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Fitting session can turn a tired bike into a true friend

By MELISSA KIM

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Have you, like many others, been inspired by the Tour de Lance? You've hauled the old bike out of the basement, dusted it off, pumped up the tires and taken it out for a spin, proudly sporting your yellow Live Strong bracelet.

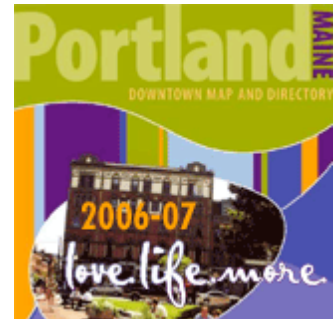
But the bike feels cranky, and your neck is stiff, and you have a rash, and the hammock is so comfortable. But don't give up too soon. It's so easy to breathe some fresh air into your cycling, to make the whole experience comfortable and pleasurable.

One approach is to test ride some new bikes and splurge on a new pair of wheels. But if you're stuck with an existing bike, then treat it well. Take it to a bike shop for a tuneup. The mechanics will, among other things, check and adjust the brakes and derailleurs, true the tires, clean and lube the drive train and do all those other things you really should have been doing yourself.

If that still doesn't make you rush home from work every day to ride your bike, then consider going in for a fitting session. One of the most important elements in the relationship between you and your bike is the fit. It makes sense, right? If you bought a \$600 suit, you'd have it tailored or altered to fit you properly. Then it feels good when you wear it, and you want to wear it all the time.

Same for the bike. When all the conditions are right, biking should feel effortless and graceful. You zoom along and pedaling becomes as natural and mindless as breathing. You don't even notice that you're doing it. The fit contributes to this in so many ways. Your movements are more comfortable and more efficient, resulting in a great combination: fun and power.

If you're buying a new bike, then any bike shop worth its salt will give you a fitting session. But if you already have a bike, then consider booking a session, especially if you've done any of these things recently: Had an injury or surgery, had a baby, got new bike shoes, switched to clipless pedals, gained (and/or lost)



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weight, changed your riding style or aged since you bought the bike.

All of those things apply to me, so I decided to take in my 10-year-old Trek for a fitting session with David Brink at Cyclemania in Portland. It was a little bit like having a makeover. I went in feeling a little sheepish and ashamed of my tired old bike, but left with a spring in my step, wanting to ride all day, ready to plan my next cycling holiday.

We started by talking about my biking style, how many miles I put in on the bike and any discomfort or problems I've been experiencing (for example, my left palm always falls asleep when I ride long distances). We put the bike on a stationary trainer and he had me hop on, clip in and pedal while he stood back and observed.

The first and most crucial step is to make sure you have the right frame size. A few simple measurements of your inseam, maybe even your torso and arm, combined with some facts about the type of bike and riding you'll be doing, will sort this out. I knew I had the right frame size, so we moved quickly on to step two: the saddle.

The saddle can go up or down, forward or backward, and can tilt up or down. Your seat height should be such that your leg doesn't straighten all the way on your downward stroke; you want a little bit of bend in the knee. My seat height was fine.

To check the fore and aft position, Brink had me position the pedal at a nine o'clock spot with the pedal flat and the pedal axle parallel to the ground. Then he dropped a plumb line from my kneecap to the pedal. The plumb hit at exactly the right spot along the pedal, so I knew I didn't need to move the seat forward or backward. You can adjust this position if you want more power (move the seat back), or prefer to spin your pedals more as you ride (move it forward).

We also looked at the saddle itself. Mine was literally coming apart at the seams. Brink showed me a saddle fit system, basically a specially shaped gel pad. You sit on it and an impression is made of your ischia (that's the sit bones, to you and me). I turned down a chance at this experience, but I did get a different saddle to test out.

Then we looked at what Brink called the cockpit area: the handlebars. Here, you can adjust the stem height, the stem length and the width of the handlebars. I'd been feeling like I was reaching too far to rest my hands on the tops of the brake levers. With a quick adjustment, Brink tilted the bars up and also raised the stem a tiny bit. Presto! Everything clicked into place and the bike was more comfortable than it had ever been.

He also adjusted one brake lever and one gear shifter (both had slid a bit out of place); tweaked the cleat on my right bike shoe so I wasn't riding pigeon-toed; and recommended a gel-padded handlebar tape to reduce some of the impact on my hands. All the adjustments were little things that I probably could have done myself, but sometimes having a qualified professional do it, or tell you to do it, makes all the difference.

As Brink cautioned, you can't expect miracles. It will depend on your existing bike; you can't turn a 10-speed into a mountain

bike, and odds are that nothing will turn you into the next Lance Armstrong. But, said Brink, "it will make you want to ride your bike and not leave it in the garage."

All of Maine's quality bike shops will do custom fittings. Prices range from \$35 to \$80 and upwards, depending on your needs. Most shops require appointments, and a fitting can take from 45 minutes to two hours.

Melissa Kim, a free-lance writer in Portland, is the author of "New England Biking: 100 of the Best Road and Trail Rides." She welcomes comments at: bikes@melissakim.com

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