



Pinkie's and the Peugeot

Bicyclists and bicycles are separate things. They can come together and make for some incredible bicycling, but they are still two very different things. Some cyclists love bikes more than they like to ride them. Some cyclists love to ride their bike, and the machine itself makes as much sense to them as the internal workings of their washer or dryer. "I eat something, and then when I get on the thing and push the pedals, it goes." I've had teammates like that. Professional bike racers. They did not know how to adjust a derailleur or a brake. They knew how to raise or lower a saddle, but not necessarily how to make it go fore and aft. They would cuss the team mechanic if their chain made an improper noise. Those were tough times for mechanics. Bicycles were a little more 'imperfect', then. Today, a stock bike could be delivered from a remote factory to a race, assembled in 10 minutes and ridden to victory. Flawlessly.

I am a bicyclist who also loves bicycles. Sometimes, we make good bicycling, together. I never frowned on the guys sitting outside the coffee shop on Sunday morning, their fine Italian steeds perched out front. Their bikes were Ferrari's compared to my Peugeot. On those mornings, their Ferrari's might only tack on 10 or 12 miles. Maybe less. My Peugeot would just be getting started. It would have to make it another 100 miles, and I'd have to cross my fingers that it could. My early bikes were in a continual state of flux. Every week I would Frankenstein them closer to a 'real' racing bike. The results were not always positive. It only served to increase my lust for good bikes.

I did own a couple Peugeot's. Not at the same time. Low end models. Those poor bikes had to do it all, for me. I'd race them all year, paint cracking off from tube stress, and then do the cyclocross season on them. I would line up at a start one week with stem shifters, the next week with bar end shifters, and the next week with down tube shifters. The act of grabbing my stem and bar end before reaching my down tube caused me to miss some critical moves. Sending this kind of sign language to your bike before you can shift does not make things better in a bunch sprint. Especially when you're scared to stand up after that because the band holding your down tube shifters is covering up the holes you made in your down tube when you took a hacksaw to it to carve off the cable guides that used to be there. Often I'd be afraid my bike wouldn't pass inspection. Gear rollouts are tense when you're hoping they don't realize you've compromised the integrity of your frame.

Cutting on frames back then was not at all uncommon. It was a good thing my dad had lots of power tools. I remember one stressful Friday. I was so panicked at school that I had to cut class, come home and work on my ragged Peugeot. Pinkie's Road Race was the next day, and my headset was so pitted I could barely steer. Pinkie's was a classic race. Point-to-point, finishing with a climb up a dirt road and a sharp, dirt descent to the finish. How could I perform if I had to zig-zag four feet to either side just to go forward? Bloody headsets. I rounded up as much cash as I could, making sure I still had \$12.00 left to enter the race. I went to the local bike shop, which also sold guns and did taxidermy. They said "You got that French bike, right kid? That one with all the cuts on it and paint missing? Well, let's see. We've got one of these here Stronglight roller bearing style ones. It's mostly plastic, but I think it's French." Even the damn threads could be different on bikes from different countries. Insanity. I didn't have enough money, so they took everything I had and gave me the box.

Back home, my troubles continued. Incessantly beating the crap out of my bike, I tried to make the switch. I'd never removed cups, before. I wondered if the French didn't weld them inside their head tubes. Sweating, I cut some hardwood on the band saw, shoved it down my head tube and Bunyan'd it with the sledgehammer. It moved! More violent slamming ensued. Finally it popped out. The Stronglight went in a little easier, but... what the hell? The stack height was different, and there were not enough threads on the fork to put the lock ring on. Oh, man. Wasn't this just typical. Getting a new

fork was an impossibility. I decided I would have to cut down my head tube, somehow. Hammering the headset back out of my frame, I became more determined. I put on the safety goggles, threw the frame on my shoulder and flicked on my dad's electric stone grinder. Sparks flying, I ground about 1/4" off the top and bottom of the head tube. Nevermind that my head tube was now angled. Putting the Stronglight back in, I noticed that my work with the sledge had kinked my down tube and actually stretched my top tube. At least I got one or two threads of fork inside the lock ring. I would get to race after all.

It was getting dark. I put the bike in the trunk of my sister's car. She drove me an hour to a friend's house. He was 16, had a driver's license, a full Super Record Pinarello, gas money, and a long-term subscription to Velo News. In my view, that was as rich as it got. He also didn't race as well as he wanted to, which put him in a perpetually awful mood. We loaded the car to take off early the next morning. As the most 'Spring Classicish' race on the calendar, Pinkies evoked all kinds of wild happenings. Normally composed riders lost it, there. The coastal roads were wet, mossy, steep and twisty. My friend with the Pinarello got a little over-baked on the first climb, making it over in the group by the skin of his teeth. Bernard Hinault was his hero, and he made sure that his facial expressions mimicked the Badger's. Halfway down the descent he went straight off the road in a corner and disappeared in the forest, never to be seen, again. From the gun, I had a new set of challenges to deal with. My bike was acting schizophrenic. Minutes after the start other racers were yelling at me to stop my spasming, or else.

I fought my bike, and the other riders, all the way to the line, that day. On climbs, it would veer off like it had a mind of it's own. Suddenly steering straight into other riders, I'd have to lean into them, grab hold of their neck and apologize. "Whoaaa.. Ooof... sorry dude! Won't happen again." On descents, it would shake in my hands like an automatic paint mixer. The skin on my cheeks and forehead vibrated until they tickled. My eyeballs shook so hard I couldn't read road signs. "These Stronglight headsets suck, man!" I screamed. It didn't occur to me that I'd shortened my wheelbase, changed fork rake and even the tracking and angle that my wheels lined up. Getting to that race was an achievement. Finishing it was for the mantelpiece. On the way home, my friend was particularly pissy. "I'm gonna have to get some new sewups, or something. Dude, no way you would have beaten me if I didn't get trapped in between those trees. I couldn't move." I read his Velo News while he continued. I came to the 'change of address' form and ripped it out. From then on, his Velo News was coming to my house.

20 something years on and I am still gaga for bicycles. My Peugeot's exist only in faded photographs and memory. I have owned a lot of bikes, since then. Many of the bikes I rode were the finest available. I rode the first LOOK frames, TVT's, Calfee's, and different models of OCLV's. I've gone through extreme carbon addiction and come out the other side. Today, there are no carbon frames in my garage. There is steel. Beautiful, heavy, painted, un-scarred steel. Hannibal does not need to visit. It might seem strange that although I can own any bicycle I want, 'wealth' means something else to me. I suppose bicycle 'wealth' to me now is having that piece of mind that my trusty steel bike is sitting out there, intact. It doesn't need to undergo any trauma, any cutting, before it's next ride. I think I'll go get a coffee.

Paul Willerton rides steel and poses at coffee shops in Bend, OR. You can read more articles and stories from Paul at <http://www.defeet.com/blog>