

A Word About Quality

Recently there was a thread on a website about someone asking about budget Titanium. Actually I lie – this ‘debate’ has been going on for at least the past 12 months, if not longer.

Anyway, I got sick of justifying my obvious high standards (yeah, that’s a joke) so I thought I would put together my thoughts on the subject. Just because I can!

Or maybe it’s because I should. Daily you get hit with the same old questions such as ‘Why Custom’ or ‘Why are your bikes so expensive’, so I guess this is another one of those questions, the ‘big picture’ questions if you will, which often aren’t the big questions but rather very little questions in which you get to practice answering the same answers like some sort of politician or something.

In today’s consumerist hell (that’s a joke too), the word ‘quality’ is often clouded. It’s actually quite ironic as an Industrial designer, as my profession is often lauded as being responsible for the ‘value added’ term often applied to consumer goods. The fact that Oakley sunglasses cost 7 bucks to make and sell for 200 is largely thanks to people like me – albeit with a healthy dose of input from marketing. Does anyone else think it’s weird that the cost of the actual item in the sticker price of something is actually the smallest cost, smaller in fact than the cost to sell and promote the item itself?

Anyway, I’m digressing a little. ‘Quality’ really is not something that has any value unless you place a value on it. Something is either ‘high’, ‘low’, or ‘good’ or ‘bad’ quality depending on who you are talking to. The word ‘Quality’ needs quantifying.

When I set up Thylacine Cycles, originally setting some sort of quality goals was not really a priority. Honestly, all I thought of was ‘let’s make a kick arse bike, something with little precedence in this country, and see what we can do if we actually ‘try’’. The result of that was the full suspension bike that can be found in the gallery at thylacinecycles.com/gallery.

Shoot forward to early 2004, and the buzz around the traps was all about singlespeed and it was all about rigid forks. You know, the whole ‘simpler is better’ axiom and the ‘let’s rattle my teeth out for a hoot’ philosophy. To that end I got in contact with Spicer and private labelled a few of ‘his’ Titanium rigid forks before hitting XACD up for them direct.

Now, at that time rigid forks was not my cup-of-tea, and after trying out some steel rigid forks, it still isn’t. What also wasn’t my cup of tea is scarily flexy forks that break.

Sure, pulling the forks out of the box was a scary thing in and of itself, but the demand was there and they'd gotten good reviews by people, with acceptable levels of warranty returns. Except there was one glaring problem. They didn't meet my idea of Thylacine Quality. When I had a look at some of the 'budget ti' bikes at Interbike, and then the odd Airborne or XACD custom, and compared them to other OE manufacturers out there, there was no comparison. None of those products were something I would want to put my brand on.

So that's when I went looking for someone who could build custom Titanium frames and forks to my specifications. Not just someone cheap but someone with a level of expertise and a commitment to quality on-par with my own so that – yes – I could develop some sort of benchmark that would not only set the standard for my future Titanium offerings, but also in a way set the tone for all future Thylacine bikes, regardless of material.

So it turned out I do have some idea of the type of quality bike I want to put out, but how does that translate into the 'market'? What sort of quality do I project? What sort of bike do I want 'out there'?

It's a difficult question to answer. I guess in a way I despise the whole 'value added' mentality, so I never want to be in a position where I sell what I consider over-rated and over priced bikes to the merchant bankers of the world. I also don't want to be in a position where I'm getting all wrapped up in the whole 'price-point' marketing bullshit, but nor am I building bikes in a commune to better the world. (Well, maybe I am.)

The real answer is probably a very unglamorous mix of selling something that selfishly meets my standards but also allows myself and my family some sort of future where we can live off more than 2-minute noodles and grow Thylacine into a cool little bike company. It's all very humble stuff, but at the end of the day, I just want to be excited to get up every morning and have a bright future, just like everyone else.

Ha, if only it were that simple! Of course, with the whole 'What's your quality benchmark' question comes other questions on the quality of what it is that makes the thing that you're selling in the first place. For example, I have a firm commitment to the environment and do what I can to make a difference. I also believe in sustainability and believe in frame-building in the West as an art, so I don't screw down my suppliers or get into any price-wars. I prefer smaller suppliers as I'd be a hypocrite if I didn't support them as I expect support as a small guy myself. Although realistically I can make anything out of anything, anywhere, I still prefer Steel and Titanium, although I'm all for responsible use and reuse of materials regardless of what they are.

Naturally it's a heck of a lot easier to have only one standard – 'Let's get rich' – but that's something I really don't care about. Like most people reading this, I just want to get out there and have heaps of fun on my bike, avoid using and getting mashed by cars, and just do the right thing. It's not really a left-wing / right-wing thing, it's just about having simple ideals and standards that are meaningful and achievable.

That's pretty much what I'm trying to achieve with Thylacine Cycles, so fingers crossed, that's something that will appeal to other like-minded riders, and realistically, there's not a damn thing wrong with that as far as I can tell.