

# THINKING BIKES ISN'T RIDING BIKES

BY CHARLES KELLY

One of the questions I hear just about every day is:

*Hey, I'm thinking about buying a mountain bike. What kind should I get?*

This may be an innocent question, but it's the hardest one I'm ever asked. Instead, I wish people would want to know something a little easier, such as, "What's the cube root of 7.63?" At least I'd have a chance. But choosing mountain bikes for other people contradicts SeeKay's First Law:

*The more you know, the less it helps.*

Invariably the questioner is a beginner who's anxious to enter the sport and wants an expert opinion. Or perhaps he's looking for an experienced cyclist to help sort out an overwhelming pile of cryptic information contained in dozens of bike tests, buyers' guides, and company brochures.

Actually, I don't care what you ride. Just ride something!

The sport is bigger than the equipment. The record shows that it doesn't matter what you ride; the riding will get you hooked. The rest will take care of itself.

Since the concept of mountain biking was introduced, the equipment has improved so dramatically that today's midpriced bike is usually superior to expensive custom models of only five years ago.

My first "mountain bike" didn't deserve the name. It was an old one-speed clunker "customized" with a front brake. Nobody rides iron like this anymore, especially in the hilly area where I live, and there will never again be reason to. These same hills now crawl with mountain bikers riding precision equipment with a capital ATB.

But because there was nothing better, my friends and I managed to have a great time on clunkers like mine, completely unaware of their limited performance. It's the experience, not the machinery that makes mountain biking fun. Gosh, we didn't even have Lycra!

In some mountain bike country, bicycle shops aren't on every corner, and even a well-equipped shop isn't likely to stock each model in every size. The selection may already be limited, and most first-time buyers will have to choose from perhaps a half-dozen bikes in each price range. At least two of them will be in colors unknown before '85. (Where do they come up with these colors that make you want to donate your eyeballs to science?) If I have any advice at all, it's to ride everything you can and buy the bike that feels most comfortable. Forget about numbers and statistics and frame geometry.

Thinking about bikes isn't riding bikes, so stop thinking and start reacting.

If you like a bike and can afford it, buy it. If you don't like it but it's the only one you can get, get it. You might just become used to it and start liking it. But even if you don't, at least you'll be riding.

If you get tired of your bike and want to move up a notch, you'll have experience to base your decision on. You could probably sell your first bike to a friend, but you'll most likely save it for a spare or loaner and use it as bait to get others to ride with you.

Keep this in mind, though: Once you let mountain bikes into your household, they have a habit of breeding in the garage. They've even been known to take over entire communities. ■