



Soulcraft Option Three

by Doug Pippel

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Soulcraft was founded in September, 1999 by Sean Walling and Matt Nyiri, both of whom rose from the ashes of the Salsa Cycles production facility in Petaluma, California that was shut down last year. They decided that with Sean's 10 years of experience as Salsa's head framebuilder and Matt's marketing expertise they could do better than flipping burgers. Specifically, they could make really nice custom steel bike frames and sell them.

The Option Three is certainly a nice steel mountain bike frame, and all that that implies. Soulcraft uses Reynolds 853 air-hardened tubing on the front triangle and a combination of Columbus and Reynolds 525 on the rear. Sean's skills are evident in the design and construction quality of this bike. There are lots of details that bear mentioning, such as a machined seat collar, a machined and reinforced headtube, a laser-mitered downtube gusset and internally sealed tubing to keep the moisture out. Sean checks each hand-made frame for proper alignment six times during its construction. It's an elegantly simple hardtail design, clean and uncluttered with spiffy Tig-welding and a nicely painted gray finish with dark blue SOULCRAFT decals.



I started referring to it as "the submarine," because the paint color and frame lines conjured visions of no-nonsense military effectiveness. They use a two-step powdercoat finish that should make it more durable—a clearcoat layer on top of the color layer. The bike looks sleek and plain, the way I like them, and weighed in at just about 24.5 lbs. on the scale at Adventure Bicycle Company, my friendly shop in Mesa, Arizona.

Soulcraft aimed at giving the Option Three an all-purpose ride by going with pretty middle of the road geometry. My 18.25" test frame had a 23.25" top tube, headtube angle of 71°, seat tube angle of 73°, 16.75" chainstays and an 11.75" bottom bracket height. Their goal was to produce a bike that could be ridden in most any kind of terrain and not be saddled with that eastern or western thing. They were successful.

Delivered with a White Industries wheelset, White Industries C-Series cranks, Shimano XTR pod shifters and derailleurs, Avid Arch Rival 50 V-Brakes, Avid SD-2.0L levers, Titec Hellbent riser bars, RockShox suspension seatpost, Nisene fisik saddle and a RockShox Judy Race fork, the Option Three was sure-footed and comfortable. It had a nice neutral feel that allowed me to do what I wanted without worrying about what the bike was going to do. The frame fit me pretty well (I could have used a slightly longer top tube) and felt comfortable under me even in the tight spots. After getting acclimated to the Hellbents, which are wider than I'm used to riding, the bike proved itself to be very predictable in technical stuff and fast on the smooth stuff. It was particularly easy to pick through rocky climbs with the Option Three, due in part to the wide bars and the extra leverage they provided when popping the front up and over obstacles.

But it was more than that. The Soulcraft had the unique ability to feel both nimble and stable at the same time. There was no sacrifice of predictability in favor of responsiveness—the bike proved itself solid at the same time it was reacting to my whims and, at times, could-have-picked-it-better line. That held true on technical downhill sections as well. There was not much "getting used to it" time with this bike on my favorite rocky descents. I felt confident letting it rip down the chute almost from the first ride. That kind of inspired cockiness can have shall we say "negative repercussions," but I held myself in check enough to prevent catastrophe even when the Option Three was begging for more. I love that in a bike. I love it when I know the machine can do MORE than I'm asking it to do, and that's how I felt riding the Soulcraft.

If you're looking for a custom steel mountain frame I don't think you can go wrong with Soulcraft's Option Three. It's beautifully crafted and the ride is there. It just had that "feel" that I can never quite put my finger on but can always detect—it's the feel of, for lack of a better word, rightness. Even after banging and bumping the bike through dozens of miles of rocky desert riding it is no worse for the wear and I expect the Option Three to be a very durable frame that will last the average rider a long time. It's available in prebuilt frame sizes from 15.5" up to 21". Soulcraft will even put one together for you with a top tube one size up or down from your chosen frame size at no extra charge. Customs are available as well, and they're all have a lifetime warranty against defects in material and workmanship.

Soulcraft will even cut you a deal on tube replacement or repair if you do something stupid and break it. They know you're only human. And hey, in a time when small framebuilders are either closing up shop or being swallowed by megacorp acquisitions, it's nice to see two people who are out there building great mountain bike frames because they love what they do. Cool. Oh yeah, the Option Three frame retails for \$1050, around \$3400 as tested.

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