The Riding Stick

Bacchetta Bicycles has established its place in the recumbent world.



hen it comes to recumbents these days, it's all about trikes. When did that happen? Well, when aging baby boomers decided they'd like to get a little exercise by riding, except not on two-wheeled recumbents that require balancing yourself. And forget diamond-frame bikes, which not only require balance but also have a nasty reputation for making your butt sore.

Story by Dan D'Ambrosio Photos by Mark Petty

At bentrideronline.com, the gathering place for recumbent riders, you have to scroll down quite far before you get past the stories on trikes to news about a two-wheeled recumbent. For a long-time cyclist like me who still has trouble accepting two-wheeled recumbents, the sight of a machine with two wheels in tandem

in front — and a crankset out in front of that — with one wheel in back is, frankly, jarring.

At least the genetic relationship between a diamond-frame bike and a two-wheeled recumbent is recognizable, unlike a trike, which looks entirely foreign, like a praying mantis.

Bryan J. Ball, managing editor of

'BentRider Online (bentrideronline. com) said he wrote an editorial in 2003 speculating that trikes might someday represent 10 percent of the recumbent market.

"They've taken over now," Ball said in a recent interview. "A lot of regular recumbent guys also own trikes."

Ball himself primarily rides trikes

convincing for Mark Colliton and Rich Pinto of Bacchetta Bicycles, Inc., in St. Petersburg, Florida, known for its highperformance, two-wheeled recumbents, including carbon-framed models.

"The whole recumbent world has been turned on its ear; that's where the sales are these days," Colliton said of trikes. "We're cyclists, not tricyclists." Colliton and Pinto launched Bacchetta in 2001 together with Mark Swanson, Colliton's brother-in-law, and John Schlitter, an ultra-marathon cyclist. Colliton describes Swanson as the "money man." He wasn't a bike guy but had made a pile of dough in the dot-com industry. It was Swanson who convinced Colliton and Pinto to go out





Mark Colliton and Rich Pinto at a local St. Petersburg Bicycle Club ride.

now in addition to reviewing them for a living. He finds himself somewhat bewildered that recumbents haven't caught on, especially among touring cyclists. After all, they offer living room-style comfort and a panoramic view. Recumbent riders will tell you they can ride all day, day after day, with only muscle soreness to show for it — no chafing, no stiff neck.

"Trikes partly took over because of the baby boom thing, but mostly they got cheaper," he said. "TerraTrike makes a good one for a grand. A newbie who hasn't ridden a bike in 20 years buys the thing that's easier to ride. Trikes have also just gotten better."

All good arguments, but not

Colliton concedes that probably 10 times as many trikes as two-wheeled recumbents are sold in the U.S.

"Here's the deal — baby boomers with time and money to come back to cycling are finding they just want to be able to ride and not think about it," Colliton said. "They don't have to worry about balance or shifting. Most of them use internal hubs."

Pinto is a little more repentant about trikes.

"With great shame, I tell you that along with other people in the industry. I would have given you 100 to 1 odds on trikes being in this position," Pinto said. "I had no concept. It's the worst prediction I ever made."

on their own.

Both men had been knocking around the recumbent industry since the early 1990s, and Pinto, who is from New Hampshire, had even started his own recumbent company, Aerocycle, in 1996. Colliton was living in Maryland when Bacchetta launched, but in 2002 the company moved to St. Petersburg where Swanson lived.

"All of us were looking for a venue to ride year round, and the money guy was here," Colliton said. "He convinced us to come down. It sounded good to us, being from up north. Eventually we all moved here."

Schlitter left Bacchetta last year, causing a bit of a stir among online

recumbent sites.

Schlitter competed on Bacchetta bikes and won all kinds of endurance races, including Race Across America, before leaving the company.

As Grateful_G wrote of Schlitter on bikejournal.com last September, "One wonders if perhaps he alone is responsible for making Bacchetta the most successful recumbent company in the world. No doubt *he*, single-handedly, has sold more Bacchettas than all the rest of the partners and staff combined due to his success in racing.

"Because of him, Bacchetta has had the greatest presence in racing of any (or all) of the recumbent companies for the past decade," said Grateful_G.

Colliton won't argue that Bacchetta is big in the recumbent world, but he'll also temper that with a reality check.

"We have a huge name in the business, but we're a very small company," he said. "The reality is that most recumbent companies are very small, especially ones that specialize in two wheels."

Bacchetta sells direct in addition to selling to bike shops.

"We have a dealer network, and we're very much committed to that, but, unfortunately, there's probably only 100 recumbent shops in the U.S.," Colliton said. "It's very much like the tandem world. Legitimately, there are probably only 50 good ones, so we do offer direct sales if you're not in our dealer territory."

If you're looking for sales figures from the privately held companies, though, you're out of luck. Colliton declined to give sales figures for



Mark Colliton at Bacchetta's headquarters where the art displays the established evolution of things.

seen as the tiny fish they are."

Given the recumbent's obvious advantages, Colliton says the bike's marginal acceptance can be chalked up to image problems.

"Most people, and I hate to say this, they don't want to look different," Colliton said. "Most of the recumbent people I've met are freethinkers. The last thing they want to do is be in a group. They like to be a bit oddball."

"They tend to be a 'big bang' profile too, if you know what I mean," adds Pinto. "Our rider demographic is dominated by engineers, scientists, that type of profile. They get it right out of the gate."

Interestingly, Pinto says women and kids under the age of 13 also instinctively understand the advantages of the recumbent, judging by public factor: I don't want to look different."

How to overcome that religious objection is the "million-dollar question" everyone in the business has asked, said Colliton.

"What's it going to take?" he said.
"There are a lot of advantages. We tell people that it's just another tool. There are great reasons to have a city bike, a road bike, a mountain bike. For certain conditions, a recumbent is a great tool to put in the box, get some big miles, and not beat yourself up."

Gee, sounds perfect for touring.

For the first five years of the company's existence, Bacchettas were made in the U.S. at a manufacturer in Washington state who also made wheelchairs. But then tubing became difficult to source, and the company's other projects took precedence. For a short time, Bacchetta went to an Oregon company that was based in Taiwan. Then they just went to Taiwan.

"Basically, we found all our U.S. fabrication was troubled," Colliton said. "Fabricating is fabricating. A lot of people think it is less trouble to have things made stateside, but it really isn't. The Taiwanese know what they're doing. They have been building the world's bikes for the past 30 years."

Everybody building high-end bikes

- other than the custom makers you'll find at the North American Handmade

them in Taiwan, Colliton said. The cheap bikes have migrated to China. Ball says moving production to Taiwan has been one of the most significant.

Bicycle Show, for example — are building

Ball says moving production to Taiwan has been one of the most significant things Bacchetta has done for the recumbent industry.

"They were one of the first to start making stuff in Taiwan the right way, higher quality," Ball said. "They opened the door for a lot of other companies to go to Taiwan because the general perception is that they're a performance-oriented company."

The Strada, Corsa, and Carbon Aero 2.0 epitomize Bacchetta's reputation for performance. They look like spears with wheels, a seat, and crankset — built to be hurled. They have 650C or 700C wheels front and rear. But guess what? They're not the company's biggest sellers.

"We're famous in the recumbent world for making fast bikes, but our Giro 20, our basic commuting and touring bike, is consistently our best-selling model," Colliton said.

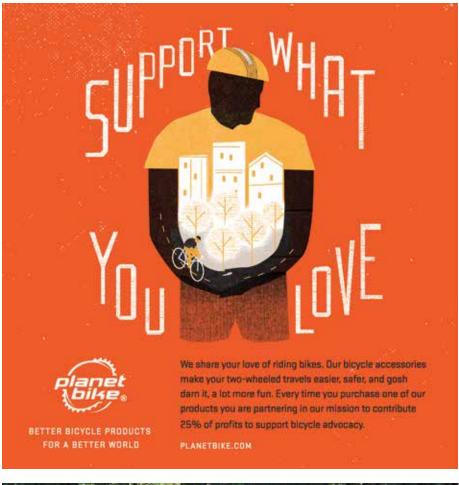
The Giro 20 sells for \$1,700 and features top components such as SRAM, FSA, and Avid. It weighs 31 or 33.5 pounds, depending on which seat you choose, and has a 20-inch wheel in front and a 26-inch wheel in back. The frame and fork are chromoly steel.

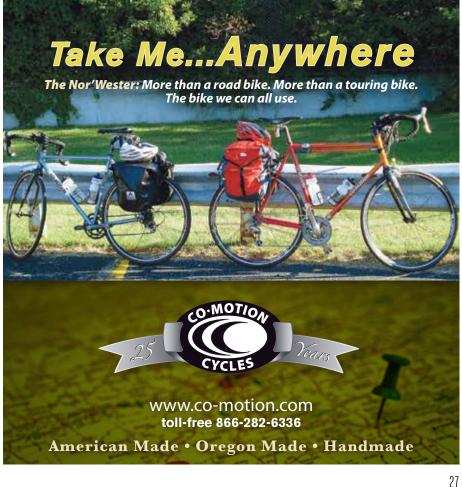
All Bacchetta recumbents are short-wheelbase bikes, from 46 to 49 inches, except the Bella, which has a 67-inch or 71-inch wheelbase, depending on which model you get, large or small. There are a variety of attributes Pinto likes about a short-wheelbase recumbent.

"On our short wheelbase bikes, the frame resists pedaling forces well but also resists road vibration," he said. "That's why we stick with the monotube design. We like the steering position. We like the arm position. We like the front to rear weight balance, keeping 55 to 60 percent of weight on the rear wheel."

Another advantage of the recumbent, Pinto says, is safety. Most of the racers who come to Bacchetta have been involved in highly regrettable crashes on road bikes. Their best rider, Jim Verheul, a former Category 2 racer, had stopped riding altogether after suffering several scary crashes that left him needing physical therapy.

"We like the height of the seats. It gets





UNABLE TO COME UP WITH A NAME THAT WOULDN'T SOUND LIKE A LAW FIRM, COLLITON FELL BACK ON HIS LOVE OF ITALIAN ROAD BIKES.

Bacchetta.

"If you want to get scientific numbers about recumbents, you're not going to get them," Ball said. "Even the biggest maker in the world, TerraTrike, might sell 20,000 to 25,000 trikes a year. That sounds impressive until you compare it to anything else. They don't want to be

reaction. Once they see a recumbent, they want one. Serious cyclists, who take their avocation as something of a religion, are another story.

"Put it this way: basically I seriously underestimated the religious objection when I started 23 years ago," Pinto said. "It has turned out to be the biggest

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us into the safe range, allows us to size the bike properly, and get our feet back on the ground, a built-in recumbent safety advantage," Pinto said. "If we do hit something, we're running into it feet-first."

That just leaves one question — the name. Where did it come from? No other recumbent bicycle company has a name that makes it sound like it was founded in some Italian village, rising to prominence when a little old frame builder began making bikes for rising cycling stars.

"Here's the thing," Colliton said. "The original partners were Pinto, Colliton, Schlitter, and Swanson. We couldn't think of a name that had anything to do with those names."

Unable to come up with a name that wouldn't sound like a law firm, Colliton fell back on his love of Italian road bikes of the 1960s and 1970s.

"Those are the kinds of bikes we grew up with," Colliton said. "We loved those bikes as kids, and we love them now. At least me, I always wanted that Italian road bike. I just liked the idea of Italian names. Estrada, Corsa, and Giro are all



A Bacchetta about to bring down its prey

great terms, synonymous with biking. We use them to name our bikes." And Bacchetta?

"Bacchetta actually means riding stick," Colliton said. "It's a term used at the racetrack, a jockey's riding crop, so

it literally translates as riding stick."
When I tell him I can see the connection to his short-wheelbase,

lance-like recumbents, Colliton had a favor to ask.

"Can I quote you on that?" he asked.
"I have partners who give me grief." ••

Dan "Recumbent Man" D'Ambrosio is a business reporter for the Burlington Free Press in Burlington, Vermont, and the former editor of Adventure Cyclist.



thank you.

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