

SHELDON BROWN 1944-2008

Cycling has lost its very best maven. Here's the story behind the man.

by John Schubert

First the bad news: Sheldon Brown, erstwhile columnist for this magazine and a cycling guru of boundless energy and good cheer, died February 3 of a heart attack in Newton, Massachusetts, where he lived. He was 63. Now the good news: Sheldon will live on in our hearts and minds. Those of you who never visited his website, head over to www.sheldonbrown.com, where you'll find helpful answers to every imaginable question. Be prepared to be blown away. The

website has about 2,000 pages, on every imaginable topic, and has news you can use whether your bike is brand new or 100 years old.

Sheldon demonstrated two things: One, "bicycle mechanic" can be a suitable job for a true genius. Two, help enough people, largely one-on-one, and you change the world.

We see this in how people responded to his death. Within days, Sheldon Brown wake rides were being planned in British Columbia, Texas, New York, Missouri, and probably lots of other places. *Wired* magazine and *Popular Science*, not to mention plenty of cycling publications, posted obituaries on their websites. An online blog quickly collected hundreds of fond, tearful reminiscences from all over the U.S., France, Turkey, India, Canada, England, and a list of far-flung places that will doubtless grow mightily by the time this magazine reaches your mailbox. A movement was launched to ask Sturmev Archer to name a fixed-gear three-speed hub after him.

Many people post helpful information on websites, but I know no one else who also helped so many people one-on-one via email. He once told me that he answered about 200 emails per day. Each writer would get a polite



Sheldon Brown, Tom Deakins, and Grant Petersen at the 2006 Interbike trade show.

reply, terse but thorough, and hair-splittingly accurate. He wrote 1,260 posts just to the [tandem@hobbes](mailto:tandem@hobbes.com) email list over 14 years, according to list manager Wade Blomgren, who added, "He had the highest signal to noise ratio in the history of the Internet."

One blogger put it this way: "He answered a few emails from me as if he had absolutely nothing better to do than help me figure out what size chainring would work best for me. A super nice guy..." Another Internet poster, Robert Perkins, noted that he

needed a no-longer-available replacement axle for a Suzue 48-hole tandem hub. Sheldon had figured out how to make a standard axle fit, saving Perkins a rather large amount of money. The list of people helped is nearly endless, the problems solved ranging from prosaic (flat tires) to tech-geek (gearing) to creative adaptivity (accommodating disabilities on the bike).

All this while he held down a job at Harris Cyclery in West Newton.

Sheldon had another career as a photographer and camera repairman.

I asked our mutual friend John Allen how he acquired camera repair expertise. "The story he told me was that he had a friend who was in the camera repair business," said Allen, who had known Sheldon since 1972. "The friend handed him this really complicated camera that was broken and said, 'If you can fix this, you have a job.'" And just like that, Sheldon had a job repairing cameras at S.K. Grimes Camera Repair in Boston. At one point, the camera repair work evolved into computer repair.

Sheldon also led a rich family and extracurricular life, which he documented on his website. He sang and acted in numerous Gilbert and Sullivan productions. He was an avid armchair scholar and reader, and he read Jules Verne in the original French. He was fiercely proud of his wife Harriet Fell, a Northeastern University computer science professor who rode Paris-Brest-Paris in 1975, and his son and daughter, both of them now pursuing doctorates in mathematics. You can download an MP3 file of his son George's trombone concerto from the website.

Sheldon didn't let personal health problems stop him from buoying up others. He came down with multiple sclerosis in 2005, and lost the ability to ride a bike in 2006. Yet, he maintained his optimistic streak, calling the multiple sclerosis "a major inconvenience, not a tragedy." He posted on his

website a page about the fun of using an electric scooter, the convenience of going to the front of airport security lines, the politeness of strangers, and other "perks" of the handicapped. He loved his Greenspeed trike. We should all be so gracious when life hands us a major inconvenience.

Knowing all this, I find the most fascinating thing about Sheldon is that he really blossomed in midlife. The fireball he was in his 50s and early 60s was far different from what I saw in earlier decades, when his output was, well, more like mine and less that of a superstar.

Why?

I attribute this to the fact that the Internet was such a perfect fit for his talents, and that Harris Cyclery had the foresight to nurture his web presence.

In the early 1980s, Sheldon strove to share his wisdom with the world by writing for several magazines, including *Bicycling*, where I was one of the editors who ushered his copy into print. This was the dark ages of publishing, complete with manual typewriters, grease-pencil crop marks on photographs, and turnaround times that would make Gutenberg himself wiggle in impatience.

Sheldon's magazine audience was far, far smaller than the website would later reach, and his output was limited to about a half-dozen articles per year. And one mercurial editor (not me) effectively

booted him out of consumer magazines in the mid-1980s, restricting him to the much smaller trade magazine audience.

And then the Internet arrived. Now there was no editorial bureaucracy, and no delay time, between Sheldon and the world's cyclists. It clicked into place beautifully. "Sheldon found where he could apply his talents in a way that brought him satisfaction and recognition well beyond anything he had before," Allen said.

Sheldon immediately joined many Usenet groups and mailing lists, and dispensed helpful information on a variety of topics. When the World Wide Web was established, he immediately set up his website. Sheldon's site made Harris Cyclery into a worldwide go-to place for hard to find parts. He was a non-greedy pioneer of dot-com e-commerce.


Never one to be jealous of pride of authorship, he sought articles by other authors to put on that website. But most of the stuff came from him because he knew so much and found the energy to write and illustrate it. He could write more useful information than most of us have time to read.

In person, Sheldon loved to entertain people with his mischievous sense of humor and taste for irony. He had a penchant for offbeat and historic equipment, particularly fixed-gear bikes,

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anything French, and old Raleigh three-speeds. He is especially well known for his lucid explanations of the craft of wheelbuilding and for his web pages about riding with children. He was an avid proponent of vehicular cycling.

Sheldon was not a keep-up-with-the-Joneses fan of new equipment, but occasionally he found a new item he liked. He wore SPD sandals year-round, and reported that with thick wool socks they were warmer in winter than shoes, because shoes compressed the loft of the socks.

The family had two tandems that he built himself from rescued single-bike frames. He studied the craft of framebuilding, but concluded that he liked being a mechanic more than a framebuilder. His one store-bought tandem frame he built up as a fixed-gear bike.

The one time I visited Sheldon's house, he ushered me to his basement bicycle collection (last known census: about 45). Internet blogger Michael Downes described the visiting-Sheldon experience very eloquently:

"His basement headquarters was an

Aladdin's cave of obscure and hard to get gear and Sheldon was a gentleman and a great host. We played a game for a couple hours with me naming really obscure components and him locating them. Sachs Duopar long cage rear mechanism? Third row, bottom shelf on the right. French threaded Stronglight alloy headset? Sixth row, second shelf down on the left and so on and until I ran out of ideas. I particularly remember him proudly showing us his 1910 track bike with wooden tubular rims, 'for riding on dry days only' he said."

Downes didn't mention the visit to Sheldon's camera room, whose walls were lined with bookshelves and clogged with fascinating vintage cameras. I marveled at the size of the collection, and Sheldon gave me a sly grin: "They're so cheap when they're broken."

Sheldon was the son of an engineer who pioneered the use of two-way radios in police and fire vehicles. Sheldon's dad was a pilot, and he died in a plane crash while conducting a Civil Air Patrol search and rescue mission in 1953. Sheldon's mom died in her fifties.

Sheldon spent most of his youth in Marblehead, Massachusetts. He attended college, but he and school were not a great fit, and formal education didn't figure prominently in his rise to genius. He was one of four founders of the Cambridge Bicycle Repair Collective in the early 1970s, and was ousted from that enterprise in a Maoist purge. The Collective eventually straightened itself out and survives today as the Broadway Bicycle School.

Sheldon believed that we could all develop a feel for machinery — knowing how much to tighten a bolt, not with the cumbersome bureaucracy of a torque wrench, but by feeling for when you've just begun to mash the metal slightly.

As many people have blogged, the best way to honor Sheldon is to ride your bike and to use your own knowledge to help someone else be a better rider. That is his legacy, and we can all keep it alive. **AC**

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