

COMPUTERS AND TECHNOLOGY

Women in the male-dominated high-tech industry bypass the old boys club to form their own networking groups

[B-5]



BUSINESS

Avid rider turns passion into profession by developing heavy-duty mountain bikes



High tech tackles HIGH HILLS

By Victoria Colliver
OF THE EXAMINER STAFF

WATCHING GARY FISHER try to contain his 6-foot-1-inch, 160-pound frame within the confines of a chair, it becomes quite obvious he's more comfortable in motion.

The man widely recognized as one of the founding fathers of the mountain bike keeps sliding off the chair in his San Anselmo living room and twisting his lanky limbs into various positions as he talks about his work, his philosophies on transportation and the history of the brand that bears his name.

His new model "Sugar," which he describes as a "happy little bike," is just hitting the stores. And Fisher, who will turn 49 on Nov. 5, has been training steadily for the past three years — essentially living his product's lifestyle and winning races in his age group, both in national and international competitions.

"It went a long ways in reinventing myself," Fisher said of his return to

[See *FISHER*, B-3]

Gary Fisher, above,
founder of Gary Fisher
Bikes, with his new
"Sugar" model; below,
Fisher's JoshuaF3
model



◆ FISHER from B-3

High tech tackles high hills

together a bike with modern-de-railleur components and having the vision to start the first company to produce mountain bikes exclusively.

"My claim to fame is that I made the first modern-day mountain bike frames. It was a bike specifically made for what we were doing and was hung with all brand new parts," said Breeze, 45. "Gary is tied in with the direct lineage of this mountain bike thing that went national."

By Fisher's second year in business, he and his partner, Charlie Kelly, were selling more bicycles over \$1,000 than anyone else in the country. But one of his goals was to make the bikes more accessible to people, so he kept pushing down the price points, a process that accelerated in 1984 when he started manufacturing in Japan.

"I used to say we were successful despite our best efforts," said the self-professed bike bum with the trademark soul patch, the tuft

of hair below his lip. Despite his best efforts to sound like anything but a businessman, Fisher is clearly business-minded.

John Thompson, an associate editor at Mountain Bike, said Fisher was able to break away from the pack of smaller bike manufacturers by producing quality bikes at reasonable prices and heavily marketing them.

Fisher is credited with producing the first mountain bike to have shock absorbers on the front fork, called a shock fork; helping to design the unicrown fork, which has fork blades welded to steering tube; and for developing something he calls "genesis geometry," which repositions the rider on the bike through shorter stem and chainstays, the pieces that connect the bottom bracket to the back wheel holder.

Nevertheless, Fisher's company started to hit some snags in the late '80s. He wouldn't discuss the privately held company's sales figures, but said the capital-intensive nature of the business contributed to its problems.

"We needed to be much smaller — like around \$4 million (in sales)

a year — or much bigger, like around \$50 million," he said. "We were growing like crazy, but we became a little too leveraged out and we couldn't keep going," is how he sums it up.

Fisher, who was then working with his Harvard-M.B.A.-educated brother, sold the company in 1991 for an undisclosed sum to a Taiwanese outfit called Anlen. He said that company drove it into the ground for the next two years before selling it to Trek Bicycle Corp., a well-known bicycle manufacturer based in Waterloo, Wis.

Dividing the company's history into "pre-Trek" and "post-Trek" categories, Fisher thinks of himself now as an employee. He is actually president of the division, Gary Fisher Bicycles, and is actively involved in developing and producing the models that bear his name.

"I like the roots of just riding the bike. I can arguably say that I do more of that than anyone else (in the company)," he said, adding that he logs about 10,000 miles a year on his bike, compared to about 4,000 on his car.

But Fisher, who is married for the second time and has two child-

ren — ages 11 and 13 — from his previous marriage, doesn't see himself continuing to train and race as he looks into the next millennium. "Racing is self-centered," he explained. "There's only so much satisfaction in that. I want to move on. I'm sort of at a crossroads."

Fisher's attentions are turning toward alternative transportation solutions.

"What I'd like to see is a different approach for bike activists," he said. "They go after low-cost solutions, and I feel it needs to be a real solution that costs money, makes jobs and improves our whole infrastructure."

Instead of trying to promote things like wider bicycle lanes and more buses, Fisher would like to extend his name and expertise to help find longer-term solutions that would actually get people off the roads.

One idea he finds intriguing is the possibility, which is being discussed in Europe, of building elevated, enclosed tubes for bicycle riders. It's clearly an off-road solution for a decidedly off-road guy.