

How to be Laid-back

Back when I was a kid riding my road bike in the 80's, all the local road bike enthusiasts always had cool Italian bikes. You know the ones – Colnago, Viner, Pinarello etc. etc. They were always lugged, always steel, and looked like they were painted by a guy with a spraycan and a few stencils. Those bikes were cool.

Even though Shimano was making major technological inroads into a market traditionally dominated by Campagnolo, Campy parts were still de rigeur – unless you were one of the young upstarts like myself on his Centurian Ironman with Shimano Ultegra. So were Rolls or Turbo saddles. Ergonomic bars were unheard of, as was the straight seatpost.

All the hardcore roadies had the mantra 'push your seat back'. Everyone was on layback seatposts those days with the seats pushed most times all the way back on the rails. It was the 'position du jour' and everyone was espousing it as giving you more climbing power or simply 'The Italians do it, therefore so do we'.

The opposite mantra to that of course was the local triathletes who had the chant 'steeper is better'. It was the 80's of course, so they also had the mantra 'The weirder and more fluorescent the better' too, but that's a whole other story.

Shoot forward to today and things are not hugely different in the road geometry stakes. Just as a 'typical' MTB geometry is lauded as $71^\circ/73^\circ$, so has the road 'median' stayed pretty much standard at $73^\circ/73^\circ$. It's been like that for a long time too, and there's fairly good reason for that. It works pretty well as a very gross general 'average'. In fact, even if you have some fit anomaly, with the right combination of parts, you can massage a bike to (sort of) fit you if it's roughly the right size. Nobody should forget that the body is an amazingly adaptable piece of machinery, so even if things aren't quite right, once you have adapted you won't know if it's not optimal or not. You will have got used to it and adapted.

Having a default 'standard' like this is a fine tool upon which bike companies can develop a stock geometry – especially in today's market where many bikes are only available in 5 sizes. Using statistical data as well as existing accepted 'norms', it's pretty easy to put together 5 of 7 frame sizes that will roughly cater for 90% of the population.

However, one component that throws the age-old parallel 73° standard out of whack is the straight seatpost.

To be honest, the straight, non-layback seatpost is a good idea. The shortest distance between 2 points is a straight line, and as soon as you offset a load

from being 'in-line' to 'off-line', you increase it's level of magnitude quite substantially. Both these facts support the design whole-heartedly. However, you can see where that leads the accepted median. A 73 degree seat angle no longer puts you in the same position as you were 10,15 or even 20 years ago. In fact, it puts your weight so far forward and changes your pedalling dynamics so dramatically, that the average rider would have to slacken off the seat angle somewhere in the vicinity of 2 degrees to achieve the same position as they had previously.

In the absurd quest of bike companies to market something 'faster and better', things have gotten a bit out of hand. Companies have steepened and shortened everything up with the moniker 'Shorter and steeper is faster'. Chainstay lengths are as short as physically possible yet still capable of shifting gears, and fork rakes are shorter than they should be all under the same premise.

All this is doing is appealing to the base emotions, for naturally, why would you want long and laidback with you can have short and steep? How could long and laidback possibly be as fast as short and steep?

The premise is, of course, thoroughly stupid. What makes someone fast on a bike (ignoring genetics and training and all that for a second) is comfort, intuitive neutral handling, and a good fit. If you get on a bike, feel uncomfortable, twitchy and nervous, like an untamed bronco it might 'feel' fast, but the reality is that it simply isn't – it's just uncomfortable, twitchy and nervous, passed through the magic of marketing's manipulation of your senses and popping out the other side as 'Woah, isn't that a fast bike'.

Straight seatposts when used with the median geometry is just fuel to the absurdist fire. The reality is, is that if you're riding a bike with roughly median geometry and running a straight seatpost, there's a very high chance you're position is totally wrong.

Part of the philosophy I guess with Thylacine Cycles is I believe most people need a slacker seat angle than the median, and this issue is only exacerbated by straight seatposts. Naturally your position is dictated by your particular physiology first and foremost, but even if you ignore philosophy and are more concerned with historical reference, it makes no sense to ride a bike with historical median geometry and then slap a straight seatpost in there, simply because it's the 'design du jour'.

As it becomes more difficult to find good layback seatposts, it makes absolute sense that if you feel compelled to run a straight seatpost, that a 73 degree seat angle is simply not going to work.

Warwick Gresswell
March 2005