

# North American Handmade Bicycle Show 2008

by Diane B. Lees

Traveling from northeast Ohio to Portland, Oregon, on Thursday, February 7, for the 2008 North American Handmade Bicycle Show (NAHBS), my partner Brian and I stepped off Amtrak's #27 train — The Empire Builder — to a cool and rainy day.

We had spent the last 45 or so hours laughing, talking shop, and sharing meals with Bilenky's Framebuilder Express, a terrific group of cycling professionals that included the zany cast and crew of Bilenky

the train and bus systems, and riders are given respect and lanes in which to ride. It was impressive.

Arriving at the Portland Convention Center Friday morning, the scene was utter chaos. If it hadn't been so exasperating, it might have been comical. Registration lines were long and confusing, and the people at the registration counter seemed ill equipped to take care of the throngs of attendees. Eventually, however, everything was figured out, and we all had the correct credentials.

Show attendance was record breaking. NAHBS organizer Don Walker chose to make Friday an "industry-only" day, allowing bike-shop owners and employees, non-exhibiting builders, and other industry and press people to browse the 140-plus booths of frames, built bikes, accessories, equip-

is available online at [www.handmadebicycleshow.com](http://www.handmadebicycleshow.com).) In a mere four years, Walker's NAHBS has created an almost cult-like following for the handmade frame. Many of the hot names in the business, such as Vanilla or Richard Sachs, have long, long waiting lists for their wares. After their respective wins this year, Naked and Kirk will probably have lengthy lead times as well.

I'd like to especially note Bruce Gordon, who won "best in show" at NAHBS '07 for his lugged road bike with custom titanium racks, and who won two awards this year. His 2007 award-winning entry was also recently featured in a prestigious art exhibit. He is a remarkable man and has a special place in our industry, and he has made an interesting and lasting name for himself with both his brilliance and eccentricity. Which brings me to:

## Finding the Right Builder

Attending NAHBS offers the unique possibility of coming face to face with the builders and being able to compare their work first-hand. Here you can see the distinctions among different styles of lugs, tubing, and paint techniques and match your ideas and dreams with a specific builder. Other than exhibiting at this show or through their websites, most of these builders do little or no advertising. Word of mouth, either person-to-person or via a blog or online discussion, is their best form of getting recognized and growing their companies. Often during the show, satisfied customers were on hand, and the builder didn't need to do anything but sit back and smile. More than anything else, NAHBS offered the opportunity to get up close and personal with a builder and actually interview him or her. And, although there probably wasn't enough time to be 100 percent certain, you might have been able to establish an essential link between your ideals and someone who could fulfill them. Ultimately, you are buying the builder and their personality.

## Other Points of Interests

Although the main focus of the show is the custom frame builder, booths containing accessories, components, frame-building products and tools, painters, publications, and apparel were sprinkled throughout the hall.

For example, Ortlieb's booth had a full wall of Tubus racks, including several that



**New show rising.** NAHBS is gaining traction among elite frame builders.

Cycle Works; master frame builder and painter Doug Fattic; writer/reporter Eric McKeegan from *Dirt Rag*; two builders from Roark Cycles; three young and emerging framebuilders — Dan Polito, Yoon Sun, and Owen Lloyd; Bryan Myers from Fresh Frames; Marten Gerritsen, frame builder from the Netherlands; and frame builder David Bard.

On Thursday we spent a little time exploring Portland, seeing first hand how the city earns its "bicycle-friendly" title. Within a fairly broad swath around the downtown area, the Tri-Met train system was free, bicycles are welcomed on board

ment, and more without the throngs of consumer attendees who would converge on the show the following day.

As usual, every builder pulled out all the stops to show off his or her best work. Custom builders, including Bilenky, Davidson, Bruce Gordon, Waterford Precision, Nobilette, and Renè Herse, showed how the lugged steel touring bike is made. With exquisite brazing technique, both traditional and quirky color combinations, and unique styling, custom builders illustrated a commitment to the touring market. All of their touring models offer the full complement of rack, bottle, and fender bosses. (A complete list of builders

haven't been offered in the U.S. until now. Of special interest are the Vega, Nova SS, Airy, and Disco, a disc-brake compatible rack. All except the Disco are ready to ship. The nicely appointed Brooks booth showed off accessories as well as saddles. Attendees who stopped were offered a free cloth tote bag, and an impressive DVD about the Brooks's saddle company was included inside the show catalog. The movie is interesting, informative, professional, and definitely makes you want to at least try a Brooks saddle.

Booths that supported the builders' work allowed the public to see some of what goes into the frame builder's product, including tubing, lug, and tool suppliers, such as Nova Cycle, Pacenti Cycle Design, and Henry James, Anvil, Bringheli, and Paragon Machine Works.

Many of the frame builders were offering promotional gifts — T-shirts, pins, stickers, hats, posters, and postcards — some for sale and some giveaways. It was a full-blown consumer show with lots of "swag" and well worth the price of admission, especially for non-industry attendees.

Circulating among the booths were show-business celebrities (Robin Williams), bike superstar Lance Armstrong, and bicycle business owners (Dale Brown of Cycle D'Oro, Larry Black of College Park Cycles, and Alex Wetmore, visit [touring@phred.org](mailto:touring@phred.org).) Rubbing elbows with of these people is one of the great perks of an event like this.

#### The Seminars

Show director Don Walker expanded this year's seminar program with a variety of topics aimed at the general public as well as the frame builder. I sat in on several but found the long-distance cycling workshop to be one of the most engaging. Moderated by David Rowe, editorial director of the online website, [readytoride.biz](http://readytoride.biz), the panel members included Jonathan Nicholas of Cycle Oregon, Chris Kosten from Adventure Corps, George Thomas, director of Race Across Oregon, and coach/personal trainer Michelle Grainger. Nicholas was the only panel member not talking about competitive events, and each panelist had helpful ideas and hints for all levels of cyclists.

I had hoped for more questions and answers to some of the pressing questions of long-distance touring without the competi-

tive component, but I still found the panel helpful and informative. [Roadbikerider.com](http://Roadbikerider.com) will be offering an e-book of the panel's entire discourse online in the near future.

Two of the most interesting presentations offered were actually not seminars or workshops at all. One was a 30-minute movie about frame builder Richard Sachs called *Perfection Is Imperfection*. It documented Mr. Sachs' philosophy, showed his workshop and some of his processes, and offered an intimate look into his life and mind. The movie can be viewed at [www.richardsachs.com](http://www.richardsachs.com). The second, Craig Calfee's Bamboo Bike Project for Africa, was riveting. What began as a trial-and-error idea for a saleable bamboo bike several years ago has evolved into Craig's project of helping to develop a sustainable industry for Africans. Many species of bamboo are indigenous to Africa and, with micro-loans, Craig believes there is a real possibility for his bamboo bicycle to revolutionize a good part of African society. Read more about the Africa project at [www.calfeedesign.com](http://www.calfeedesign.com). Other seminars included everything from working with stainless-steel lugs and using powder coating for paint

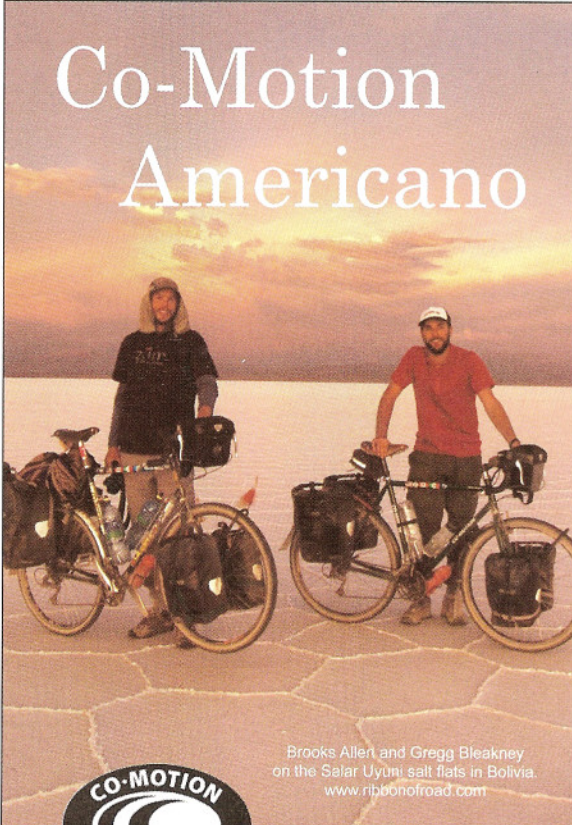
to fit discussions by Richard Schwinn of Waterford Precision — one for builders and one for consumers.

#### Wrap-Up


On the Internet, there are hundreds of photographs and bios of the bicycles and builders that were featured at NAHBS this year. The show has made an immeasurable difference to these small, previously obscure artisans, and they are stepping up to the challenge of an expanded audience — and their new-found notoriety. It's taking some getting used to — conducting interviews, posing for photographs, and being critiqued much more intensely than before — but, in the end, NAHBS, more than any other previous venue, has given the handmade bicycle builder a cohesive and supportive voice. And it's one that is showing the bicycle industry a whole new path. **AC**


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# Co-Motion Americano



Brooks Allen and Gregg Bleakney  
on the Salar Uyuni salt flats in Bolivia.  
[www.ribbonofroad.com](http://www.ribbonofroad.com)





The last twelve days tested my mind, spirit, body and bike to a level I've never experienced before. The riding conditions were some of the worst I've ever encountered. The "road", when there was one, was a semi-consistent mix of deep sand, loose gravel, huge rocks and skull jarring washboard. On the Salar Uyuni, we rode for three days to a horizon full of nothing but whiteness with sunsets that made you feel like you were on a different planet.

*Brooks Allen*

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