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THE MASTER

The Rebel King of Custom Bikes

RICHARD SACHS, THE MASTER BIKE BUILDER, DOESN'T DO HIGH-PERFORMANCE MATERIALS (JUST STEEL). BUT FOR A HAND-BUILT BIKE FROM HIM, YOU MUST WAIT YEARS AND PAY TOP DOLLAR. HERE'S WHY.

by BEN BERTWY

LEO JAMANN WENTEN A BARK built just for him. So a few years ago he made the trip to rural Connecticut to meet Richard Sachs. There, Sachs went straight to work, poking and prodding him with a tape measure, appraising his stature and arm and torso with obsessive precision. Sachs rode with Jamann, constantly clucking him, observing the intimate, married relationship between rider and bike. Are his shoulders and chest open while climbing? Does he stretch conveniently to reach the handlebar drops? Do his hips rock side to side as

he pedals? After about four hours, Jamann left Sachs with nothing but a promise that, someday, maybe years from then, his frame would be ready. Sachs had a deposit check, but no delivery date, final price, or pledge of performance was given.

"A bike is just a tool, and a frame is part of that tool," Sachs insists. "My bikes aren't going to make you a faster or better rider."

Jamann, a 47-year-old Indiana bike pedaler, a CPG in Indiana who pedals 5,000 miles a year, was now thwarted by Sachs's warning—and he isn't alone in his desire to ride a bicycle that was designed solely for him. The custom-frame industry

has exploded in recent years as riders are awed by the personalized fit and handcrafted allure of having bicycles fabricated one by one, under the discerning eye of master builders like Sachs. White (see "America's Top Bike Builders," page 18). "It's an era where most everything is made in Asia to generic specifications, riders are saying, 'You know what? I want something that's more me,'" says Don Walker, proprietor of Don Walker Cycles and founder of the North American Handmade Bicycle Show (NAHBS). "Richard is a big reason it's happening. He's a little eccentric and definitely opinionated." (According to *urbanrevolutionary.com*, Sachs coined the acronym ATMO—"according to my opinion.") But he's also entirely selfless and willing to share his knowledge.

It's not a rule Sachs ever imagined for himself. But with nearly 40 years of experience, 4,000 frames, and a well-established reputation as the 20-year-old of frame building, the self-described recluse unexpectedly finds himself at the line of the biggest hand-built bicycle boom in, well, ever.

Sachs began building after being rejected from a bike-repair position at a shop in Burlington, Vermont. He was a lover of interest in 40 European frame shops—"It was basically a way to get back at the people who denied me the job!"—and ended up at Witcomb Lightweight Cycles in London, at the time a leading builder of race-quality frames. In 1975, after returning to the States, he launched Richard Sachs Cycles. He was then one of the only custom bicycle makers in America. (This year's NAHBS drew 196 exhibitors, up from only 25 at the first show in 2001.)

Major bike manufacturers are not threatened. "Modern mass-produced bikes are so damn good," says Sachs from his perch on a stool in the corner of his shop, which is cluttered with the tools of his trade: bare metal tubes, forks, stems, and flos. A nearly complete frame sits on a workbench. Free of paint, Sachs's intricate metalwork is on full display. "For \$1,000, anyone can buy a bike that's capable of making you go fast," he says. Indeed, when Lance Armstrong launched his post-cancer Tour de France comeback in 1999, he famously did so atop a custom-Giant Trek.

But the use of Armstrong-approved factory bikes produced an unintended consequence. "It got to the point where you'd show up to a group ride, and literally everyone would be riding a mass-produced carbon bike," says Jamann. "A big part of the appeal of a custom bike is the uniqueness of it. It's like having a bike that not everyone else has, that was built just for me by someone I have a really nice and solid relationship with."

Sachs's shop is now deep in the woods of Massachusetts, on the shore of a small pond.

On at least your desk it's the shop; there is no sign. Indeed, there is nothing to suggest that you've arrived at the spot where North America's finest road bicycles are assembled.

Richard Sachs emerges. He's a short, slight fellow with deep-set eyes the color of raw steel, multiple silver hoops in his left ear, and a trim, almost hunched build, the result of decades spent alternating between his workbench and the cockpit of a racing bicycle. Sachs, 58, still races regularly and can put the hurt on riders half his age.

Sachs's business remains strictly a one-man operation. If you call Richard Sachs Cycles, Richard Sachs answers the phone. If you e-mail, the reply will be from Richard. It is Richard who makes all decisions about how your frame will be built.

All this would be trivial if Sachs didn't possess a degree of skill that's the envy of anyone who's ever picked up a wrench and file. "He set the bar for everyone else," says Mike Zamcanto, the man behind Zamcanto Custom Cycles, who has been building steel frames since 1968. "All the sculpting and the work he does is really on another level."

After measurements are taken and materials gathered, building the frame — almost exclusively for road bikes — takes Sachs three to four days. His signatures include a preference for blood-red color; joints that are hand-filed with extreme precision; and, most famously, an arrow embossed on the fork crown, a piece of metal where the forks and steering column join.

What's intriguing about Sachs, aside from his immense skill, is that his success seems



solely dependent on his assertion that his bikes are nothing extraordinary. Sachs's rhetoric, almost comically understated in building drives rarely get much attention — and followers — as the quality of his frames. In a business driven by technology and the hype that surrounds emerging advances, Sachs's frames are very well made of steel — harnessing the benefits of lightweight aluminum and carbon fiber. He doesn't consider the industry-wide measurement of stiffness acceptable. "I don't know what stiffness is" — and his frames are always, he claims, lighter.

"The human element in my bikes means that no matter how hard I try to make the perfect frame, it's not going to happen. For a long time, I tried to overcome my own humaneness, but I finally realized that the quality



Richard Sachs works on a custom frame (left) and traces parts on a frame.

and intention and emotions I put into my work are all part of the equation."

Sachs's frame sets sell today for about \$4,000, but by the time an order is delivered, that figure could jump 50 percent or more because of the cost of material and his ever-changing list of labor. The wait list is now approaching seven years (Zamcanto got his white frame in three), and it is only getting longer. In January alone, Sachs took 10 orders, nearly six months' worth of production.

With \$1,500 factory bikes ready and in stock now, it's fair to ask, is a Sachs frame worth it? Jamieson, right, is one who seems revealingly intense. "I don't want to exaggerate," he says. "But it's the best bike I've ever ridden. Was it worth it? Let's put it this way: I'd do it again in a heartbeat." ■

America's Top Bike Builders



HANDMADE CUSTOM CYCLES

Builder: Bobby Smith
Age: 54 (Lewiston, Idaho, 83)
Number of frames per year: 20
Bikes offered: Road, cyclocross
Materials: Steel
Price: \$1,500 and up
Philosophy: "Customness, simplicity. It's the simple things that last work better." He's for it.
Known for: Incredible craftsmanship coupled with excellent sales. If it's not a bike, you're not at Sachs. (bicycle@handmadecycles.com)



STEVE SMITH

Builder: Carl Strong
Age: 46 (Lawrence, Kansas, 66)
Number of frames per year: 70
Bikes offered: Road, mountain, cyclo-cross
Materials: Steel, titanium, carbon fiber
Price: \$1,000 and up
Philosophy: "It isn't necessary, don't do it."
Known for: Mastery of multiple frame materials. Strong is a "materials geek," as comfortable with steel joints as with carbon fiber. (strongframes.com)



BLAINE OTT BICYCLES

Builder: Carl Strong
Age: 46 (Lawrence, Kansas, 66)
Number of frames per year: 70
Bikes offered: Road, mountain, cyclo-cross
Materials: Steel
Price: \$1,700 and up
Philosophy: "Focus on making the bike like controls, but it's not important to me to add another detail, to have a pleasing aesthetic." Known for: The "stronger" design, which allows simple chain-tension adjustments. (blaineottbicycles.com)



VANILLA BICYCLES

Builder: Sachs White
Age: 34 (Lawrence, Kansas, 66)
Number of frames per year: 20
Bikes offered: Road, cyclo-cross, touring, track, commuter
Materials: Steel
Price: \$1,000 and up
Philosophy: "To create a marriage of beauty and function."
Known for: Bikes that inspire an emotional response. His frames are carried by bike geeks (he's one of the top builders Sachs openly praised) and the estimated 1,000 following him. (vanillabicycles.com)