

by Colin McEnroe

The first bike I tried was the fastest. I didn't plan it that way. It was just an unfortunate coincidence.

I had walked into a shop in Manchester, Connecticut, not far from where I live, knowing almost nothing about road bikes—just that I needed to upgrade if I wanted to have any hope of keeping up with the cool kids, which is what I call my cycling friends.

The bike-shop guy introduced himself as Nate. When I told him what I was looking for, he began to speak in what sounded like a kind of free verse: “BB30 bottom bracket/Shimano compact/wheelset composite shifters/Specialized carbon fork.”

Eventually, I broke in. “I didn't understand any of that,” I said.

“I do have something that's a great deal,” he countered.

I waited while he rolled out a speedy-looking carbon-fiber model from a major brand, left over from last year. I don't know much about bikes, but I know a few things about shopping. I test-drove the great deal around the neighborhood and felt completely miserable. This was the first time I'd ever sat on such a bike before, and I was unaccustomed to the slender seat. When I put my hands in the drops, they were so low and far away that the position threatened to put me in traction. The shifters were Martian technology. Mostly, though, I was freaked out by how fast the bike wanted to go and how vaporously light it felt. I've owned kites that weighed more.



SHOP OF HORRORS

Faced with confounding choices and frighteningly speedy test rides when shopping for his first road bike, our novice struggles to meet his match

I'm nursing a partial rotator-cuff tear, trying to bring my shoulder back through physical therapy. It feels as fragile as a teacup, and on that bike I felt like a man fighting the Battle of Britain in a warplane made of eggshells.

I skittered apprehensively around the streets of Manchester, feeling uncomfortable and on the verge of crashing. The bike seemed a little contemptuous. *Please don't let this inept person buy me, I imagined it thinking. I will never realize my full potential.*

So I kept shopping, kept talking to people. I made notes of things I didn't understand and looked them up. I talked to the cool kids, one of whom had recently built a bamboo bike in Brooklyn. I learned things. “What if I wanted to be in the drops in a less

aggressive position?” I heard myself asking. “Could you do something with a different stem?”

After test-riding a few more bikes, I realized that the speedy great deal was a bad idea. If you've been celibate until age 30, you probably couldn't handle a first date with Megan Fox. When I told my girlfriend, Maude, I'd decided against the really fast bike, she said, “That gladdens my heart, honey. There are so many wonderful things I want us to do and many of them are difficult in a full-body cast.”

Still, carbon interested me. At Central Wheel in West Hartford, I asked Al the Shop Guy about it.

“One thing carbon does is smooth out the jolt from a bump,” he said. “On an aluminum frame, the bump might feel more like the equivalent of this.”



And then he punched me...*in my damaged shoulder*. I knew cycling can be a risky sport, but it hadn't occurred to me that I might get hurt just talking about bikes. "On the carbon frame, it would feel like this." Al whacked me more gently.

Al and I agreed that I'm probably never going to race, especially since I cry from just a playful punch in the shoulder. So he steered me toward an entry-level Cannondale. "This one will still go plenty fast," he said, "but it's designed with comfort in mind."

It seems to me that a bike is like a girlfriend. You drape your body across it, align your bones and sinews with it. And either it feels right or it doesn't. I rode the bike for 15 minutes and liked it: I felt more relaxed on it and found it a little easier to rein in. Better yet, I sensed that it liked me. Most of the other bikes I'd tried seemed poised to reject me like an unwelcome organ transplant.

I decided to rent the Cannondale for a day. Sort of a second date. First you meet for coffee. Now it was dinner and a movie. But when I went to pick the bike up, the previous renter hadn't returned it.

With some unexpected time on my hands, I decided to drive over to a shop in Newington. In the movies, this is the moment when the lead character turns, hands in pockets and whistling a lonely tune, and walks off the subway platform, only to bump into Gwyneth Paltrow.

That's what happened to me, except Gwyneth had a high-modulus carbon-fiber frame and Shimano shifters and a compact drivetrain. In Newington, a guy named Dave sent me out on a Felt Z5.

"Go down the alley, through the lot, take a left, a right, a right, and you can go up the hill that leads to the old children's hospital,"

he said. I did, and it was love. I rode up and down the hill several times. It was kind of a nasty-looking ascent, but it felt like nothing. I took a third trip up, just to show the climb how little I thought of it.

"Spread the word to the other hills," I told it. "You guys are not the boss of me anymore."

I tried another bike brand, just because they had one. Then I took a day to "think it over," but who was kidding whom? It turns out that Jim Felt was destined to build a bike ideally suited to a middle-aged left-handed Irish-American writer with a penicillin allergy. When I went back for a fitting, Dave's colleague Jeff put the bike on the trainer and watched me pedal for a while. "This doesn't happen very often," he said, "but I wouldn't change anything."

Why this one? It seemed like the best of both worlds, striking a pleasant balance between comfort and power. I thought I could make it go fast, but also felt I could keep it under control. Sort of.

A couple of days later, I made a point of riding past the place I knew the cool kids would be after finishing a 60-mile ride. Mark, their leader and man of few words, looked me up and down.

"Man got himself a Felt," he said.

Ralph, who speaks to bikes in their own language, murmured approvingly.

I wobbled off hopefully but uncertainly into the sunset. It's a better bike than I am a bicyclist. I've got some catching up to do. [B](#)

Next month, our novice begins the getting-to-know-you part of the relationship. Will he continue to fall for the new bike—or just fall?