

Calendar

Chain Gang

True Your Wheels

He has a mechanic's voice, the one that mechanics use when they are trying to explain things to people who aren't mechanically inclined.

It's not condescending, not at all. The cadence is slow. To rush something is to ruin it, a mechanic knows. The words are carefully pronounced. You wouldn't want your listener to think you said "lube" when you meant "tube."

There are three bike mechanics at R.E.I., says this one, Roy Smith. The other two are "A.P." — who doesn't like

his real name to be known — and Travis

Moore, who is described by Smith as "probably one of the best mechanics in San Diego."

Depending on their work schedules, one of the three is assigned to teach R.E.I.'s basic bike maintenance class or the comprehensive maintenance and repair class for advanced students.

Smith explains that the basic class is just a couple of hours, purely a demo, not hands-on, and designed to accommodate 25 people. Given monthly, the class is free. The advanced class is five hours long, costs \$60, and those who take it bring their own bikes to work on in R.E.I.'s bike shop. It's given whenever a total of four people sign up.

In the basic class, you will be shown "what a properly running bike looks like and sounds like." You will be taught how to conduct a "pre-ride" and "post-ride" inspection of the frame, the wheels, and all other components of your bike. These guys want us to be able to recognize a problem even if we can't as yet adjust or fix it ourselves.

Smith wants us to keep our bikes clean. He recommends Simple Green or any other biodegradable detergent. "It's much easier to locate problems on a clean bike," he says. "If it's clean you'll be able to see fine cracks in the paint, which is the first indication that there's a crack in the frame" — that

being a possibility if you've crashed recently.

Smith says there's nothing wrong with using a garden hose on a bike, just like what you'd use on a car, except that several points on the bike shouldn't be exposed to pressurized water. In the class you'll be shown where they are and be informed about the prescribed "gentle rinse."

Is Smith going too far to ask us to

put a coat of wax ("any car wax") on a bike? Not at all. "That keeps the rust off."

He also wants us to clean our bike rims with a Tuffy sponge, then isopropyl alcohol. It's for the sake of well-functioning brakes.

Squeaky clean some places; lubed in other places. You'll know the difference soon.

"The biggest thing about lubing a

chain is making sure you don't get any of the oil on the wheel," says Smith. Because then you'll have no brakes? "Exactly."

In the class you'll also learn how to measure your chain, to determine how much it has stretched. "If it's stretched too much, your derailleur may not work properly." What's worse, an overly stretched chain will wear down the drivetrain. "So instead of changing a 10- to 15-dollar chain you're going to end up buying a new drivetrain for \$400."

Anyone who has dealt with anything mechanical knows a key issue is tools. Here you will learn what tools you absolutely need to carry.

And then, of course, there are flats. Here you'll learn about preventing flats as well as how to fix them.

Patching a tube is a last-ditch effort — you would patch one only if you didn't have a spare one. "We encourage people to carry at least one good tube with them," says Smith. Still, patching will be taught.

The more important, less obvious lesson is to be sure to determine the cause of the flat, to prevent the experience of riding a hundred yards only to discover the new tube has been punctured by the same thorn in the tire that got the last tube.

It makes sense (like all mechanical things) that the finer points of maintenance and repair — truing wheels, for example — are saved for the advanced class at R.E.I. "In that class, each person is given his or her own work stand, set of tools, cleaning equipment, and all of that, and we basically go through the entire bike," says Smith.

Roy Smith

The basic class is the lead-in to that one.

— Jeanne Schinto

Basic Bike Maintenance Class
Tuesday, March 23,
6:30–8:30 p.m.
R.E.I.
5556 Copley Drive,
San Diego
Free
858-279-4400

Local Events
page 79

Classical Music
page 93

Art Museums & Galleries
page 96

Theater
page 97

Pop Music
page 101

Restaurants
page 126

Movies
page 141

LOCAL EVENTS



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