

TTIPS Vol. 3/22 - Tips and Insights
Bike Fit

I was daydreaming the other day about my first bike. At the time I got it I was attending a Catholic school that did not have school bus service and was walking to and from school a couple of miles every day. A bike, I thought, would be a much better way to get around, and would be fun too.

I asked mom. My mom said that if I wanted a bike, I should pray for one every day, and so I did. Days went by....weeks went by...months went by, and still no bike. So, one day on the school playground, I went to the parish priest and said, "hey Father, I've been praying hard for a bike for months, but I still don't have one." The priest smiled lovingly and replied, "well my son, that's not how prayer works." "Oh" I said and went back to playing. I was surprised by his response, and I had no better reply. After all, when it comes to prayer, he should know the rules, right?

After recess I went back to class and thought about my situation the rest of the day. Eureka, I found the solution! On my walk home from school I stole a bike and rode it home, and the next day I went to Confession. Problem solved.

Of course, when my mom discovered my errant ways, I was in big, big trouble. I had to give the bike back, apologize to the owner, and I was "grounded" for a year. I couldn't leave the house and it was a lonely stretch. That's when I developed my Tequila problem (see TTIPS Volume 2).

OK, you know I'm kidding, right? Good. Let's go.

This week let's talk in broad terms about bike "fit," and its importance. For clarity, I'm talking about the size of your bike relative to your body's dimensions, and the way the bike is configured to "fit" those dimensions.

You need to consider right up front that the act of *riding your bike should not cause pain*. Let me say that one more time: *riding your bike should not cause pain*. Some of us have recent or previous injuries that are aggravated by our riding, but set that aside, that's not what I mean. And yes, sometimes a long ride can make your backside a bit numb or sore, but I don't mean either. I'm talking about pain in in the hands, neck, elbows, shoulders, lower back, hips, knees, ankles, and feet that is caused by your bike ride. If you are having pain (not from an existing or previous injury) something is probably wrong with your fit.

With that in mind, achieving a proper bike fit is no trivial thing. To keep it simple, let's start with a few generalities. Some of these generalities are common sense points, but worth noting as a whole.

First consideration - I'm not a trained fitter, a doctor, or otherwise an "expert" in any of this. I volunteered in bike shop for a year and worked with a trained fitter from whom I learned a bunch. I have done lots of research. Everything I say here will be drawn from credible sources.

Even so, none of what follows should be interpreted in any way as prescriptive to your individual circumstances. You should use this information only to consider and analyze your own fit or fit-related issues and if, as a result, you feel you need assistance, seek help from a professional.

Second consideration - your bike is virtually perfectly symmetrical, meaning that the measurements on the left side of the bike are identical to those on the right side of the bike. Guess what? It's a sure bet that your body is not perfectly symmetrical, meaning that the left side is not perfectly identical to the right. As an example, in my case, my right leg is several millimeters shorter than my left leg. I found out the hard way that if this anomaly is not addressed in my "fit," this asymmetry causes sharp pain and potentially serious permanent medical issues. My "fitter" (the dude to whom I paid a bunch of money to make the pain stop and make me faster in the process) inserted a precisely sized spacer on my right shoe to even me out. What a difference, and well worth the money! It's much cheaper than the hip replacement that was otherwise in my future.

Third consideration - your fit needs to be configured with respect to the kind of riding that you plan to do, and yes, with respect to circumstances concerning your body. What do I mean? Well, for one thing, a rider who races her bike needs a different fit than one who rides primarily in endurance events. Also, aspects of our age, physique, old injuries, and plain old preferences need consideration from your fitter.

Fourth consideration - foremost, your bike needs to be the right size for your body. I have a 42-year-old steel Schwinn Traveler in my garage that I purchased brand new in 1980: it weighs as much as my car, I think. When I bought it the store proprietor said, "ahhhh, this one looks like it would fit you." I was tall.....the bike was tall....it seemed like a good match to us both. And there was no more consideration or sophistication to "fit" than that. Well, you guessed it, it's not the right size for me and therefore can't be properly fit to me, but I can't bear to part with it. The point here is that if your bike is not the right size in the first place, you likely will never get a comfortable fit. So how do you know if it's right? Every major bike manufacturer has a size chart into which you can plug in your body dimensions to see if a bike is the right size for you.

Fifth consideration - and finally, your body is in contact with your bike at five points; two hands, two feet and one backside (hey, thank you Captain Obvious!!!). In addition to the items delineated above, the placement and distances between and among those body parts, and where they contact your bike, in precise relation to certain points on the bike largely will determine your proper fit, and therefore your comfort, endurance, and athletic performance on your trusty steed. Happiness follows.

With those generalities in mind, we will consider the some the finer points of "fit" in future TTIPS volumes. Until then...

Make Every Ride Epic,
Darryl