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I was a world-class wrench. (bicycle mechanics)

Last summer, when Shimano's Bruce Galloway called, I was a little nervous about accepting his offer. You see, Bruce was rounding up mechanics to work for Shimano's Neutral Support Service at the Mountain Bike World Championships in Vail, Colorado. He wanted to include a journalist with mechanical experience - someone to sample the action and hype his company's commitment to the sport. He said Shimano would supply everything needed on-site, plus the airfare to get there. All I had to do was bring my tools. Further, Bruce assured me I wouldn't have to work any more than I wanted, hinting I could take the VIP approach: Knock out a few simple derailleur adjustments then hang out the rest of the week, scribbling notes, snapping pics, watching the races. But I told Bruce that if I was coming, I was coming to wrench.

That's why I was nervous. I've been doing this magazine gig since '88, but before that I was a pro mechanic for 17 years - with the filthy wardrobe and fingernails to prove it. I'm still a licensed USCF mechanic and work on friends' bikes as well as those we test. Fact is, I've probably forgotten more about fixing 2-wheelers than many modern mechanics know. But things have changed considerably since I wore an apron from 9 to 5. (Yeah, right - make that 8 to 7.)

Besides, we're talking about the Worlds, mountain biking's Super Bowl. Mess up a cable's tension, forget to check one spoke nipple, overlook a bad link and the result could be a race-ending mechanical-possibly derailing someone's career. It's not your reputation on the line, either. It's the team's. These were real concerns, enough to make any conscientious technician edgy.

And excited. I signed on. Devin Walton, who runs Shimano's rolling workshop (12 events and 25,000 miles in '94), and Christophe Esayian, his right-hand man, scoured shops across the U.S. to assemble a crack team of experts. These were mechanics with know-how and integrity, so thorough that they'd grease the pump washer when tuning a bike. Like me, these guys received room and board, a workstand and bench, the bragging rights of working the Worlds, and no pay. Unlike me, they had to get to Vail on their own. So most drove, sleeping in their cars to cut costs. Some risked losing their regular jobs by leaving for a week.

We were like the gunslingers in *The Magnificent Seven* - hired desperados (although we were brought in not to kill bandits, but to rid the Worlds of mechanical gremlins). Steve McQueen, James Coburn, Charles Bronson, Yul Brynner, and Robert Vaughn (nobody remembers the other guys) were pros, but they didn't have anything on our gang. Devin, who studied mechanical engineering in college, dazzled us with his Shimano knowledge. Christophe, who hadn't been home to Seattle in 5 months, spoke several languages. **New Englander Merlyn Townley**, bald and sophisticated like Brynner, had troubleshooting down to a science. Mercenary Eric Wolfe from Colorado, all 6-foot-4 of him, was willing to take on any dirty job that came along. Lean Chris McGrew from Seattle was quiet but efficient, listening intently to riders before deftly tuning a rig. Meanwhile, Texan Scan Thomson tirelessly cranked out repair after repair. Pitching in were 2 technicians from Shimano's California headquarters, Kent Wright and Greg Chalberg, who provided years of factory service experience and were ready to jump in anytime someone got in over his head (usually me).

In a week, strangers became friends. Even if you aren't mechanically inclined, I think you'd have had fun, so come along.

### Poised for action

We set up in the bustling pit area between the Diamond Back and Cannondale teams. Looking to the right, past the other rigs - Specialized, Yeti, Grip Shift, Rock Shox - we have a glorious view of the snow-tipped Vail Pass peaks. It's cold the first day, in the low 40s. The metal parts and tools amplify the temperature, and I wish for gloves.

We work outside, next to Shimano's box van, in a fenced-off area just large enough for our workstands, benches and bikes, at about 8,000 feet elevation, which explains Sean's altitude sickness the first day. We're fortunate to have a tarp roof to ward off weather, which ranges from "Run for cover, it's hailing!" to "Where's that sunblock?"

Shimano supplies us with team-issue aprons as well as to-die-for pile jackets, sweatshirts, hats and T-shirts, all emblazoned with "Saved by Shimano Multi Service." We wear this stuff everywhere. Filing into the Hubcap Brewing Co. for dinner, we fit right in with the similarity resplendent Swiss, German, Japanese, and U.S. teams. But not having to worry about racing, we hoist a few and overeat.

Each morning around 8, we open the van, assemble benches, set out stands and small-parts cases, and await problems. It's first come, first served. Racers line up, usually those practicing days before their events. We rack the bikes and ask what's the matter, sometimes with amusing results.

Even Christophe's language skills can't help when a fit-looking Slovak tries to explain a skipping problem. My sign language seems to work, but I think I unknowingly insult him, judging by his expression as I disassemble the wheel. Some teams travel with interpreters, and Kozo Shimano is around to speak with the Japanese racers, so we manage nicely.

Occasionally we go to elaborate lengths to solve problems. Even though the van is full of small and large tools (even a bench vise, compressor, refrigerator, and electricity) we don't have everything. Embarrassingly, I fumble around for an hour, hand-machining a plastic part for an XTR lever while our waiting line grows. Fortunately, Devin has saved worn and broken components from past events, which we can strip and recycle.

This doesn't always please racers, who expect even exchanges. ("C' mon, guy - this steel Alivio derailleur will never break the way your old XTR did.") We give the damaged parts back, though, in case they can be replaced under warranty at a shop.

### Shining stars

Good news. A section of the cross-country course is only a few feet behind us, so we get to watch some of the stars, albeit briefly. No trouble knowing when they're coming - just wait for the ESPN helicopter to swing overhead. We follow lead changes via the blaring PA.

The racers are great. They come in totally energized, amped to get to the starting line on time, or just after a trial run. But they're never abusive, demanding, or out of control (unlike customers on a showroom floor on a busy Saturday). No, they're downright nice. Take the British downhiller who mangles her derailleurs in a crash, then patiently waits, sweat-soaked and bloody, while I slowly install new mechs. Or the French guy who, after

Devin painstakingly overhauls his XTR Rapidfire lever (I told you he was good), says "Merci! Now I will win!" Or Grant McKelvie from Scotland, who insists on tipping us (we refuse) after we replace his Grip Shift with help from company ace Ted Kennedy.

It's tougher satisfying the team managers, who are trying to keep their squads spinning and often need a bunch of parts - yesterday. Jeannie Longo wants XTR derailleurs. Hans Rey is looking for something, anything, we're willing to give away. Toby Henderson has to have a rear axle, but he's willing to install it. GT's Doug Martin needs cassettes. We greasy types gawk at the legends while Devin hears them out with motherly patience and solves their problem one way or another. He seems to know everyone on the NORBA circuit. When parts aren't in stock, he orders from the factory and has them shipped to Vail. Example: a box of new, riveted XTR cassettes to replace the bolted ones that are coming apart for many pros.

We're amazed to see what some racers pedal. Naturally, top Americans ride only the best frames and components. But other countries make do with whatever is available. Would you enter the Worlds with bolt-on wheels and steel rims? No way. But it doesn't seem to faze the Mexicans or Bolivians. I take a break one day to watch some of the downhill and spot them descending wildly. (How else could you descend on those slick rims?) They have miniature flags stuck in their helmets and are obviously so proud to be participating that any bike would do.

The same euphoria about being part of a major event is felt by us mechanics. Because we might not get a chance like this again, we try to savor every moment. Walking through the wonderful car-free village of Vail to try another fine restaurant; hanging at the condo and swapping shop tales; rating the bands at the bars; dialing in bikes for the world's best - we relish our good luck. On the final night, the U.S. team throws a mechanics-only party. There's a slew of us - young and old, men and women-from various nations, all members of a noble fraternity.

#### RELATED ARTICLE: MECHANIC'S NOTEBOOK

Direct from the pits, here are 14 nuggets of world-class wrenching wisdom.

\* Traveling mechanics need a safe, reasonably portable way to carry tools. Two methods favored by Worlds' mechanics: aluminum or plastic toolboxes like those used for photo equipment, and Sidetrak's 52-pocket Tool Rap Pro, a nylon organizer that rolls up for travel. You have to check tools when flying, and cases are best for this.

\* Shimano uses Ultimate Repair Stands (which it purchased). The Ultimate is impressive, having a narrow, easy-to-use clamp that fits into the tightest places. In addition, it folds for easy storage, adjusts to accommodate short or tall mechanics, and has a tripod base that works even if the ground isn't level. (See "Time Trial," New Products, Feb.)

\* Shimano's new linear rear derailleur spring, found on STX, isn't as powerful as earlier versions. When paired with Grip Shift, the result can be slow shifts to the smallest cog. To improve this, keep the cable clean and well lubed, or upgrade to a Gore-Tex RideOn cable.

\* Curiously, while Americans run brake cables right/rear and left/front, much of the rest of the world has them the opposite way (motorcycle style).

\* Using liquid sealant to flat-proof your tubes has drawbacks. If you're not careful it can clog the valve, making

it impossible to inflate the tube. Always rotate the valve to the top of the wheel before releasing or adding air and you should be OK. If the valve does get jammed, cut it off to release the air, then replace the tube.

\* As shift cables stretch, index adjustment suffers. But having the cables too tight also causes problems, mainly hesitation during shifts to smaller cogs. To cure this, turn the adjustment barrel clockwise in half-turn increments until the chain drops immediately when you shift. It's a problem with index front derailleurs, too. Don't overtighten cables.

\* We saw lots of aluminum bikes with bent derailleur hangers. They ought to be replaceable on all such frames. You can straighten a slightly bent aluminum hanger once (or several times if you're lucky). But bend it too far, or too often, and it'll break.

\* It's a fact: Downhillers are harder on equipment than cross-country racers.

\* Suspension forks make it darn hard to feel a headset's adjustment. Often the play you sense is actually in the sliders. Try bracing the frame firmly with one hand while the bike is on the ground, then push and pull on the fork crown. Or grab the stem and crown and push and pull to feel for play.

\* Cantilever brakes remain one of the hardest things to adjust, especially the pads. There are just too many variables. Surely someone can come up with a more foolproof brake design.

\* Based on almost no bottom bracket problems at the Worlds, Shimano's relatively new cartridge-style BB seems to be as good or better than the traditional cup-and-cone design.

Langley, Jim, *I was a world-class wrench. (bicycle mechanics)*. Vol. 36, *Bicycling*, 04-01-1995, pp 62(4).

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