

Bike Love: Goodbye, Old Friend

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I distinctly remember when financial responsibility found its way into my living room. In May 1999, I was somehow finishing my twelfth semester of college with no degree to show for my effort. I was also finishing spending the remainder of my \$18,000 Montgomery GI Bill that the Army had given me to pay for expenses during college in exchange for the three years I had given to them as a paratrooper.

At 26 years old, I felt I hadn't gotten my act together. I had no money, no degree, and no plan, and all I had to show for spending \$18,000 dollars was an expensive mountain bike and a hell of a hangover. My dwindling government funds, plus the approaching 1999 fall semester, marked the approach of two words that scared me: student loans. Since I was broke and wouldn't be riding my mountain bike much that summer – I'd just be working – and since I had no need for a full suspension bike since I quit racing in 1996, I decided to do something sacrilegious in the name of the mighty dollar. I was going to sell my mountain bike to avoid student loans. To any serious cyclist, selling your bike is akin to selling your soul. Shame on me.

My bright red 16.5-inch Pro Flex 854, complete with front parallelogram fork and curved rear swingarm, had been through a lot with me. None of my friends, not even past girlfriends, knew me as well as that bike did. I had logged thousands of hours in the saddle, over hill and dale, in good times and bad, midterms, breakups, and blurry late nights. We plowed through piles of windblown snow and slid in the sticky, cool spring mud. Among the heat and blackflies of summer we traveled, under the orange fall canopies we coasted. Summers were most memorable and each warm weather ride exceeded the prior in joy.

Typically I'd carry by bike down the stairs of my apartment building, the floor still sticky with dried beer and malt liquor from weekend parties, and out the front door, into the parking area. Once aboard my steed, I pedaled through the deserted summertime campus, jumping steps and riding elevated walkways, continued past the dormant middle school and across the empty university soccer fields. Then I arrived at the Blue Trail, a series of serpentine mountain bike paths that traveled above the Saranac River hidden behind my university's field house.

The primitive ten-mile-long Blue Trail snaked its way through hardwood forests composed of maple, beech, and oak. This was an island of wild land in an advancing sea of sprawl. Once on the trail, my bike and I were one. My tires softly flattened leaves and slid through the mud holes that didn't dry up until August. My gloved fingers delicately worked the shifters and brake levers while the suspension soaked up Northeast terrain. Besides the breeze filtering through my helmet and the white noise of rapids churning in the Saranac River below, there was silence.

That's what came to mind when I decided to sell my bike. I remembered the good times on the Blue Trail, not the \$700 that might end up in my pocket. My decision to sell was permeated with guilt. Who would end up with my bike? Unfortunately, anyone with \$700. Maybe a pair of suburban parents who would buy it for their spoiled brat to leave out in the rain and rust. Perhaps an independently-wealthy Phish head would purchase it. He'd be a wannabe from the '60s, who smelled like burned veggie burritos and couldn't tell the difference between Panaracer Dart and Panaracer Smoke tires. Maybe a muscle-bound frat boy would become the owner, carelessly bashing my Pro Flex through the woods and attempting lame bunny hops in his driveway. He'd ride with the seat too low and let some girl ride it.

I felt I was selling a lover into a life of prostitution. It would be bunny hopped by pimps, ridden and soiled by Johns. The idea of selling my bike to a substandard owner reeked of irresponsibility. But after attempting to withdrawal forty dollars from an ATM, which was unsuccessful due to "inadequate funds," necessity trumped emotion.

The advertisements' headline read "Full Suspension Mountain Bike For Sale." It was the catchiest headline I could think of, seeing full suspension bikes were rare in 1999. An unflattering black and white image of my bike was placed under the headline. Below this simple illustration I listed all my bike's components. At the bottom was my name and number. I posted the announcements in bike shops, bookstores, and coffee houses, pressing the thumbtacks in with a pout.

Two weeks evaporated and no one called. I hoped no one would ever call. I kept reassuring myself no one wanted my bike. "A five-year-old bike for \$700? No way. It's a dinosaur. 28 pounds of Shimano DX parts and suspension that consists of pieces of foam hyped as 'elastomers.' Nope, this thing isn't going anywhere," I assured myself.

A week later, the phone in my living room rang. I prayed the call had nothing to do with my bike. I picked up and an obnoxiously enthusiastic voice greeted me. "Hi, I'm calling about the bike for sale."

Showing some respect for my bike, I walked into the kitchen, out of sight, to spare it from overhearing the details of a potential sale. I whispered into the receiver, "Yeah. The Pro Flex?"

A gratingly chipper voice asked, "Is it still for sale?"

I asked him to hold on a minute. Laying the phone down I walked back into the living room and gazed at my bike. I thought of the Blue Trail and all the good times we had riding that route. Our route. If I sold my bike, who would go to the Blue Trail with me? I didn't want to go alone. I walked back into the kitchen, stared at my useless ATM card on the table, and picked up the phone. "It's for sale."

He asked, "Can I come over tomorrow?"

The rest of the day I didn't look at my bike. I couldn't. It was too damn sad. Though it sounds delusional, I somehow felt my bike heard the conversation and knew I betrayed our relationship. By evening we both knew we were breaking up. It was over.

At 10:00 a.m. the next morning, the potential buyer arrived. I led the young man into the living room to my helpless bike, soon to be sold to a substandard owner. But once the kid and I built a rapport, things started looking brighter. Though only 16 years old, he noticed the Shimano DX front hub and noted, "You know, whether it's Shimano DX or XTR, a front hub is still only a front hub." He noticed that I had chosen an economical set up, parts wise. He agreed that wheel sets are where you should always try to save weight since it's rotating weight. Therefore, he appreciated the Kevlar-beaded tires, double-butted spokes, and Bontrager BCX rims. He respected that I took care of my bike, saying it looked "really clean."

"You always keep it inside?" he asked.

"I wash it after every ride, dry it off, and put it right here." With a nervous laugh I added, "It's kind of like a little system I have."

He looked the bike up and down one more time, pushed on the rear suspension, and took a step back. "I'll take it." He pulled an enormous pile of cash out of his pocket and offered it to me. He smiled and gentlemanly said, "You're more than welcome to count it, but it's all there. Seven hundred dollars."

I slowly drew in the stack of well-worn twenties as I stood in shock, in disbelief that I just sold my bike. I counted the money, then put it in my pocket, reassuring him it was all there. Then, I thanked him. He replied with a smile, "No, thank you."

He wheeled the bike out my apartment, carried it down the stairs, his feet sticking to the dried beer and malt liquor from the weekend parties, and arrived in the parking area. From my window on the second floor I watched him mount the bike the same way I always did. Then he rode away, pedaling and shifting delicately, gently leaning into his first turn. I never saw my bike again.

I turned from my lookout and stared at where my bike was just moments earlier. There were two tiny imprints in the brown carpet where the front and rear tires had sat. Next to the front tire print were my riding shoes and toolbox. On the coat rack behind where my bike used to rest, my helmet and full-fingered riding gloves hung. These objects looked so useless and lonely. I stared at the scene with sadness, took the massive wad of cash out of my pocket, and felt like a chump.

I comforted myself, reasoning that there would be other bikes in my future and that paying rent was more important than riding. But if I had the chance to do it all over again, I would have chosen riding the Blue Trail for one hour over paying rent for an entire summer.