

Getting Ready for the Road

Spend a little time now to avoid trouble later

By Sheldon Brown

Now that winter is waning, it's time to get your bike ready for the 1999 touring season! A bit of preventative maintenance now could save your tour later. I'd suggest starting with the wheels, since most tour-ending failures are wheel-related.

WHEELS

Hubs. Your hubs should be properly lubed and adjusted. When the wheels are off the bike, the axles should turn

smoothly and freely, with no feeling of granularity. If they don't pass this test, the hubs need to be adjusted or overhauled.

Put the wheels back on the bike, tighten the quick-releases normally and check the bearings again. Try to wiggle the rim back and forth between the brake shoes. If it feels loose, your hub needs to be tightened. Lift the

front end of the bike off the ground and let the wheel spin from gravity alone. Normally, the valve will be the heaviest part (unless you've got spoke reflectors) and the wheel should settle consistently with the same part, whether it's a reflector or a valve, at the bottom.

Turn the wheel 1/4-turn, then let go of it. Gravity should make the wheel swing back and forth like a pendulum several times before it glides to a smooth stop. If the wheel stops abruptly, or doesn't swing back and forth, your hub is too tight.

To perform this test on the rear wheel, you need to remove it and temporarily re-install it so that the chain isn't in contact with the sprockets. Make sure that your quick-release skewers are properly tightened when performing

these tests, because the quick-release tension affects the bearing adjustment on conventional hubs.

Rims and spokes. Spin the wheels and observe the rims as they run through the brakes. If the wheels don't run true and round, they are not ready to tour. A quick check of spoke tension is good, too. Pluck a pair of spokes where they cross and listen to the tone. A properly tensioned wheel will make a high-pitched plink sound, not a low-pitched plunk. (If you're musically savvy, you're looking for something near G, above middle C.)

Tires. Check your tires for tread wear or any sign of lumpiness. Rear tires usually wear much faster than fronts. If your rear tire is worn but your front tire is OK, move the slightly worn front tire to the rear wheel, and buy a new tire for the front (assuming you use the same type of tire in the front and rear — not everybody does!). The idea is to have the more reliable tire on the front, since a front flat is more likely to cause a crash.

DRIVE TRAIN

Chain. You can check your chain for wear with a good-quality tape measure. Each link of a new chain is exactly 1 inch long. Put your tape measure along a foot-long section of the chain with the one-inch mark centered on a chain rivet. With the chain under tension, the 13-inch mark on your tape measure should also be centered over a rivet. As a chain wears, it elongates. If the rivet is 1/16-inch past the 13-inch mark, your chain is toast. If it is much farther than that, it's likely that your rear sprocket cluster is also a goner.

Cluster (cassette/freewheel). You can't check your cluster for wear by eye. If it is visibly worn, that means that it is WAY past due for replacement. The cluster's condition can often be inferred, however, from measuring the chain as described above.

If you replace your chain, test-ride the new chain by pedaling hard in all of the rear gears while the front is in the granny gear (this is the only time you should ever use the small-small combinations.) If the cluster is worn, the chain will skip or jump under heavy load on the smaller sprockets (or on your favorite one, if you do most of your riding in one gear.) While it is possible to just replace the worn individual sprocket, it is usually easier and better to replace the whole cluster. If some of the sprockets skip, others are also probably worn enough to cause rapid chain wear.

CREATURE COMFORTS

Saddle. If you've been off the bike over the winter, the saddle that was perfectly comfy last fall may seem anything but in the spring. Many people buy new saddles in the spring, not because there's anything wrong with their old ones, but because they have softened up over the winter. Build yourself up gradually with short rides after a layoff, and you'll feel better after two to three weeks.

Tape. Unless your handlebar tape is in great shape, spring for a new wrap in the spring. It really makes a bike feel younger and fresher to have a nice new tape job.

BRAKES

Cables. Squeeze your brakes and look inside of the



PHOTO BY GREG SIPPLE

Make sure that your bike is ready for the road to avoid surprises like this.

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brake levers. You'll be able to see the lever end of the cable. Check for fraying of this cable section, as this is where cables break, if they do. Squeeze your brakes and note how smoothly the levers move. Compare your lever action with a few other bikes that you know to be in good condition. If your brakes have too much friction to their movement, you probably need new cables and/or cable housings. This sort of problem is insidious, because it doesn't suddenly get worse; you'd notice that! Instead, there's a gradual deterioration of braking, and if you don't compare with other bikes you may not realize that you have a problem.

If you have drop handlebars and old-style exposed brake cables, check especially for kinks where the cable housings leave the brake levers. This is a common location for cable damage.

Pads. Have a good look at your brake pads; make sure they aren't too badly worn down. Also compare the condition of the fronts with that of the rears. If the rear brake shoes wear faster than the fronts, this should be a wake-up call that you are using your rear brakes too much, and your fronts too little. [Watch for a future article on braking technique.]

Check the adjustment of the brake pads. As the pads wear, they may start to bear on a different part of the rim. This is particularly an issue with cantilever brakes. They hit lower and lower on the rim as they wear. In extreme conditions, they can dive past the rim and go into the spokes!

If you have U-brakes or calipers, the opposite problem sometimes occurs. If you're not alert to this, the brake shoes can start to eat into the sidewalls of your tire. This is a rather common cause of tire failure.

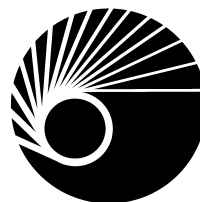
RACK AND FENDER HARDWARE

Make sure that the bolts that hold your racks and fenders are secure. If they are loose, they can cause handling problems when you load the bike up. Make very sure that the fender stays are not rubbing on the tires. Those climbs on this year's tour will be challenging enough without the added friction. ●

Sheldon Brown joined Adventure Cyclist last month as a technical writer, authoring our "1999 Touring Bike Buyer's Guide." His advice column will appear regularly in this magazine. Send your technical questions via e-mail to CaptBike@sheldonbrown.com, or write to Sheldon Brown, c/o Adventure Cycling Assn., P.O. Box 8308, Missoula, MT 59807.



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