

Built a wheel today... had to see if I still have it. I do.



I used to build a lot of wheels, often several a week. It was something I learned to do, and do very well, very early in my cycling career. Just something I had a knack for. 15 year old kid building wheels for himself, then other racers, and getting stern lectures from the team's "professional" mechanic, a guy who didn't like people coming into his craft without the proper credentials. In this case, credentials meant working as an apprentice for a master craftsman who would show the new guy the ropes and keep him out of trouble. I just saw it as an attempt (successful I should say) to act snobbish and try to pretend there was more to it than anyone mildly intelligent and halfway mechanically-inclined could figure out.

This same guy also constantly whined to us about how awful everything was in the US compared to his native England, making us wonder why, if it's so bad here and so great there, did he stay? That was 45 years ago and apparently he's still here. Hmm.

There was some sort of special marking he used on his wheels, so people knew he'd built them. Seemed like a good idea, so I created my own trademark of sorts; a narrow red band around the center of the hub.

I kept on building wheels for quite a few years; wheels built by somebody who knew what they were doing, using high-quality spokes, were dramatically more-durable than what a shop could buy from distributors. I was on another planet when I discovered the Robergel Sport spoke, an obscure, kind of ugly spoke, ugly because instead of being chrome plated or stainless, it was zinc-coated high-carbon steel. The stainless spokes of the day were prone to failure (but looked nice), while the chrome-plated Unions both broke and didn't look very good after the chrome would rust away. Yes, for a while, my wheels held up while others failed. They didn't look pretty, but nobody ever had to drop out of a race because they had a Robergel Sport spoke break on them.

Eventually Wheelsmith came along and made great improvements in stainless steel spoke quality, with DT coming along shortly thereafter. That, combined with Jobst Brandt's "The Bicycle Wheel" book, ushered in a new era where everyone had access to higher-quality components and great instructions on how to build a wheel. I had always fancied writing my own wheel-building book, but never got around to it.

Sometime around the mid-90s we began to see another new era for wheels, as they began to become a fashion statement for bikes, with distinctive looks for different brands. Standards went out the window; everything became proprietary. The locally-built custom wheel became the exception and generally couldn't offer the light weight and aerodynamic properties of the high-end brands.

Me, I pretty much stopped building custom wheels in large quantities a very long time ago, probably late-80s. Just not enough uninterrupted time in a day to build a wheel, when you own a shop. For special circumstances I'd still build a wheel or two from time to time, sometimes just to prove I still had the touch.

Today, I built a very special rear wheel, something that should be pretty darned bomb proof and yet still light weight, for a customer who's had issues with modern low-spoke count factory wheels. I could have had one of my mechanics do it, but really, I had to know, would it still come to me easily? It must have been 5 years since I last built a wheel. Would it matter? I had to know.

I can report back that I still have it. It's like riding a bike; you just don't forget. The main issue wasn't tensioning and truing; I still do a lot of that on already-built wheels. It was mostly whether putting the spokes in and lacing the wheel up would come as easily as it did in the past. It did. No problem. I remembered the special way I put the spokes in, and it all fell neatly into place.

Too bad I can't spend more time building wheels, but it wouldn't keep the doors open. Darn that progress thing. Adapt & evolve and use your time wisely. I miss the old ways.