RACKS FOR ALL

Old Man Mountain takes on the confusion surrounding racks in the bike industry and makes it possible for anyone to take their favorite bike on the next great adventure.

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PHOTOS BY JEFF CLARK
Channing Hammond of Old Man Mountain racks grew up working in his parents’ metal fabrication shop in Santa Barbara, where they catered to the advanced engineering companies surrounding the aerospace industry in southern California.

“They made a lot of different stuff,” Hammond recalled. “There are interesting industries here in Santa Barbara, such as radar development. They worked for a bunch of companies over the years. It’s an R&D area.”

As a boy, Hammond did his own R&D in the shop.

“I love aluminum and I’ve loved working with my hands since I was young, going with my father down to the shop, seeing how things were built, learning how to weld when I wanted a mini-bike,” he said.

Hammond’s other love as a young man — he’s 41 years old now — was riding bikes in the mountains surrounding Santa Barbara.

“I’ve been a mountain biker since I was a young kid,” he said. “We’ve got a great backcountry area behind Santa Barbara I was fortunate to be introduced to. One of the employees who worked in the metal shop took me mountain-bike camping. He was an early mountain biker.”

Hammond decided then and there he wanted to be involved in the bike business. He worked in a bike shop in Goleta, about five miles north of Santa Barbara, moving on to Jandd Mountaineering, then based in Santa Barbara, making packs and panniers (Jandd has since moved to San Diego).

Jandd owner Dave Sisson wanted to have a rack to sell with his panniers.

Hammond took on the task, given the amount of metal fabrication experience he already had. He began by building welding fixtures similar to the ones he’s still using to make Old Man Mountain racks. The fixtures hold two racks at a time and spin in a circle, allowing easy access to all welding points.

“The fixtures allow you to weld the racks fast by letting them spin around,” Hammond said. “I got that whole thing set up, built the tooling, and set up a shop so we were making those racks.”

Racks for suspension bikes

The pivotal moment for the creation of Old Man Mountain came when Hammond bought a GT mountain bike with a suspension fork and realized it had no rack eyelets.

“I wanted to do overnights and camp in the backcountry,” Hammond said. “I had to figure out a way to put a rack on the suspension.”

Studying his bike, a simple solution struck Hammond. He could build a rack that mounted on the quick-release skewer and the cantilever brake bosses. Hammond took his idea to Sisson, but Sisson balked.

“He was worried about liability with the quick-release skewers, so I decided to go on my own,” Hammond said.

To set up his factory, Hammond found a space in an industrial park in Santa Barbara and brought in 40-foot shipping containers he turned into a long, but narrow shop — perfect for making racks, but not much else. Hammond’s space is only 7.5 feet wide.

“That’s worked very well for producing a small product,” he said. “Early on, I tried to be a job shop as well, welding projects to supplement the rack business. I quickly found out that whatever I was doing was too big for the shop. The shop has been good to keep me focused on making racks.”

His unique shop space also kept Hammond out of the bike trailer business.

“Years ago, I thought maybe I should make a trailer like the BOB, which seems to be my biggest competitor,” Hammond said. “But if we tried to make hundreds of trailers out of our little shop space it would not be easy, relative to making racks. We can put 50 racks in a bin and easily powder coat them. Trailer parts would have been a problem.”

Thank you, Adventure Cycling

Hammond credits the Adventure Cycling Association for giving Old Man Mountain an early, much-needed boost.

“If it wasn’t for Adventure Cycling, I wouldn’t still be here,” he said.

Hammond met Adventure Cycling Sales and Marketing Director Teri Maloughney at the Interbike trade show in Anaheim in 1996.

“We had been in business for six weeks,” Hammond remembered. “We basically were at Interbike with prototypes. We had no idea what we were doing but we got a booth and we went there to see what kind of business we could drum up.”

In a stroke of good fortune, or perhaps fate, Adventure Cycling had just finished mapping the Great Divide Mountain Bike
Route from Canada to Mexico that year, an off-road odyssey that cried out for a suspended mountain bike equipped with racks. Hammond, of course, had just the thing for the job.

“It was a perfect synergy,” Hammond said. “Adventure Cycling was able to offer an off-road rack. It was a great meeting, and very fortunate for me to meet Teri and have that exposure so early on with Adventure Cycling.”

New axes, no standardization

Today, faced with a fast-changing bike business, Hammond has all new challenges to solve. Now, in addition to suspension, there are disc brakes — eliminating the cantilever bosses that Hammond originally used to mount his suspension-bike racks — and the oversized thru-axles without quick-release skewers — Hammond’s other original mounting point.

Other, bigger players in the bike industry followed Hammond’s lead making skewer-mounted racks, but those may now become obsolete, given recent developments.

“Bikes keep changing,” Hammond said. “I’ve always felt the only way for me to exist is to continue to evolve with bikes. We’re really at the forefront of getting racks onto all these new bikes with varying front and rear axles.”

The oversized thru-axles, built for strength, are perhaps the most difficult challenge Hammond has faced in his nearly 20 years of business, because — not surprising for the bike industry — standardization is not high on anyone’s list.

“Manufacturers really are just going crazy,” Hammond said with a hint of frustration in his voice. “Everybody is doing their own thing, their own thread pitch, their own axle standards and spacings. All of them hope their standard gets adopted.”

“It’s really focused on fit. I think it’s really important.”

Eyelets, anyone?

Hammond believes the bike industry has done itself a disservice by assuming people don’t want to take anything with them on their high-end bikes.

“Often times these bicycles people want to tour on are nice, expensive bikes, and manufacturers didn’t put any eyelets or options for racks, kind of like myself when I got my first suspension bike,” Hammond said.

In fact, says Hammond, people who own really nice bikes do want to take tours, or at least weekend excursions, and that’s where Old Man Mountain comes in.

Working really hard to keep up.

What Hammond has come up with is an approach similar to what Yakima and others do for roof racks mounted to cars and trucks by using a universal rack frame that takes different “fit kits” that bolt to the bottom of his racks to allow you to mount it on whatever axle design and brake setup you happen to have. It’s his way to adapt to the myriad of different mounting situations.

“It’s not a one-piece rack,” Hammond said. “It’s really a system where we mix and match parts in order to get the best fit we can for the bicycle. I’m really focused on fit. I think it’s really important.”

John Schubert, former technical editor for Adventure Cyclist, recognized that years ago when he wrote about Old Man Mountain, according to Hammond.

“John gave us a great compliment,” he said. “He said, ‘a company like Old Man Mountain shouldn’t have to exist, but we’re lucky it does.’ It’s true. We’re solving a problem for people that love their bikes and want to tour and want to camp. There really is no other good option.”

Despite the fact that its shortsightedness benefits him directly, Hammond wishes the bike industry would get its act together.

“I want to see the bicycle and its use grow in our country more and get away from the car,” Hammond said. “I love commuting to work on my bike. I think as an industry we’re not doing ourselves any favors. If the manufacturers made it easy to put racks on every bike, I would be happy to do something else for a living.”

In the meantime, Hammond is updating his website to reflect his new “fit kit” approach to Old Man Mountain racks.

“It’s challenging to disseminate all the information about how to fit racks on different bikes,” he said. “If we can get a handle on having lists of different bikes and diagrams that help people understand it’s now a rack system, we’re going to have a great year.”

Hammond may be frustrated by the bike industry’s discombobulated approach to rack-mounting, but he never forgets what his efforts mean out on the open road, which is what really counts, after all.

“I don’t think I realized when I started, how fulfilling it would be to hear about great adventures I was able to make possible because people got to take the bikes they wanted and go on these great trips,” Hammond said. “It makes me feel great. I’m always getting emails and pictures from people in amazing places, who say, ‘Thank you so much for helping make this a reality. That’s hugely satisfying to me.’”

Dan D’Ambrosio has a rack on his Specialized AWOL, and it was easy to mount. He’s still trying to figure out how to put a rack on the titanium mountain bike he bought used years ago from former Adventure Cycling cartographer Tom Robertson.