

Buying a Used Bike

Sometimes I think there should be a warning label on inexpensive, big-box store bicycles: “Caution, do not be fooled by shiny paint that hides the cheap metal/plastic parts”.

But what is a person supposed to do when they want to start riding? In 1997, just prior to my launch into serious cycling, I can recall rolling my eyes when our son told me about these “cool” bikes that cost \$700. I told him my \$180 bicycle was all anyone needed. That was before I encountered a group of unforgiving trees after I lost control!



One is reluctant to spend too much until one is sure that cycling is the ticket to fun and wellness. On the other hand, enthusiasm for the “bargain” bike is quickly dashed if parts fail or work improperly. I have empathy for novices who bring me their “cheap” bike after a single ride. A flimsy rim can look like a potato chip after going over a four-inch curb - once.

I recommend that cyclists on limited funds follow the car-buying philosophy: Let someone else drive it off the lot and then you can buy it used at a reduced price! The trick: knowing the difference between a bargain or someone else’s frustration. There are several ways to avoid making the wrong purchase. Many areas have annual bicycle swaps in which clubs organize the event in exchange for a portion of the proceeds. Club members, who are passionate about cycling, are on hand to answer questions and help newbies get introduced to the sport. A second option is to comb the classified ads and take someone along who is an experienced cyclist to assist you.

When looking at a used bike, there are things to look for that are a concern, much like a used car, and then there are things that won’t affect reliability a bit. For instance, scratches on a used steel bike may detract from its appearance but not its operation. Likewise, I have a 1978 Volkswagen bus. It also has scratches but it runs just fine! On bicycles, scratches can become a concern if the component/frame is made from carbon fiber.



The areas that concern me when shopping for a used are engine, transmission plus wheels/brakes. On a bicycle, I worry most about brakes, wheels, chain rings, cassette, hubs and what would it cost to replace the worn parts/have parts properly adjusted? My favorite story was a customer who found a scratched, gray/pink rigid mountain bike for \$9.95 at a garage sale. A shifter was broken.

Both hubs and bottom bracket needed to be repacked. The wheels were out of true. I joked that the bike's outward appearance almost made it an anti-theft bicycle. The good news – the heart of the bike (quality components) was sound. For less than \$100 – parts/labor – the customer left with a well-functioning bike. In its prime, the bike was worth approximately \$500. His \$100 was well spent.

It's important to understand that when buying a cheap, new bike, where the money goes. Follow the \$100 and see what's left by the time one gets down to the wheels! First, there is the cost of shipping – usually from China. Second, there is the store profit. At best, one is down to an \$80 bicycle. Subtract another \$15 for tires plus \$30 for the frame and \$10 for the seat, and one is down to \$25. Subtract another \$15 for rims. That leaves \$5 for each brake. My life is worth more than a \$5 brake and so is yours!