

A Bike History of Time

by **Guy Kesteven**

In the beginning, Him in the Big Armchair created man and, to cut a long story short, by 1970 man was mountain biking. However, rather like dictators in the '30s, we dispute the course of history in between.

There's no escaping the fact that bicycles have only roamed the earth for a few centuries, with mountain bikes rearing their knobbly heads in the past 20 years or so, but ever since the earth started cooling from a molten ball it's been creating and influencing the mountain bike world we know and ride through. Look closely at history and you'll see every current contentious issue of riding -- riding styles, access issues, UCI bike fascism, and even the BCF's World Cup Performance Plan politics -- time and again throughout the centuries.

Inexplicably, the short-sighted academic world has never paid any heed to mountain biking's clear links with the planet's development, but we guarantee there'll be embarrassed shufflings in university libraries across the globe from now on.

You read it here first and it'll change history forever, so grab a cup of tea, turn off the telly and prepare to gasp out loud as we reveal the incredible story that is THE MOUNTAIN BIKE HISTORY OF THE WORLD -- hahaha, etc. (mad laugh)!

The Big Bang

Whether it was an enormous cosmic bang or a bearded bloke in a cloak, something, or somebody, moulded a rough ball of elements and assorted minerals into our humble planet and set it spinning round a dirty great star. Most impressive about this piece of handiwork is that whoever stirred the mixture made damn sure they created just the right selection of materials to make bike design interesting from square one. Nowhere else in engineering do so many materials (steel, titanium, aluminium, magnesium and carbon) all vie for the title of 'best material' like they do in bike building. The creators even went to the trouble of making some materials easy to find and others absolutely murder to process so we could have an easy price hierarchy to keep the snobs happy. In fact, considering the lengths they went to on our behalf you can almost forgive them for putting on a bit too much top spin and making it inevitable that when you're reading this it'll be getting dark too early and will probably be sluicing down as well.

From soup to standing up

Laying the foundations of bike technology was one thing, but providing riders was another. So the powers that be came up with the first UCI (Universal Crawling Initiative). Anything capable of dividing, multiplying, swimming or just drifting through the primordial soup was told to make its way onto dry land as best it could. Of course, back in the early days the young UCI was far less concerned with rules and regulations, but the problems were already plain to see. With everything from single-cell jelly to 40-ton lizards trying to compete for the same titles of land supremacy, something had to be done. Overnight, bodybuilding drugs and dinosaurs as a whole were banned, and small, furry fellas without sloping toptubes were thrust into the limelight.

Trials and tribulations

Just when mammals got the fur/live young/high speeds on four legs thing all worked out, some clever little monkey reared up on its hind legs, managed a couple of side hops, grinned to its mates, then wheeled off across the African plains. Thus, trials was born.

Pretty soon these Australopithecine tricksters realised that not only could their front legs be used to point and wave at herds of proto-wildebeest, but they could be used to make stuff or give troublesome individuals from other species a good slap.

Over the next few million years, bigger brained, better balancing individuals stuck sticks to pointy rocks with pieces of resin and hide, built shelters and set fire to stuff, in a bizarre link running in a direct line to the Polaris competitions of today, bearded people set out into remote areas to collect as many points as possible (denoted by size of animal 'tagged') before returning home before it got dark.

When successful teams started coming home with truly mammoth (ho, ho!) scores, early magazines (Maximum Bison Hunting, Primitive Horse and Hound, What Spear, Good Cavekeeping, etc.) were painted onto rock walls. Over time, the majority of people began to tame animals, settle down, and start farming, happy to spend every Sunday down the garden centre, but others still wanted that singletrack thrill they first discovered chasing Aurochs. The 'Sweet Track' singletrack discovered in the Somerset Levels is undoubtedly a direct ancestor of the raised North Shore trails in Vancouver, while only a few years ago an early Transalp competitor was discovered frozen into a glacier on the Austrian/Italian border.

Civilisation's what you need

Back in the farmlands, the boffins were starting to play. Pointy grey stones were replaced with shiny metal alloys such as bronze and then iron. Rough log slices became wheels, the Sumerians started using donkey-hauled chariots and somewhere out in the eastern steppes the first carts to use a wheel track of four foot eight and a bit started making ruts through mud. As it doesn't make much sense building a cart that won't fit into the existing ruts, this set up a double track width that hasn't changed much to this day and (trivia fans rejoice) still provides the gauge for most of the world's railways.

Over in Egypt, the pharaohs were doing their fair share of inventing too, with enormous tombs (impressive but pointless), cat worshipping (completely pointless) and tensioned, spoked chariot wheels (extremely impressive and useful).

As cities grew and people became inevitably more serious by using roads too often, regulations and even uniforms replaced informal Sunday outings, with official wars being waged instead of friendly trail skirmishes. Technology continued to be fuelled (as ever) by the need for more destructive weaponry, with springs being developed for siege engines and body armour replacing baggy stuff for combat.

The rise of the roadies

It's no coincidence that the ultimate disciplinarian, 'trample all before them' nation were also stringent roadies. Yes, the baggy-clothed, tattooed and pierced Celts didn't know what had hit them when they met the Romans and their version of the UCI (the Unstoppable Conquering Idea). Trying to defend their often enormously ramped and bermed dual slalom courses (often misinterpreted as hill forts), the Celts' individualistic style didn't stand a chance against well-drilled pelotons of legionnaires. It was either

crucifixion or an even more drawn out, painful death on the beautifully made roads stretching out in straight lines across the Roman Empire. Even the worshipping of woodland gods was outlawed in favour of regular steaming baths and the pungent ointments still found in time trials today.

Unsurprisingly, it didn't take long for people to get sick of all the regulations, licenses and bureaucracy needed to be eligible for national citizen points and the empire collapsed into chaos within a few centuries. Spurred on by the example of such legendary 'free riders' as Attila the Hun, groups like the Saxons, Angles and Jutes arrived to 'check out the urban scene', and the dual slalom/hill fort settlements became popular again. For the next few centuries everyone road or ruled pretty much wherever they wanted and great fun was had by all, particularly a young lad called Arthur who pulled the legendary riser Excalibur out of a stone shopping bike. In times of narrow, flat bars he proved invincible in close combat.

Over in the Middle East, clipless horse pedals (stirrups) were developed by the Persian Cataphract heavy cavalry and so another two seeds in mountain bike development were planted. Back in Europe, the Vikings and their WCPP (World Cup Pillage Plan) proved an enormous short-term success, allowing assorted Scandinavian teams to join together as one on the world plundering circuit. It eventually collapsed, however, as leaders such as Eric Bloodaxe and then William the Conqueror arranged more lucrative 'feudal kingdom' deals and declared the medieval period official open.

The Middle Ages

All through this time the church tried to keep order by arranging regular meetings on Sunday mornings and even starting a WCPP (World Crusade Pilgrimage Plan) of their own. In this new form of competition knights could come from all across the country and after ridding their local Halfords of Saracens could set off to trash the Holy Land under the banner of God. The rising cost of full body armour, long-travel lances and specialist, ultra heavy horses made this a minority interest, and access issues developed as knights and nobles declared all royal hunting grounds (and of course footpaths) off limits. As usual, most bands of merry men couldn't give a Friar Tuck and kept using the singletrack regardless. After witch burning and the ever-popular sport of thrash the French kept England busy for the next few centuries, our bearded Polaris ancestors started the discover ball rolling again by setting off with blank maps to find checkpoints in Cathay and the Americas. Those returning with the most plunder within the allotted time period (roughly the sell-by-date of a weevil-ridden biscuit) were declared the winners and offered the chance of finding Australia.



Mountain biking was very much a support act at the main spectator events in the Middle Ages

Discoveries of cocoa in the Americas paved the way for far better tasting energy snacks, while the Far Eastern inventors proved to be a step ahead by returning with gunpowder, silk, spices and indexed gearing. Back home, Henry VIII's annoyance with his WCPP (Wife Culling Pregnancy Plan) not producing any long-term team success saw him setting up his own UCI (Usurping Cash Initiative) by ignoring the European governing body and dissolving the monasteries.

This upset the Spanish deeply and, not content with just thieving our fish, they tried wholesale invasion -- presumably to get hold of the chip shops as well.

The Armada was beaten off by a combination of pointy beards, bowls playing and ridiculous collars, but England developed a terrible taste for shipbuilding that saw the great riding forests that were our rightful inheritance sacrificed in centuries of naval warfare. Worst of all, this deciduous destruction was justified purely on the basis of making cricket an international sport. Meanwhile, somewhere in Italy a bloke called Leonardo casually doodled plans for tanks, helicopters and bicycles in between painting assorted Madonnas and getting the smile right on the Mona Lisa.

Just after the Middle Ages

The next couple of centuries saw a few plagues and a big fire in London as the only notable events in England until a dispute over the introduction of compulsory helmet wearing (Cromwell and the Roundheads) instead of floppy, feathered hats (Royalist Cavaliers) escalated into civil war. During this period, the idea of Fawkes as something temperamental, explosive and ultimately doomed to failure was born after a bungled attempt to Rock parliament with Shox.

In the peace that followed, carved saw benches in the shape of horses were fitted with wheels and scooted around country estates by the lunatic aristocracy. These 'hobby horses' were converted to pedal power but brutal road conditions saw them rapidly renamed as 'bone shakers'. However, despite a prime opportunity to start our favourite sport, horses were still the first choice of 'free riding' highwaymen.

Over in America, the descendants of St. Brendan, Lief Ericson and the Pilgrim Fathers began the argument about who discovered the country in the first place, while the native Indians correctly observed that 'white man speaks with forked tongue'. As early IMBA members blazed trails towards the west and Canadians disappeared into the forests looking for singletrack, Britain decided it's all just a fad anyway and concentrated on stopping world domination attempts by the tiny Frenchman Napoleon 'Martinez' Bonaparte instead.

The Industrial Revolution

Having thrashed the French (again), Britain concentrated on inventing exciting things in iron, and technology largely bypassed the bike in favour of steam trains, elaborate bridges and rusty boats. Frustrated by the primitive Penny Farthing cycles, those bearded Polaris men started racing ultra high speed 'clipper' ships to get to the other side of the world to collect tea using such famous vessels as The Cutty Sark, Ariel and, of course, the Mount Vision.

With most of the globe safely painted pink and understanding the rules of cricket, attention returned to the 'safety bicycle' with its chain drive and Dunlop pneumatic tyres, and by the turn of the century the world went cycling mad. Well, most of it did. Over in the US, the Wright Brothers abandoned their bicycle business in a successful attempt to get really big air, and so start the overused cliché of 'aerospace technology' with a mixture of bend wood, canvas and string.

Undoubtedly causing the biggest division of society -- and of skirts -- were the radical feminist independents, who not only risked 'worrying their pretty little heads' about equality and political representation with the WCPP (Women Claim Political Parity) plan, but caused untold moustache

twirling excitement among the male population. In an attempt to impress these newly independent ladies, testosterone posturing ran out of control and, as ever, things turned nasty as the whole of Europe geared up for world war.

The War Zone

After a great deal of slaughtering, cowering in trenches and general lack of movement, the British Admiralty, peeved that the Germans wouldn't come out and give them a proper battle at sea, designed their own ATBs (All Terrain Battleships). Their big, knobbly tracks, extremely low gearing and bombproof frame allowed these 'tanks' to wander about regardless of roads, revolutionising warfare in their wake. However, just like the first mountain bikes, the early versions suffered from lousy handling that saw most of them falling into craters.

Starting as they meant to go on the Americans arrived at the war late, shouted a lot and tried to take the credit for everything. Then peace was declared and the Americans declared alcohol illegal in their UCI (Untouchable Cocktail Initiative), while the Bolshevik Russians set up their own WCPP (Without Czar Proletariat Power) plan, whereby everyone got to be on the red team or mysteriously disappeared.

Back home, numbers of cars were increasing but these inter-war days were a happy heyday of canvas saddlebags and pass storming on fixed gear roadsters. Despite the lessons learned with tanks, cycling still had very much a cavalry feel, involving galloping about in road clubs. Even in France no one seemed to be bothered about making use of the ready supply of fresh bombholes, while the Dutch just started doing even more cyclo-cross races on recently reclaimed polder.

Feeling like they missed out on the first war, the Spanish had one of their own, which got the Russians, Germans and Italians all excited again. The Germans were still smarting from getting a whopping in WWI and the Italians decided black shirts were the colour for invading small countries. So another world war kicked off. The French got thrashed, we got 'plucky' and just about held on, the Russians suffered obscene casualties but still had enough numbers in reserve to come out of the east in horde-like fashion. Yet again, the Americans arrived late, shouted a lot and tried to take the credit for everything.

The following decades of the Cold War were spent developing weapons of mass destruction as a cover for researching bike technology, with all sorts of useful stuff like aluminium, magnesium and titanium alloys, and carbon-fibre constructs being authorised by generals who could spend as much as they wanted. While this was all going on, actual bike design didn't change much, as people figured they probably wouldn't be alive to ride them the next day.

The birth of mountain biking

By the Sixties, sex, drugs and rock and roll made the imminent destruction of Earth more bearable and rapidly expanding trouser acreage and afro hairstyles pushed young Californians further and further into the mountains. In a moment of genius, a small group of these 'reek pack' riders took to drying their clothes and monstrous hairpieces by hurling down the sides of mountains on old paperboy bikes. Soon gears were fitted to allow the riders to go back up and descend in separate rinse and spin cycles. Noticing the new spring freshness of their chequered shirts and the luxuriant condition of their heavyweight moustaches, Mike Sinyard saw an opportunity too good to miss.

Taking a whole new approach to the Far East for an American, he avoided the temptation to start a small, doomed war and shipped samples of these bikes to Taiwan for copying. The mtb phenomenon snowballed. People raced them, took them intercontinental or just rode them around the woods. The generals in Russia and NATO kissed and made up, then cut up their missiles to make shiny new bikes. All the hi-tech aluminium tweekers turned the control dials in their secret sheds from camouflage to shiny anodised colours and the world was filled with peace and happiness -- but a little too much purple.

Heavy bikes got lighter then broke. Then they got springs to stop them breaking. Sprung riders did ever more stupid stuff and their bikes got even heavier. Downhill racing became a separate discipline and the bikes are still getting bigger. Other riders still wanted to go up too and the lighter stuff is getting lighter again. And, of course, in between the extremes there's a whole bunch of mongrels hopping, jumping and disappearing into the wild green yonder.

zdroj: <http://www.bikereader.com/BikeReader/contributors/kesteven/history.html>