

Q&A Don Walker: Framebuilder by Day, Show Promoter by Night

BY JASON NORMAN

HEWITT, TX—Don Walker might not own a cape, but he can no doubt identify with Clark Kent.

“I have had to go from blue-collar guy to shirt-and-tie guy,” said Don Walker, founder of the North American Handmade Bike Show and owner of Don Walker Cycles. “It’s a strange transformation for me. I’ve been blue collar my whole life. I started out as an aircraft mechanic when I was 19. Now to suddenly be thrust into this odd position of organizing a show for 100-plus exhibitors, taking care of contracts and schedules and such. It’s a definite learning opportunity. It’s also quite stressful because if I mess something up, everyone on earth will notice.”

Before Walker became Handmade’s face and name, he was a framebuilder who fell into it by happenstance.

“I cracked a bottom bracket shell on my race bike when I was living in Santa Barbara and went to the local bike shop,” Walker said. “They had a framebuilder on staff named Al Wanta.” Wanta told Walker that he could build him a new bike for a slightly higher amount than the repair would cost.

“One thing led to another and he eventually caught onto my enthusiasm,” said Walker, who sold his first bike in 1991. “He said one day, ‘Hey, Don, I’m getting a new frame jig. You sound like you have a genuine interest in building frames. Would you want my old jig?’”

Fourteen years later, Walker and other framebuilders



Don Walker says balancing shop and show demands is unreal.

took their passion from inside their shops to the show floor for the first Handmade Bike Show in Houston.

“It just seemed to me that the Vegas show really doesn’t cater to framebuilders—unless they have wholesale accounts to service—and most small framebuilders are just one-man shops who rely on word-of-mouth advertising or their Web site,” Walker said. “I felt that there had to be an affordable way to get more attention to the independent framebuilders. Given the limited resources that we framebuilders have individually, this show provides an opportunity to pool our resources. It’s the best marketing tool we as cottage-industry types could have.”

How has the show grown or changed since its beginnings?

Walker: At our first show in 2005, there were 23 exhibitors. We got press, too, even at that small size. It was very fun, though. It was small and close, with a high school science fair type atmosphere. Last year in San Jose, we had 92 exhibitors and 3,000 attendees. It has grown quite a bit on both accounts in only two years, and I really think we are headed in the right direction. I am happy that we have expanded this year, and are hoping for a significant gain in attendance. Like many young businesses, I would like to be growing faster, especially given all the positive press we received after last year’s show. I know being a framebuilder isn’t going to put you in the upper tax bracket, but when a marketing tool such as this comes along, it baffles me that framebuilders would pass it up. NAHBS offers the smallest of companies a worldwide audience thanks to the Web and the national and foreign magazines that are attending the show. I know after day one of last year I went back to my hotel room and Googled and found pictures online. That’s a pretty fast turnaround, so clearly there is a great deal of buzz

around the show, and [hopefully] this will keep on growing.

Are you happy with San Jose? Are you considering moving it?

Walker: San Jose and Northern California in general have been a hotbed of cycling, even before I started riding. I grew up racing in the area, met my wife who is from San Jose, and still have friends and family in the area. It’s like a homecoming of sorts for us. However, San Jose was just a stepping stone. It has been a great location to really give us some momentum so we can start taking the show to other locations in the U.S., and maybe outside of the U.S. The entire concept of the show was to bring it to a location for a year or two and move it. That way the exhibitors won’t always have to travel cross country as maybe the next year it will be in their backyard or at a more central location. Moving the show will always help keep the show fresh with new exhibitors, and give some attendees who don’t have the time or resources to travel for a weekend to come to the show a chance to see it in their backyard. As for the future locations, you’ll have to come to the show and listen for the announcement.

Ultimately, what would you like to see the Handmade Bike Show grow into?

Walker: The show has already become the premier custom bicycle show on earth. More and more international companies are considering it or actually getting involved. And that makes sense, because the U.S. market is so vast. Comparing the handmade industry to the mass-produced industry is a bit like comparing the major computer software companies to the open source world. We’re not so much in competition with one another as we are working from different places toward a common goal. So the show is the greatest approximation of what that common goal is. The show will grow into the “cannot-miss” event of the year for all the framebuilders and in-house component makers of the nation, and leaders from around the world. Not only will it be a hands-on, face-to-face experience that takes place during one week of each year, but it will have a vast Internet presence as well. I’m looking for enthusiasts in the Web world that want to collaborate on making a one-stop Internet portal for handmade bicycles. The show and the Web site will publicize each other. Overall, we’re creating a sense of community, togetherness and branding for the handmade bicycle industry. So, I’m not only about creating a great bike show, I’m about creating access to an amazing subculture in cycling, customers, manufacturers, where

anybody with any kind of interest can find the great engineering minds, the creative minds, the artistic minds. The show is the very prominent tip of that iceberg. When all this happens and everybody is on board, I will feel like it’s “mission accomplished.”

Whose frames are you most excited to see this year and why?

Walker: Oh, that’s not a fair question. I think every booth will display a wealth of cycling riches. It really depends on what you’re looking for. The bespoke bike market is so much more diverse than the off-the-peg market. This is the market where cyclists really can obtain their dream bike, rather than purchasing somebody else’s dream. I know Sachs has a track bike he is bringing. I know that will get rave reviews. He did it just to try and one up me. Baylis has a new bike that is supposed to be another museum piece. I know that will be ultra cool. I heard rumors of Sacha White making something just off the hook, but that was all I had heard. Seven Cycles told me they had something special in the works just for the show, but declined to tell me what it is. Soulcraft has a new bike I am dying to see. I really enjoy Curtis Inglis of Retrotec’s stuff, too. I think Curtis is a great builder. Della Santa is going to bring some

rock solid frames. I love how clean his lug shorelines are and how easygoing he is. Nick Crumpton is going to wow us again with carbon fiber. I can’t say what he is bringing, but it will surely be one of the top bikes at the show. As for new builders, I hadn’t heard anything of what they are doing. So here’s a message for new builders: I want to hear what neat plans you have so we can get you some exposure and a position in the market.

If you had to give advice to a handmade framebuilder just starting off, what would it be?

Walker: I’ll start this off with a Bruce Gordon anecdote. “What’s the difference between a framebuilder and a large pizza? A large pizza feeds a family of four.” Keep your day job. Don’t give anything away for free. Strive for perfection. Listen to your peers. If they say it’s a bad idea, it usually is. Bike racers are cheap or broke or both. A very small percentage of them can help get your name out there. Word of mouth might be slow or fast depending on the frame you built for your last customer. If it was a disaster, that word will spread faster. Come to NAHBS and learn what it’s like to be a part of this community. You’ll find support and others just like you.