedals	None