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Sunday, May 14, 2006

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Avoid bike trouble: Wheel in for tune-up

By MELISSA KIM

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Finally - the days are longer, the temperatures are higher, and biking season has well and truly begun. Did you grab your bike out of the basement and go on your first ride, barely taking time to wipe off the dust from last fall?

If the answer is yes, then you can pretty much expect something annoying to happen this summer: You won't be able to downshift smoothly when you're hill climbing; your chain will come off when you least expect it; your brakes will screech or, worse, won't work; or you'll bust a spoke miles from home.

If you'd rather have trouble-free riding for the summer, then give your bike a tune-up or take it to a local bike shop to let the pros do it. Now's the time. (Actually, February or March is really the time. By May, most mechanics are extremely busy.) I always take my bikes to a bike shop for a pre-season tune-up. Maybe I could do it myself, but I know that professional mechanics will do the job faster and better.

CLOSE-UP ON THE TUNE-UP

This spring, I persuaded Karl Stewart, a mechanic who has been with Portland's Back Bay Bicycles for more than 16 years, to let me watch him do a tune-up of my road bike. Stewart gave my bike, a 10-year-old retrofitted Trek 750, a quick once-over when I brought it to the shop in advance of the tune-up. His goal was to check for major problems so he'd know if he had to order parts and so he could give me an estimate (at Back Bay, a basic tune-up is \$39 plus parts).

Right off the bat, he noticed that my chain was worn and stretched. A quick measurement told us that I'd need a new chain and, as a companion to that, a new cassette (the set of cogs, or gears, on the rear wheel). This was painful, but not unexpected. It could be because my chain is old, but it could also be because I don't clean and lubricate the chain frequently enough; yet another reminder that regular maintenance makes for better biking and saves you money.

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He asked about my riding habits and needs as well. The more you can tell the mechanic, the better. If, for instance, you hear a worrisome click or squeak on one side of the bike but not both sides, that's useful information. Make sure to tell them if you are about to do a long, multi-day tour, or if you live on an island. Rust is a big problem for Mainers and, said Stewart, Peaks Island folks almost always have rust, for example, on their seat posts. It's easy enough to sand or grind it off, then grease it, but if you let it go untreated it will cause problems down the road.

A week or so later, I came back for the tune-up. Stewart gave all the parts a once-over, making sure the handlebars were straight, checking the crank for looseness, looking at the wheels, oiling the quick-release mechanisms, greasing the seat post, and so on.

He basically checked everything you can see on the outside of the bike without having to disassemble any parts. All the gears and the ratchet mechanisms were tested, and tightened or loosened as needed. He then zeroed in on the three big things: wheels, frame and alignment.

TRUING THE WHEELS

Both wheels came off and spent some time on the truing stand; the goal is to make the wheel as true, or as straight, as it can be by adjusting the spokes. Truing a wheel is a finesse skill; Stewart spun the wheel forward and back, tightening one spoke, loosening another, eyeing the wheel with a trained eye. He also added tiny bits of oil here and there.

In a place like Maine where there is a lot of salt on the roads, it's important to put a tiny bit of oil between the rim and the spoke nipple (the little piece of brass that holds the stainless steel spoke to the rim). When finished, he gave the spokes gentle squeezes all the way around; the equivalent, he said, of taking it for a little test ride.

We then spent a lot of time looking at, talking about and adjusting the hubs on both wheels. Hubs contain the axle, quick release parts, and bearings and ratchets built in to a cassette. Stewart had me feel the grittiness when turning the hubs; this meant they were too tight.

Adjusting the hubs, Stewart emphasized, is one of the most important things you can do to increase the lifespan of your wheel. Checking the hubs once or twice a year is far cheaper than replacing the entire wheel. After the adjustments, I could feel them spinning easily and smoothly. This, I felt, was one of the best things that came out of my tune-up; it was essential maintenance that I wouldn't have thought of, and didn't have the tools to do at home.

Then the frame came under scrutiny. Stewart and the other mechanics all agreed that you could easily have a crack in your frame and not know it. I had no cracks, but Stewart did notice that one of my cable housings had torn through, and the cable was exposed and starting to fray. He removed and replaced both the cable and the housing. I watched him measure the cable and the housing, adjust them, pull the cable through the housing, thread the cable, adjust it, crimp it, tug it, seat it, shift gears to test, and I found myself wondering how long it would take me to do that. Maybe two weeks?

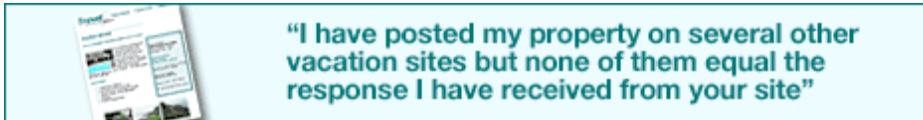
He then checked all the alignments, especially in the derailleurs, where the tiniest of adjustments can make a huge difference. He also tightened and checked the brake levers, brake pads and brake alignments, and lubricated all the brake mechanisms.

He put a wrench on everything to make sure all the moving parts had just the right tightness, what they like to call "road snug." And he put grease or oil on any part that moves. I know I've left out dozens of other things he checked as well.

I couldn't wait to ride after the tune-up. Can you really tell the difference, people ask? It's kind of like getting a tune-up for your car. The mileage is better, you feel lighter, hill climbing seems easier, shifting gears is smooth, and there's no knocking, scraping or pinging. It all means that instead of thinking about the bike; you can think about the ride. And that's the point, isn't it?

Melissa Kim, a freelance writer in Portland, is the author of "New England Biking: 100 of the Best Road and Trail Rides" (Foghorn Outdoors/Avalon Travel Publishing). She welcomes comments at bikes@melissakim.com

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