

# Feb 5 Framebuilders

## Soulcraft

**Petaluma, California**  
**Years in Business: 8**  
**Number of Employees: Just the owner**

**W**hen he worked at Marin Speed Machine grinding out parts for hot rods, Sean Walling was living the dream. But the oil, smell and dirt of an engine shop day after day began to tarnish the dream.

Thumbing through a *Bicycle Guide* feature on American framebuilders, Walling noticed that many shops used the same equipment he used in the engine shop. That got him thinking.

He picked up a frame he had at Bruce Gordon's shop for repainting and asked Gordon if he needed help. And as things go, Walling left hot rods for Gordon Cycles.

"I left Gordon to work with Ross at Salsa, but it was all great time. I was working with bikes and doing what I loved. There was a bit of a panic when Ross sold Salsa, but I knew framebuilding was what I wanted to do," Walling said.

Salsa founder Ross Shafer sold his company to Steve Flagg at Quality Bicycle Products in 1999, and days after Salsa closed, Walling and fellow Salsa employee Matt Nyiri founded Soulcraft. Five years later Nyiri left Soulcraft for a sales position at Camelbak.

"When Matt and I got started we had no business plan or strategy beyond figuring that there were more people like us who are willing to pay a bit more for something made by someone that really cares about what

they are making, which is so rare these days," Walling said.

Eight years later he still sees his business as one step above a garage builder, but he's making a good living and loving the business.

"I'm only one guy but I always answer the phone when I can or return calls and email quickly. Why make a big deal about your individual level of service when you don't deliver? I make sure I deliver," he said.

While liability insurance and rent checks add cost over working out of a garage, it pales next to the cost of running the Soulcraft racing team and attending Interbike, Sea Otter and the Handmade Bike Show. But spending this extra money adds professionalism and passion to his company, and Walling said it keeps his customers coming back.

But if there is one thing that keeps Walling up at night it's the thought that his prices might be too low.

"The last thing I want is customers that search me out because I'm cheaper than other builders. Those value customers are so much extra work. In addition to a good price, they want a whole bunch of other extras for free," he said.

"So rather than getting you more business, letting your prices lag ends up costing you business and eating up your time," he added.

Soulcraft works with about 10 dealers, but from a business standpoint, Walling said it's hardly worth it. After he figures in a dealer's 35 percent margin, little if any profit is left. For that reason, Walling said he greatly prefers doing customer-direct business.



Sean Walling

## Richard Sachs Cycles

**Chester, Connecticut**  
**Years in Business: 32**  
**Number of Employees: 1**

**I**t makes you ponder predestination: A serendipitous series of naïve but gutsy decisions set Richard Sachs, a beginning bike racer just out of high school, on the road to becoming one of America's pre-eminent custom bike builders.

With time to fill before entering col-

lege, he spotted an ad in New York's *Village Voice* for a wrenching job in Vermont. With confidence that only a bike-crazy 18-year-old could muster, "I bought a one-way Greyhound ticket to Burlington thinking I'd go up and ace this job. When I got there, they looked at me like I was crazy," Sachs said.



Richard Sachs

## Vicious Cycles

**New Paltz, New York**  
**Years in Business: 13**  
**Number of Employees: 7**

**M**any in the industry might not realize that Vicious Cycles has been ahead of the curve when spotting trends.

"We were among the first four builders to display a 29-inch mountain bike at the 1999 Interbike Show," said Carl Schlemowitz, founder and owner of Vicious Cycles. "We were the first to offer a 29-inch mountain tandem. We were the first company to have a rigid disc fork."

From a one-man operation in 1994 to employing seven today, Vicious Cycles has grown to be a nationally recognized bike brand thanks to Schlemowitz's vision and love of biking.

"My interest in mountain bikes began in the late 1980s and came about by combining camping trips with off-road cycling," Schlemowitz said. "Cycling became a lifestyle for me, more than just a sport."

Schlemowitz's love for fabrication came from his father, who was a sculptor working in metal.

"I watched him work and was inspired to start building my own bikes," he said. "My first successful efforts inspired me to make biking my life and work. Now my main focus is on growing Vicious Cycles so I can get more of my bikes out there for people to enjoy."

Schlemowitz said he continues to see his business grow. Especially lately as his company builds a stronger dealer network. The Handmade Bike Show doesn't hurt either.

"It's an additional venue for gaining exposure with both the consumer public and potential dealers," he said, adding that his full-suspension and 29er models have been really taking

off as of late.

Just because Vicious might fit into the handmade label doesn't mean the company doesn't offer a bevy of different riding options including the aforementioned full suspension, a 29er, a cyclocross and a women's-specific mountain bike, just to name a few.

"We've developed our production methods to allow us to easily switch from making one frame type to another, so it's become possible to offer all the models we do," Schlemowitz said. "Over the years our selection of products has grown to keep pace with our



Carl Schlemowitz

customers' desires, not just to fill space in the market."

Vicious Cycles has all the capabilities of the larger U.S. manufacturers, according to Schlemowitz.

"All the models take about the same amount of time to build," he said. "Custom geometries take a bit more time, and tandems take the most design and production time. A standard geometry frame is usually delivered in four to six weeks."

Schlemowitz said he has no intention of going into production with his bikes. "We're growing while maintaining the high quality of our frames and forks," he said. "We continue to keep it all handmade."

In the handmade business, a lot of competition exists for a very tight dollar, Schlemowitz said, but that doesn't seem to bother him in the least.

"Our customers come to us for our product's reputation," Schlemowitz said. "They've seen our bikes on the trails and roads, and appreciate the style, personality and ride."

Unemployed but undaunted, "I went to the library and wrote to 25 to 30 bike makers in England and France, basically saying 'Will work for food to learn about bike making,'" he said.

Amazingly, Witcomb Cycles of London wrote back, "We'd love to have you." Using college tuition money, he went.

It was an eye-opener.

"To me, bikes were so beautiful. I had this vision of them being made in some antiseptic arena with tile floors, by people in lab coats. I had no idea it was a labor-intensive job by people in dirty shop aprons on floors coated with metal filings," he laughed.

Not a formal understudy, "I grommed as much information as I could and picked up basics, but I was not there being taught so much as exposed. No way did I come out of there a frame maker," Sachs said.

Tuition money running low, he returned to New Jersey, but soon joined

## Bruce Gordon Cycles

Petaluma, California

Years in Business: 31

Number of Employees: Besides Bruce, one part-time employee

It's no surprise that Bruce Gordon has a good sense of humor. He is, after all, the "co-dictator" of SOPWAMTOS (Society of People Who Actually Make Their Own Shit), a tongue-in-cheek club that recognizes individuals and companies in the bike industry with spoof awards modeled after the Razzies.

Still, his assessment of the financial condition of most handmade framebuilders is candid and insightful.

"I should have been a plumber," he said. "Making bikes in this country on a small level is a really tough way to make a living."

Gordon, 58, has been in the business of building bikes for 33 years—31 years as owner of Bruce Gordon Cycles. Before starting his company he spent two years as vice president of Eisentraut Bicycles in Oakland, California, where he learned how to build frames in 1974.

"It is very hard to compete with the big boys—especially when their stuff is made in Taiwan or China," Gordon said.

Although Gordon knows the challenges of being an independent framebuilder, he chooses to continue because he enjoys designing and building things.

Gordon, who specializes in custom lugged frames and touring bikes, builds between 40 and 100 frames per year, along with racks and other component parts. Chris Hayes, formerly of Ibis Cycles, drops in once or twice a week to assist with welding.

"I have spent my career trying to refine my products and come up with new designs. A few years ago I got back into making fancy lugged frames, which is what I did exclusively for the first 16 years of my career," Gordon said.

Witcomb USA, his mentors' new import branch in Chester, Connecticut.

"It imploded pretty quickly; Witcomb wasn't sending enough frames. The boss said to me and Peter Weigle 'You're going to make frames. Get some torches,'" Sachs said. (Weigle had also worked with Witcomb and is still a frame maker himself.)

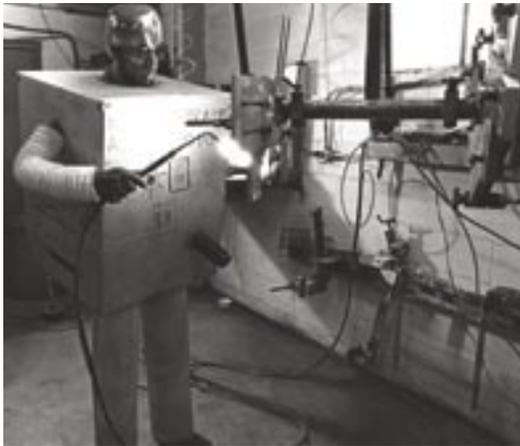
Sachs improved his craft, but soured on the job.

"I didn't have the stomach to see such a fun thing made all business. It was taking all the love and passion out of it, so I left and started Richard Sachs

Last year for the North American Handmade Bicycle Show, Gordon constructed a tubular titanium cantilever brake that was such a hit, he decided to make a CNC'd aluminum version.

"I like making new designs of parts that have a more classic aesthetic than many of the parts made today. They look better on classic lugged frames," he noted.

Although he occasionally works with titanium and aluminum, Gordon's ma-



Bruce Gordon

terial of choice is steel. "I guess I'm just traditional," he said.

This year, Don Walker, founder of the NAHBS, is providing Gordon with floor space to show a retrospective display of his work, a collection that will include 23 bikes and five frames dating back to 1974.

The display will feature lugged, titanium, road, track and touring bikes, plus a chopper he built in 1994. Gordon will also showcase a 29er he built in 1990—perhaps the first 29er ever made.

"The North American Handmade Bicycle Show is a perfect place to bring out all the bicycles I've made for myself over all these years, all of which I still ride," Gordon said.

"I think the cyclists, engineers and designers who come to the show will enjoy seeing a few decades' worth of techniques and styles in handmade frames," he added.

Cycles in late 1975," he said.

A racer himself, he already knew riders who needed frames. Sachs had orders before he lit his first torch as an independent.

"I took a proactive approach to magazine advertising—*Velonews*, *Bicycling*, *Bicycle Guide*—everything," Sachs said.

Favorable product reviews, numerous magazine articles and, more recently, complimentary postings on the Internet kept orders flowing.

For three decades, he's stuck to one clear principle: he works alone, without assistants, personally building each

## Baylis Cycles

La Mesa, California

Years in Business: 30

Number of Employees: Just the owner

Brian Baylis is the first to admit he's not a modern or technologically savvy guy. "I like to stay in the past in some ways, while still refining my work," he said. "I haven't changed and adapted to some modern looks and some modern materials."

While technology is progressive, that doesn't mean new product is always better than older product, he said. And Baylis is unconventional in other ways as well.

"I don't give a damn about profit or business. I loathe the term business. I'm anti-advertising. I'm an odd duck," he admitted.

Baylis, who describes himself as an advanced hobbyist, learned the craft of framebuilding in 1973 as one of the earliest Americans hired during the startup of Masi USA, where he worked at two different times for a total of three years.



Brian Baylis

Masi's painter took him under his wing as an apprentice. He started off building wheels and assembling bikes, but within a couple of weeks he had moved on to other tasks.

"Apparently I was good enough to learn other jobs," he said. "I was lucky in that everything I did was accepted. So I kept learning."

In between his stints at Masi, Baylis and Mike Howard, a friend and fellow Masi alumni, launched Wizard

frame at a rate of about eight to 10 per month.

"The last thing I wanted to deal with was 'How fast, how many, how quickly are you going to get a helper?' All I wanted was to be left alone and make my bikes and make them better," Sachs said.

Frame making is the core business, but he's long sold peripherals such as softgoods, and five years ago added lugs that he designs and has cast in

Cycles. The venture lasted about two years. Howard moved on and joined Medici in Los Angeles, but Baylis wanted to make his own frames.

Baylis, in his early 50s, estimates he has built anywhere from 300 to 500 frames in his lifetime—a lot less than most custom framebuilders.

"There's no way to make large numbers the way I work," he said, adding that the minimum time he puts into a frame is 80 hours. But he has put in up to 120 hours on a single frame.

Aside from custom framebuilding, Baylis also has a paint business, where he does mostly restoration, painting and frame repairs of collectible vintage Italian, French and early American lightweight road frames.

Because of the time he spends painting, and the time he devotes to each frame he builds, Baylis produces only about two to 10 frames a year.

Upon occasion he cuts and shapes dropouts by hand but he always shapes his own lugs. Even his paint colors can't be easily reproduced since he doesn't do paint formulas or charts, so touchups become impractical.

His material of choice: vintage steel. "I don't use modern lightweight thin wall very often, if ever," he said. "Nowadays, I like vintage standard retro type of materials." His specialty is fixed gear, track and traditional road bikes.

While he has a three-year backlog and has to turn down orders, Baylis still attends the Handmade Bike Show not to sell bikes, but to be part of a community.

"I go because I'm a figure and representative of craftsmanship in an age of old-school framebuilding" he said. "I have to be there to represent the fact that there is another way to do the bike thing. There isn't any money, but it's a different direction."

Taiwan, both for his own use and as a supplier to other makers.

More recently, he and famed Italian bike maker Dario Pegoretti collaboratively designed tubesets specifically for builders who use lugs and braze frames, then persuaded Italy's Columbus to make them.

"I got my first set of 70 tubes last August, and it's the best thing to happen to us artisan builders in the past 10 or 15 years," Sachs said.