

Thursday  
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# Variety

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SECTION

## TODAY'S QUOTE

► "One face to the world, another at home, makes for misery."  
— Amy Vanderbilt

StarTribune



## Gary Fisher

- **Born:**  
Nov. 5, 1950, Oakland, Calif.
- **Claim to Fame:**  
Named the sport of Mountain Biking in 1979. Founder, Gary Fisher Bicycles. Dubbed "Dad of Dirt."
- **Honors:**  
Named one of "50 Who Left Their Mark" in the past 10 years by "Outside" magazine. Original inductee, Mountain Bike Hall of Fame.
- **Career:**  
Active in the birth of the mountain bike in 1974. Innovations made mountain biking accessible to the masses. Sold company (and name) to Trek bicycles.
- **Website:**  
<http://www.fisherbikes.com/>
- **Quote:**  
"I'm always tinkering, always finding some solution to the problem. Looking out for the primo experience."

Star Tribune photo by Tom Sweeney

Gary Fisher, a legend among mountain-bike aficionados for his racing and designs, recently visited Encouraged Bicycle in Minneapolis.



# Dad *of* Dirt

By Mark Brunswick  
Star Tribune Staff Writer

phrase mountain bike.

Wearing a decidedly stand-outish purple leather suit, beret, designer eyeglasses and trademark chin beard, as he did during a recent Twin Cities visit, Fisher, a master of self-promotion, looks different from most other folks.

His name and claim to fame may be recognizable to only a limited group, but, man, their admiration is palpable.

"If you ride a mountain bike, he's a god," says cyclist Devon Russell, who got three autographs from Fisher later in the day at Freewheel Bicycle in Minneapolis. She makes that acknowledgment even though she rides a rival brand, Cannondale.

It no longer registers that it is his name going by when he sees a Gary Fisher bicycle being ridden past him. But he does remember the day when he knew he had arrived.

Reading a Mad magazine, Fisher saw a cartoon of a guy riding a mountain bike. The man in the cartoon was wearing Fisher bike shorts.

"I thought to myself, 'Oh man, this means I've become an icon of sorts,'" says Fisher, 46. "Some people tend to be intimidated when I walk through the door, but that's not what I want."

Turn to FISHER on E13

To many mountain bikers, Gary Fisher is **the man**. One of the pioneers of the genre, he has masterfully developed the bike company that bears his name and created bikes noted for their **Zen-like** fusion of space-age technology and simplicity.

**T**he boys at Boehm's bike shop in St. Paul are spiffing up the place, vacuuming the well-worn rug and cleaning the glass display cases.

The store needs it anyway, one worker says, but in a matter of minutes *he* is about to arrive.

A Gary Fisher poster meets the visitor, with the motto: "Fisher: The First & Last Name in Mountain Biking." Several brightly emblazoned Fisher biking jerseys make up the rest of the display.

Fisher walks through the door 20 minutes after he is scheduled to arrive. Late, but not bad for an icon.

Depending on how you look at it, Fisher is either the Orville or the Wilbur Wright of mountain biking. Fisher is often credited with inventing the fat-tired, multigeared bike that rejuvenated the cycling industry.

While a ragtag bunch of gear-heads made their way down Mount Tamalpais in Marin County, Calif., in the mid-1970s on various junkers, clunkers and thumpers, it is Fisher who is regarded as making technological developments that elevated mountain biking to what it is today. He even attempted to patent the



Fisher autographed bicycles for enthusiasts at Twin Cities shops.



Star Tribune photos by Joey McLeister  
Fisher's Joshua X1 model lists for \$999.99.



# Mountain bike pioneer has enthusiastic following

Fisher has a Zen-like manner about him and an engineer's approach to improving his product. With a disarming down-to-earth West Coast-style, he spends much of his time on the road, riding prototypes, listening to customers and bike-shop mechanics like those at several Twin Cities shops recently, searching for ways to make his bikes better.

Devotees believe Fisher's bikes are better largely because they are simpler. Kimberly Johnson, for instance, has been riding a Fisher Mt. Tam since August and finds the bike more responsive.

"It seems to have a totally different kind of feel when you are riding, it seems to fit better," she says, shortly after getting her bike signed at Freewheel. "It seems to allow you to express yourself more."

In an industry dominated by technology-obsessed gearheads, Fisher says his goal is to make cycling accessible. It's a contrast with other mountain-bike pioneers influenced by the complexities of motorcycle technology.

Fisher says his ultimate goal is simplicity, even by advancing technology. He says more innovations in cycling will occur within the next three years than in the past 20.

"When you come down to it, the rider is the most important thing on a bike. The thing about a bike is that it should feel good," he says. "There are some riders who are obsessed with tinkering, riding a bike and then tinkering with it. But most people want to ride a bike hard and not have to worry about it. They don't want to be constantly adjusting something or fixing something that wears out."

**"... Gary is the genuine item in my mind. He still rides."**

— Geoff Drake, editor of Bicycling magazine

## Origin of the species

Fisher was always on a bike growing up in California and started racing them at 12. The mountain-bike thing can be traced to the early 1970s with a group of road racers trying to keep in shape by using the San Francisco Bay-area's Mount Tamalpais for training.

Using one-speed balloon tire bikes to explore dirt roads and trails, they also found thrills in high-speed downhills that tested bike-handling skills. After hair-raising descents, though, participants had to hitch a ride or push their bikes back up the 2,600-foot mountain.

This is where the dispute about who did what comes in.

At some point, Fisher showed up with a five-speed Schwinn ballooner and shortly after developed wider varieties of gearing and front and rear drum brakes similar to motorcycles to improve braking.

In 1975, Fisher and roommate Charlie Kelly staged "The Repack" on Mount Tam, so named because riders needed to repack their smoking brakes with grease after each decent. Fisher set a record that still stands for the 1,200-foot, 1.8-mile drop: 4:22:14. Fisher and Kelley formed a new company, Mountainbikes, in 1979.

"It's clear that a group of Marin County pioneers catapulted mountain biking into what it is today, and that group included Gary Fisher," says Geoff Drake, editor of Bicycling magazine.

"Off-road riding had been around for decades. But they made fundamental changes in technology — adapting equipment and gears from road racing to machines that were basically old newspaper-boy bikes."

An article in "Bicycling" last year written by fellow mountain bike pioneer Joe Breeze essentially relinquished the Fisher/Breeze/Kelly role in the invention of the mountain bike, bowing to what was described as a heretofore anonymous group of "70s funhogs." Last year, the Mountain Biking Hall of Fame in Crested Butte, Colo., honored the nine-man Morrow Dirt Club, which rode modified 1940s bikes in 1973, a year before Fisher built his bike. Undeterred, Fisher says his bikes were the first reliable ones.

An independent British organization has been commissioned to make a determination, and Fisher says he is confident of his place in history when the results become known next summer.

Fisher at once claims it isn't important who invented the mountain bike, but also remains proprietary about his role. After all, it's meant millions of dollars. Fisher promotional literature, for instance, proclaims that Fisher invented the phrase mountain bike "so names a sport, an industry and a culture."

"People were riding on rough roads on fat-tired bikes for hundreds of years. I rank the invention of the mountain bike with the invention of the lava lamp in significance in the 20th century," Fisher says.

"What I did was improve things. advance things. People found they could do things comfortably on my bikes that they couldn't do before."

Adds Bicycling editor Drake about Fisher's place in history: "There is a certain mystery about how it all began, and that's not bad. What we are talking about here is basically a bunch of hippies in blue jeans having a good time launching a multimillion-dollar industry years later."

"Gary is an eccentric guy, and he's pushed his ride a lot further than the other guys. That's part of why he's made the most out of things. But Gary is the genuine item in my mind. He still rides."

## Pedaling his product

Fisher began his bicycle company in 1979, building 160 bikes the first year. Sales were slow at first, but grew steadily.

In 1988, bike sales in the United States hit a low, with 9.9 million sold. But by 1993, bike sales hit 134 million as mountain-bike popularity took off.

In that year, the National Sporting Goods Association estimated that more money was spent on mountain bikes — an estimated \$1.2 billion — than any other sporting goods besides guns.

But in 1993, the Gary Fisher Bicycle Co. was in trouble. Fisher had sought the help of investors to bring down the costs of his product, and it was hurting him.

The company was struggling under Taiwanese ownership and wracked by what the industry press said was financial mismanagement and quality-control



Gary Fisher autographed posters for fans at Freewheel Bicycle in Minneapolis.

Star Tribune photo by Tom Sweeney

problems.

In April of that year, industry giant Trek bought the company and put Fisher back on stronger ground. He continues his relationship with Trek, consulting on designs, riding prototypes and, of course, lending his name.

Fisher now sees himself in a larger role as an ambassador of bicycling. His push is to have the sport accepted as a viable form of transportation and everyday life, not just something that collects dust hanging in the garage between weekends.

"You should see how people react to me in Europe," he says

wistfully. "I show my passport in Italy, and the guy is all excited. You have generations of people who have an interest in bicycles over there. Actually we are the first generation of people in this country to really embrace cycling. Those people in Europe are bike freaks."

His mission comes at a difficult time. After the boom years of the early 1990s, U.S. bicycle sales have stalled, a victim of too much hype or too little inclination on the part of Americans to exercise.

"You've got to get people to pedal. I'm going to get them to do it," he says.

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