

INTO THE RIDE #78

Why Cheap Bikes Cost More

by Randy Schlitter

I bought a Wal-Mart bike; it was not my first, the others were cheap attempts at hybrids when that was in style. This one was a cheap attempt at a recumbent. Now why would a maker of fine recumbents and CrankForwards be checking out the cheapo end of things? That is a great question. Here it is a week plus later and I am trying to remember the line of reasoning that caused that 44-pound tank to be sitting in my garage. So I rode it again, and remembered. I wanted to objectively review the beast, and that review may appear somewhere someday. I still am not sure about sharing what I found, even though I promised I would. But I will share some discovery, or maybe more accurately, re-discovery about how cheap bikes cost more.

In selling planes for 26 years we adopted a very no-pressure approach, planes are a huge commitment, and the last thing you want is to twist someone's arm into a purchase. You merely ask what the mission for the plane is and if you have a model that will fill the bill you state the facts about what it can, and even more important, what it cannot do. I recommend doing the same in bike sales...cycling takes commitment. The problem with a super cheapo bike: few cyclists have that low of a mission requirement. Yet the bikes are out there. Hundreds of thousands throw-away bikes, ridden with the seats and tires too low, and only one or two gears working and next-to-nothing brakes. You rarely see them going much faster than waking speed, and few of the riders have that glee-full endorphin charged smile. The mission? Get me to somewhere, work, the store, a friend's house. That is a simple enough request and anything with wheels and a means of auto-motion could do the job. The danger of falling in love with cycling is remote, as is the chance of riding for no reason, other than riding.

The crux of the matter is whoever sells them is not in it for cycling, but only the money. \$89 dollar bikes at a glance seem innocent enough, at best the take in profit has to somewhere far south of \$89. But it is the numbers, sold in hundreds of thousands, that makes the profits worth going for. The backslap of the whole process is the individual bike has so little profit the big box stores do not "sell" them, they merely carry a stock, and when someone needs the product, they assist in dispensing.

The bike itself is a collection of amazingly cheap components from the tires to the fancy graphics. In fact it seems the graphics are an important feature, since many point of sale promo tags list it as such. And I cringe; inspecting these bikes is a habit of self-inflicted duty. Maybe I keep hoping they will rise in quality of construction and assembly. It is a vain hope, since big box bikes will firmly remain a commodity and not a product sold with care or passion on par with what they truly represent. It is in this way cheap bikes cost more. Primarily by insulating the consumer from what a bike could be. And they sometimes come so close!

That is why I bought the Wally World bent. It came close, and I know it could have, with a bit of "better guidance," been a home run. Again in this way cheap bikes cost more. Because thousands will be sold, most riders will discard the whole experience being glad they did not spend more. But what if they had? What if they spent another \$100, and the bike actually invited them to ride? What if the bike ended up creating the impression of value to the point it was well worth it? Some say the crowd that buys the big box store bike is unlikely to walk the aisles of a quality bike shop, where they would stagger at the prices for even the entry-level machine. Yet you have to wonder if their first taste of bentdom came with a heaping helping of satisfaction, they might actually seek out what is behind those LBS doors.

I would hope they would be meet with understanding, and not be scoffed at for buying cheap. And to be treated with respect for taking on the adventure of cycling, they need to be handed the straight talk on whatever bike they desire. Then the cheap bike, in a new sense will have cost more, if they buy even an entry-level machine. But they would have a taste of what is possible, and soon learn about how much more is out there.

The bike they leave behind (provided it was the mildly upgraded version I fantasize about) would still be worthy of many more miles, and could easily fall into the hands of another budding cyclist. Now suddenly the upgraded bike is impacting the world less, by being of continued use.

A landfill populated with discarded cheapo-depo bikes never made much economic or eco-sense. And the frustration I feel from seeing so much resource put into something that is a personal passion and career is real. Maybe the current economic downturn is causing some re-think in the big box mind set about not only throw-away bikes, but other products. I would like to believe the average consumer is also in midst of a major re-think about consumerism and the outcome will be demanding longer lasting products at reasonable additional expense, because with the right guidance obtained from actual users of products and experienced manufacturers in like fields, we would all win. In my mind it is a switch we have to be willing to flip, and maybe that willingness will come from a global melt down of consumerism. The process could be a rough ride, because I am not alone as a contradiction. I like to consume; heck my garage is stuffed with every known device for lawn care, and a few other typical home-owner must haves. I like the idea of being able to buy at will, and stores filled with rows and rows of stuff, isn't that natural for a manufacturer? But a part of me would give it up in a blink if it meant the whole world could hit the reset button on reality. The truth is cheap bikes represent only one of millions of products that tax resources and fall short on delivery of promise. In the end the cheap bike does cost more by not only killing the desire to cycle, but also the place we ride. It really comes down to some simple principles, buy what you need and buy quality.

Until next time, ride safe and stay into the ride!

A nearby corrections facility annually repairs and distributes donated bikes to the local needy and third world countries. This year the director of a local nursing home had learned the program was to be canceled for lack of bikes. With a few postings and flyers stapled to telephone poles she collected 10 times the 30 minimum needed for the program, and a room full of spare parts, many brand new. It is an interesting lot of bikes, ranging from vintage Schwinn to the usual fare of big box store brands. The cheap bike goes into this phase all too soon, but in this case, you cannot fault the ultimate benefit they provide.

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