

Sports

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You can do it yourself

The time has come to get your bike into shape

By MICHAEL FORMAN

Do you have trouble figuring out how to open a jar of peanut butter? Then stop reading this and make yourself a non-Kraft cheese sandwich. But if a couple of years of university have taught you that a single twist counterclockwise works like magic, then you probably have enough skill to do your own bike repairs. Careful observation combined with a little patience and common sense will allow you to do all except the most difficult fixit jobs.

If you're like most of us, your trusty two-wheeler has spent the winter months in a cold, damp garage or a dry, dusty furnace room. No matter where it's been hibernating, unless your bicycle was hermetically sealed, it will likely need some simple maintenance before it's ready to greet the spring.

Whatever repairs you decide to attempt, the best piece of advice has to be 'watch what you're doing.' Really watch, looking at the parts you will be handling, seeing how they come apart and fit together, understanding the function of each one. Ten minutes spent figuring out how your bike works will later save you two hours of fumbling around, trying to remember where that little nut goes.

TOOLS

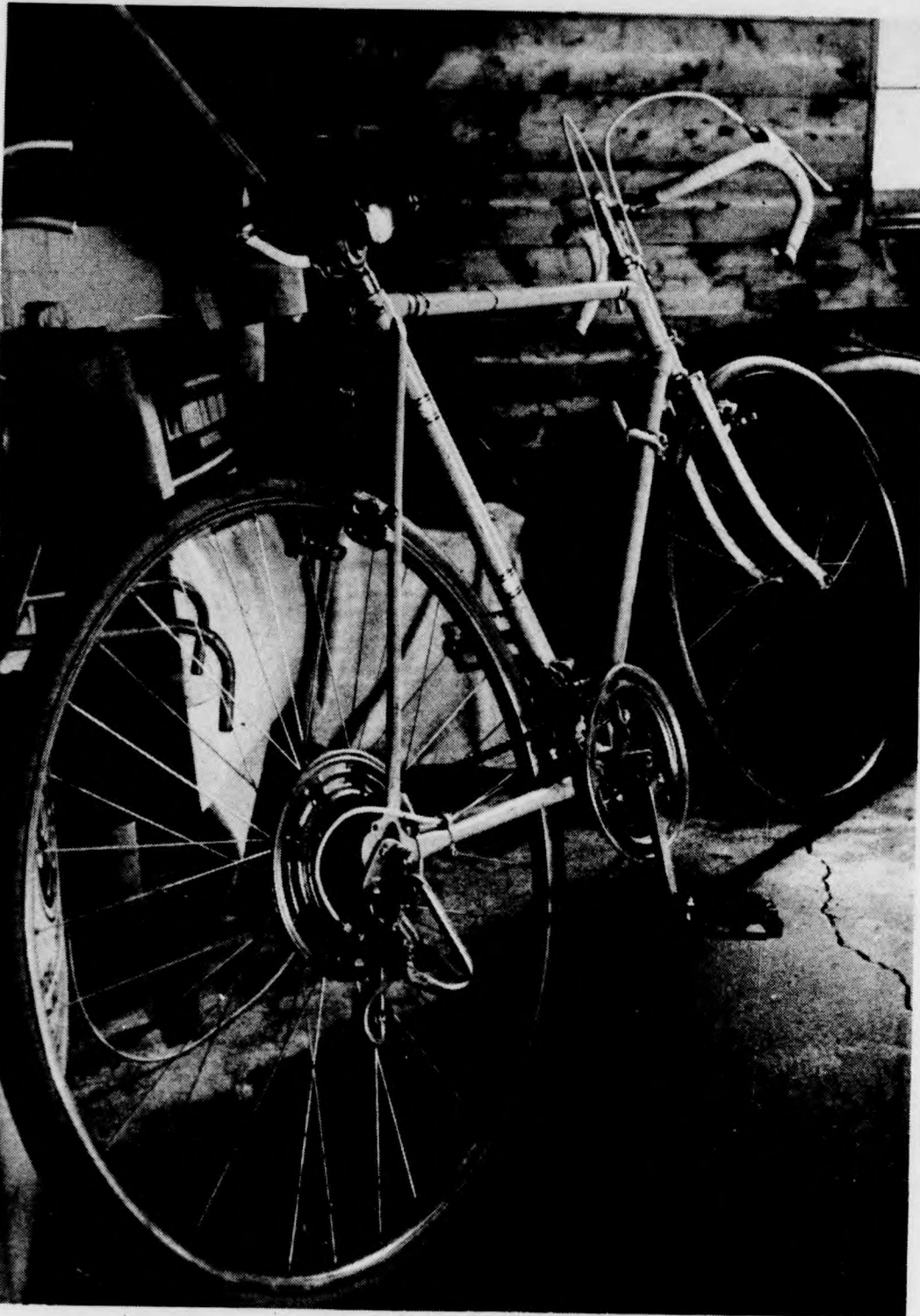
Doing your own repairs will save you but may mean an initial investment of ten to twenty dollars for the necessary tools. Butter knives just do not make good screwdrivers and thumb and forefinger wrenches tire too quickly. If you've got the tools, good, and if you don't, get them because you'll need them.

Avoid buying tools or any other goodies at a bicycle specialty store unless it's unavoidable. They can charge an arm and a leg, both rather necessary to this sport.

With your wallet in one hand and a shopping list in the other, head for the nearest Canadian Tire Store and use up all those coupons with Roland Michener's younger brother on them, the ones you've been saving in your drawer for years. Canadian Tire's selection and quality are usually very good at prices that are better than Aikenhead's or any other large hardware chain.

The necessary tool list goes something like this. 1) A set of combination wrenches, closed at one end, open at the other. Husky or Gray are both good brands but cheaper sets are available. Make sure to find out whether your bike uses metric or British sized nuts. 2) Two screwdrivers, a short one about four or five inches long with a blade a 1/4 of an inch wide and a big one, about nine or ten inches with a half inch blade. Don't skimp here, cheap screwdrivers last about a week and are then ready for the garbage. 3) A flat headed hammer for the occasional necessary whack. 4) An adjustable wrench (crescent or channel) to fit those bolts that nothing else will. 5) Tire irons, because nothing can poke a hole in a tire more quickly than a substitute like a screwdriver. 6) Lubricants. Three-in-one or Can. Tire fine machine oil are both good. Also a tube of speedometer cable lubricant which is perfect for brake and gear cables.

As a starter set, these tools should be able to handle almost any repair job you have in mind. Not necessary but nice to have are things like a Vicegrip wrench, hub spanners, a set of Allen hex keys, etc. If you have them, they're great for the occasional job, but if you don't, worry not, you can still butcher your bicycle without them.



Michael Forman photo

BACK TO BASICS

No advice is given here to repair some of the complex disasters that can overcome our two wheeled friends. For those, buy a good bike repair book and read it through. One of the best I've read is the "Anybody's Bike Book" by Tom Cuthbertson. Available at the York Book Store last year, a quick check found that this year's shipment has yet to arrive. Try some of the downtown paperback stores or bike shops but any manual should suffice.

Still there are certain repairs that can be done without much trouble. With about three hours work on a spare day, any Joe/ Josephine can have his/ her bike in tip top shape for the first ride around the block. These are basic repairs and adjustments that are necessary on any bike, a \$500 French number or a \$125 Japanese special.

THE CHAIN

A wise man was once heard to say, "Chains,

never respected, always neglected." This simple cleaning job can make an amazing amount of difference in pedalling ease and quietness. Hang your bike on a repair stand or some hooks in the garage wall or as the last resort invert it and stand it on its seat. Turn the chain slowly till you see the master link, the one with a "U" shaped clip covering it. By sliding back the clip and pushing out the rivets you can remove the dirty chain. (Note: Remember which direction the clip opening points when it's time to put it back.) Now take the greasy culprit and throw it in a bucket of Varsol or Dunk, any grease cutting agent will do. Let it sit there for an hour, then remove it, wiping it dry with a clean cloth. While you're waiting for the chain to soak, take a Varsol covered rag and clean the gunk off the front drive cog and the rear gear(s). Chains on ten speed bikes have no master link so don't think you're going blind. Clean them by running them through a Varsol rag.

Now that the chain is completely dirt free and back on the bike, take a can of oil and hold it over the front cog. Turn the cog slowly while placing a fresh drop (only one) of oil on each rivet. When the chain has fully cycled, rub it through a lightly oiled rag. One job completed, spin the pedals and pat yourself on the back.

SEAT AND HANDLEBARS

Poorly adjusted seats and handlebars can make cycling a literal pain in the ass it not attended to. Start with the seat. When sitting in a normal position, the distance from the top of the seat to the pedal in its lower position should measure 106% of your leg inseam. technically, your heel should just touch the pedal with your leg fully outstretched. Raise or lower the seat by loosening the binder bolt where the frame meets the seat stem. If the seat tips back or forth, set it level and tighten the nuts just under the seat.

Handlebars, whether the racing or coasting type should also be adjusted. To raise or lower the handlebars, loosen the large hex nut on top of them. After this stem has raised about an inch use that flat headed hammer to rap it down. Now the handlebars will raise

and drop easily. The tightened bars should rest about one inch lower than the already adjusted seat.

BRAKES

Brake trouble seems to be of two varieties. Either they don't stop well or they're on continuously. If your brake is of the pedal backwards variety, forget fixing it yourself. But if you have hand brakes, most problems can be straightened out at home.

First look at your brake shoes. After long storage or use, rubber brake shoes can crack, split or wear. Like the saying goes, "no brake shoes, no stoppy!" If the shoes need replacement, remove them carefully, easy enough to do, and take them to a bike shop. New shoes must match the old ones in style. Now run home and reinstall the new shoes, being careful that the closed metal end of the shoe retainer faces forward. Adjust the shoes so when depressed they hit only the rim, not the tire or spokes. Toeing the shoes in is a nice touch. Take your pliers and gently bend the shoe supports so the front of the pad hits the rim first. Voila.

Other simple but necessary brake maintenance includes lubricating the brake cable and hand levers. Cables can be oiled by dropping fine oil down the front of the cable housing while continuously squeezing and releasing the brakes. If the cable is old and frayed anywhere except at the end, it's time for a replacement. Detach the cable by loosening it at the brake end. Then by pressing the hand lever the bulb on that end of the cable will become accessible. Pull the cable through and again get matching parts. New cables should be well oiled before they are reinstalled. Speedometer cable grease is great both for old and new cables, and seldom needs applying.

Don't forget a gentle drop of oil for each hand grip. Stiff hand grips are quickly tiring.

For more difficult brake repairs check a manual. The number of washers and nuts in the braking mechanism can be frightening. But if you're careful you should be able to loosen them enough to figure out what's going on back there. Just don't lose any of the pieces, they're hard to replace.

GEARS AND GEARCHANGER

Lubrication for gear cables is ditto the brakes. If you own a three speed, also oil the rear hub through the nipple on the axle.

The only adjustment described here is the simple one of limiting the range of the gear changing mechanism so your chain doesn't jump into the spokes or off the hub. Sit down and take a good look at the rear gear changer on your ten speed. Move the gear changing lever back and forth. Watch for two small screws on the rear changer and by adjusting these you can flip into high or low gear with no fear of losing your chain.

Adjusting the gears on a three speed also requires a good eye. Set the bike in second gear. Now look at the rear hub where the cable enters it. The cable is attached to a skinny post that slides in and out of the hub. Play with that adjusting mechanism on the cable until that little post just pokes its little nose out of the axle. Now first will be first, second second and third third.

TIRES

Replace, don't patch inner tubes. And never ever ride a bike with a soft tire, you'll dent the rim. Keep tires inflated to recommended pressure. A small pressure gauge is a good investment, as those will testify who saw their tires explode because of a faulty one at a gas station.

CLEANING AND POLISHING

Wash the little devil once in a while and marvel at the shiny paint. Avoid using harsh abrasives especially on the wheel rims. One scratch and a cheap rim will quickly begin to rust. For rust spots try a little chrome cleaner (very gently) or penetrating oil. A small can of touch up paint will cover those tiny chips and scratches you're bound to pick up in crowded parking lots. Never store your bike in an area vulnerable to rain or blowing sand.

So now with all this new knowledge, off to the garage with all of you. Your pet pedaller awaits your gentle touch and let it be exactly that. Never force a nut or screw that won't go and don't kick that tender frame no matter how frustrated you are.

And for those of you who really screw up on your repairs, just wait til next week. Some of you could probably use some more helpful knowledge, but this time on buying a new bike.

