

PERFECT FOR ITS PURPOSE

What is it with these American bike builders anyway? You've seen their pedigrees — Harvard grad, aeronautical engineer, Indonesian linguists... Haven't these guys heard how blue collar work is supposed to be done? You know, with blinders?

Anyone who has toured the Campagnolo factory in Vicenza, Italy gets the point quickly. For the most part the faithful producers of the world's most prestigious bicycle componentry appear to be chained to their work stations. On a reduced scale the same characterization applies to small shops such as Masi. The focus is on hard work and modest rewards. It's rare to find one of these guys who speaks another language, holds a college degree or has personal interests beyond those of his contemporaries.

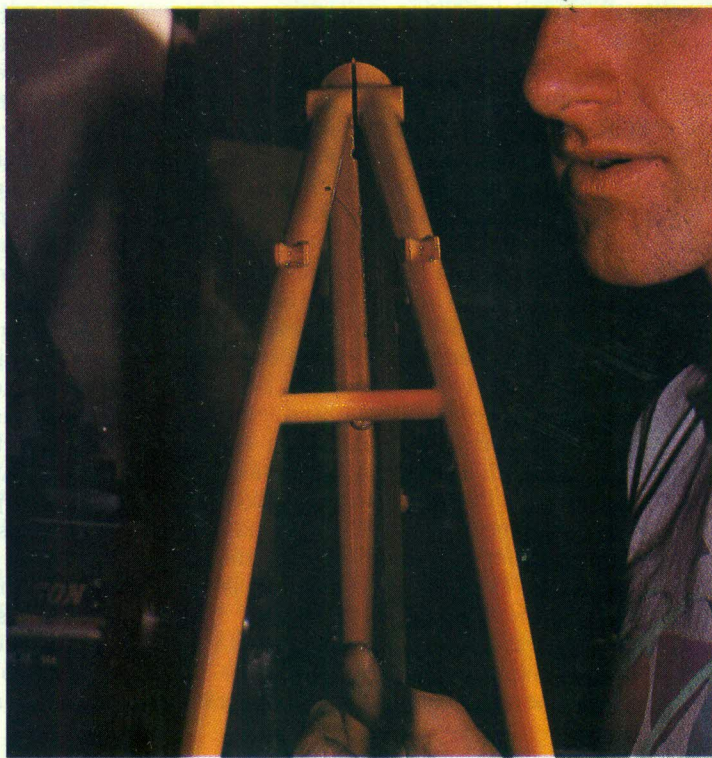
This is not an attempt to make invidious comparisons. Lucky are those who can find contentment in life. But there is no mistaking the circumstances which separate the craftsmen from the New World and the craftsmen from the Old.

Scot Nicol, founder of Ibis bikes in Sebastopol, California continues the dichotomy. How does a guy get from soils analyst to bike building by way of Alaskan fishing? It's been quite an odyssey, but one factor has remained constant: the bike. From age four he was cruising his Walnut Creek, California area on two wheels.

Lots of kids ride bikes, of course, and Nicol did the usual newspaper delivery job through high school. But a watershed is reached in American suburbia at age 16 — the driver's license. Often it is the death certificate for the bicycle.

Nicol, however, continued to get around on his '49 Schwinn, exploring acrobatics rather than territory. Customers were impressed when he tooted by doing one-hand wheelies while throwing their paper with the other hand.

After high school he moved up to a



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cheap Gitane and began large-scale cruising. New Zealand, Australia, and much of the western U.S. passed beneath his wheels. Intellectual wanderings eventually took him to the University of California at Davis, the big agricultural school in the chain. This may have been the mid-1970s but Scot was still a child of the sixties. He had always loved math and the sciences and this school offered the possibility of applying those tools to his life-in-harmony orientation.

"Not that I liked their conservative, big-ag biz push," he was quick to add. "You know, genetic engineering, five mph bumper tomatoes, and all that. They were even the only U.C. school to prosecute apartheid protestors. Fortunately, I was able to write my own major, specializing in large scale composting. We got 20 acres for a model farm and plowed under throwaway produce and leaf trimmings. I was not a heavy-duty student. I always had time for bike rides, but getting the knowledge was fun and I still use it every day."

Living in the middle of a two-acre orchard, he has plenty of opportunity to employ his green thumb, as any visitor can see. The Ibis works are well-concealed among the fruit trees. The site perfectly fits his criteria. Nicol explained, "I

wanted to be near a fairly large metropolitan area [Santa Rosa] in order to operate the bike business. I wanted to be inland enough to be warm, but not so far as to be too hot. That left us about a 10-mile strip in Sonoma County [just north of Marin] in which to search. The more we're here the more we know what a great decision we made. This place meets our monetary, agricultural and esthetic needs."

"We" refers to his partner of 10 years, Ginny. "We were married under that oak tree over there," she pointed out. They met at an environmental education school near Fort Bragg in very northern California. Three months of the year they ran the school and the rest of the time they went adventuring, mostly in the south Pacific and Alaska.

Nicol gets excited when he talks about Alaska. "We went ocean touring in kayaks. We got close to whales and all that, but it was heavy shit, too. Real survival stuff, 70 mph winds and 28-degree water."

He went on to recount an amazing story he heard from the owner of a fishing boat that hired him one season. "Lituya Bay, between the Inland Passage and Cook Inlet, is sort of T-shaped with the stem about seven miles long. It's one of the very few good refuges for fishing boats in that area. In 1955 there was an earthquake that dropped umpteen million cubic feet of glacier ice and earth into the head of the bay. This slide created the highest wave in history, 1700 ft! It washed trees off the valley wall that high. The wave moved at 100 mph down the bay. One of the two fishing boats tried to motor out and was lost. The other headed straight toward that monster. Up and up and up that boat went and it surfed it out. There was a four-year-old boy in that boat who remembers looking back down on the 70-foot trees on the spit at the end of the bay. They were just dots. That boy was the owner of the boat when I worked on it."

The story of Scot Nicol, builder of Ibis mountain bikes

by OWEN MULHOLLAND

Back at the environmental school Scot got more and more into fat tire bikes. "You could go in any direction just about as long as you wanted. It was phenomenal stuff," Nicol enthused, "and no one knows about it." Then he heard about the parallel developments going on down in Marin.

A short visit there turned into a winter stay. "I'd go from Joe Breeze, who was more traditional, over to Charlie Cunningham's (maker of aluminum bikes) on the wild side. Steve Potts was a big influence too. It was a great education."

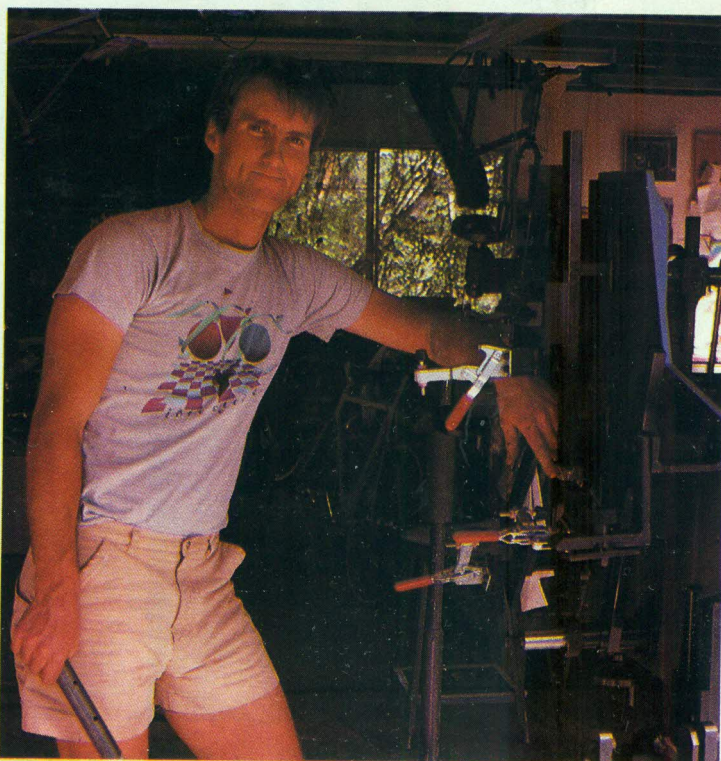
Not long after that visit the owner of the property on which the school was built started making impossible demands. Scot and Ginny Nicol knew it was time to move on. That's when they located their Shangri-la near Sebastopol.

The first year, 1983, was mostly occupied with getting the Ibis operation in gear. A structure for bike production was erected and a paint booth installed. Personal considerations were secondary. To this day the Nicols live in a trailer on the property. It has all the amenities, including an outdoor shower, although plans for a house have been completed.

From the start, Nicol had his own ideas about what constitutes the perfect mountain bike. "I wanted a bike that was steeper and shorter all around," he said. "Seventeen-and-a-half inch chain stays, 70-degree head, 70- to 74-degree seat tube depending on the overall size — the sort of bike that is now becoming the industry standard."

He also began developing a data base correlating people to bikes. "What we've done here," he continued, "is to combine high production with custom fitting. Take a 19-inch frame. I'll have four different configurations and tubing thicknesses depending on the person's size. I also make about 25 different stems with different angles and reaches."

Nicol admitted he "doesn't spend



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countless hours on finish work covering up bits that will be covered by mud on the first ride anyway. We pay attention to the important things — the alignment, the brazing heat, the structural things. We employ tig welding. It's very fast and clean if you're good."

Two attributes Ibis bikes have come to be associated with are down-turned bars and wild paint jobs. Neither is obligatory, just available. Years ago Nicol rode on flat bars, but after many a rough downhill his wrists began to hurt. "Charlie Cunningham was out front on drop bars," Scot admitted. "I wasn't really interested until I was in pain. I found that the drop bars rotate the wrists and spread the force through the arms. I wasn't totally satisfied with Charlie's configuration, so I did my own experimentation and finally arrived at what I thought was ideal. The stem shape, necessarily different from road bikes, was also Charlie's idea which I adapted."

For \$25 extra per color you can get pretty crazy. Nicol remembers a five-color combination as being the busiest design they ever put together. Not that he's short of ideas himself. "Like, did you ever really look at cereal boxes?" he deadpanned. "Our teamcolors, turquoise and white, come from Clover Dairy's Half and

Half."

Just then, employee and riding partner Laurence Aberti walked in holding a new road frame. One side was red, the other yellow, only the pattern on the stays was reversed from the frame tubes. There was no masking line so the colors flowed into each other over a very narrow band less than 1/16 inch wide. Even the pannier eyelets got this treatment. A magnifying glass is a useful accessory to appreciate this level of detailing.

Enthusiasm permeates the Ibis nest. Nicol, Aberti and third partner, Wes Williams, obviously love their work. "Every morning I get up and can't wait to get to work," Nicol enthused,

"although it's a bit hard in the spring time. When the cherries are ripe it's so tempting to stop and graze a bit."

They build about 200 bikes a year: in other words, low volume and modest profit. But Nicol's happy. He continued, "This whole frame-building thing is really a lifestyle and its own reward. We can break for a ride and take off two to three months a year."

Ibis bikes are available through about 15 shops, coast-to-coast. They will take special orders, but the customer may have to wait. Nicol has been on backorder since he started.

Until recently an early 1960s Cadillac could be found resting between the apple and pear trees. This symbol of extravagant waste, inefficient design, and bad taste was Scot's idea of a joke. "Yeah, that was our team car," he chuckled. The sight of six or so laughing, grubby guys leaning out of this rolling relic festooned, roof and trunk, with more bikes than London had balloons in the blitz, never failed to break the prerace concentration of even the most serious racer.

Scot Nicol is serious about his racing, and for him fun is serious. One look at an Ibis in flight and he knew it was the ideal logo — so graceful, so perfect for its purpose, and so obviously enjoying it. **W**