

INTO THE RIDE #44

For the Best Ride

by Randy Schlitter



Sometimes we go too far. We reach for that extra shred of performance and sacrifice a lot of other elements. This became apparent a while back testing a prototype. I had an obsession to make it light, and doing anything and everything was the battle cry. In the process I was willing to trade off comfort, reliability, handling, and worst of all, safety. Also in the process I noticed the bike getting less and less fun to ride. It was light, but not really faster, since I was not comfortable or sure of myself. The most improvement to any bike may come when you are confident on the bike. That is the kind of bike (if you have more than one) you find you ride more often than the others. It may not be the lightest, or have the best components, or a flashy frame, it is the bike that sums up to be your best ride.

Frame Configuration

It all starts here. A frame that matches your riding style and brings out the confidence is more than halfway to the best ride. Be honest with yourself. Are you really happy with LWB, SWB, or CWB? Ride the bike you feel best on, not what is touted to be best according to a riding buddy or savvy salesman. Matching your riding style is fairly straightforward; it is answered by asking what you do most: commute, race, group road rides, touring, or tool around town running short errands.

**Handlebars**

Handlebars are all about handling and fit. Some bents have tiller, which is something many learn to live with, because it brings the bars back to an easy reach. A little tiller is easy to live with, reaching forward with arms straight out is plain uncomfortable. Set up your bike with a bar that just feels right.

This will take some time. The 3-Way Chopper Bars have been a big hit since they adjust to get this fit, a lot of people love these bars, but a lot of people also love our other bars. Trying a few bars can get costly if you have to re-cable. If a similar bike has the bars you want to try at the dealer, take it for a test ride. I like my bars so the hands are not too high, usually flush with knee height and elbows bent. I can get this position with the 3-Way and the T-bar setups. One thing I do not mind is to have to time out my pedal stroke in tight slow turns to miss the bar. For what this hand position offers in handling and just over-all-good-feel, it is worth learning to joggle a knee; besides I hardly have to pedal in tight slow turns.

Wheels Tires and Brakes

Wheel and tires are a BIG deal when it comes to ride quality and performance. A lighter wheel mounted with a light, low profile high pressure tire is always going to take less energy, but any wheel with good hubs will perform adequately. Wheels generally will ride cushy when made with narrow rims and more spokes. As the rim profile increases so does the stiffness. Fewer spokes are a good indication of very rigid rims. This may be the ride you look for, if you're mainly about speed, and riding good roads. But making the best ride is more about fun and having a bike that you simply cannot ride enough. Experimenting with tires is limited on some frames due to clearances and brake types. Disc brakes offer the most flexibility, since they are not affected by tire size. Road brake equipped bikes are pretty much dialed in on tire selection, with only a few millimeters to go up, but going from a 25 to 28mm can be noticed. When all is said and done the road really does predict the selection. If you're lucky to have smooth pavement lacking the usual imperfections small, hard tires are great fun. However a jump in tire volume will bring large gains in comfort, increase handling safety in some cases, and not kill as much performance as you would suspect. I cannot call out specific brands but for good over all tires go for a cross section size that is 50 to 60% larger than the smallest tire you could put on the given rim. For example: jumping for a 20mm to 32mm is a 60% increase in cross section. What this buys you is a huge improvement in shock absorption with a small performance penalty.



28mm / 20mm

Shifters, Cranks, Cables, Brake Levers, and Derailleurs

Our bikes come with what we have determined the best match for the intended use. Changing parts or the entire component group can mean spending a lot to make a little difference. It is fun however, to try new toys, and a lighter, smoother crank, brake lever, or cables are out there. Shop carefully, be selective, and make sure it will do the job. A lot of the high end rear road derailleurs have trouble shifting the extra chain. Front derailleurs are less picky though. As would be expected the second most

effective upgrade will be a better crank; wheels are first. Cranks that are light, smooth, and aesthetically pleasing inspire the ride. Brake levers are also a fun thing to seek out and change, since they are a very feel-sensitive part. Of course once you change brakes and levers, you will want to consider cables, and there are some nice high end cables that are worth the cost and effort. Again all this is going to be enhanced over the stock issue only if you are ready with the cash to experiment.

Adapting

The best ride is also something you adapt to. That takes time. Riding a lot and taking note of what is or is not working out help sort it all out. Currently I would have to say my best ride breaks a number of the generalities described above, simply because I have adapted. I ride a Zenetik Pro over just about anything short of a single track trail. The skinny high pressure tires are amazing about having control zooming down sand-packed county roads, and on pavement I find it easy to hold speed or pull away for a stop. The need for so little energy to hold the bike at a 15 to 17 MPH cruise is what I like. I do miss the cushy feel of Big Apples I have on a special 9-speed Dynamik, or the wind-cutting aspect of the F-5, or the super plush and fast ride of the Stratus XP, but for now my best ride is that yellow Z-Pro that has a cluster of lights, a handlebar bag, and is always ready and willing to hit the road. Until next month stay safe and stay into the ride!

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