



Pat Sprute of Spokane, Washington, welding together the custom rack for Jon's bike.

Building a Practical Bike

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words: John Speare
photos: Ben Tobin





The Set-Up

Jon Snyder has been a daily bike commuter for about five years. He's the publisher of a regional outdoor monthly magazine, and he recently won his first public election, to the Spokane City Council in Washington. Jon's schedule is insane. He has meetings stacked back to back and overlapping, and is constantly bouncing between his two offices that are separated by three miles of busy urban traffic. Yet Jon rides in all weather, at all hours of the day, and on any street. He often hauls his daughter to school on a tag-along or in a bike trailer on his way to work.

To say Jon rides hard is an understatement. It's not that he just rides fast (and he does), but he rides as if possessed, without regard to potholes, curbs, glass, bumps, and other hazards of the road that many riders learn to avoid.

His commuter for the last five years has been an entry-level urban bike. It's got a flat bar, aluminum frame, 700c wheels, rear rack, and plastic fenders. Jon has abused this bike to the point where just about every component needs to be replaced. His drivetrain is so worn that replacing any one piece, for example his chain, would require replacing all the other parts that have worn in with it, like his cassette and chain rings, too. His (second) rear wheel is so fatigued that he breaks a spoke about once a month. His brake pads are wafer-thin, and one of his brake levers has

been bent and re-bent so many times that it no longer pulls enough cable to stop safely. And of course there's a symphony of creaking and groaning coming from his bottom bracket.

As is probably obvious, Jon is not too keen on maintenance. In fact, for as much riding as he does, he is surprisingly uninterested in the particulars of his bike. He doesn't think about upgrades until something breaks. He sees his bike much in the same way most Americans see their car: it's a machine that must go when he needs it to move him from one place to the next.

I'm a bike nerd and I share an office with Jon. I spend countless hours looking at and discussing bikes online, building up many slightly different versions of the same bike, and fussing over the minutiae of bike detail that Jon would never consider. With a sense of both fascination and horror, I've been watching the gradual decay of his commuter bike for the last year or so. At the same time, I have come to admire Jon and his absolutely utilitarian bike ethic.

Thus, it seems only natural that the challenge presents itself to me as Jon's bike literally falls apart under him: what is the perfect commuter bike for a guy like Jon?

The Criteria

Good value: Jon works two jobs. His wife works. He has two kids. While he's not broke, spending thousands on a bike and bike stuff is not a budget priority. He can spend some money up front, but what's going to be really important is the long-term cost of maintaining the bike.

Tough: Jon's new bike needs seriously bombproof wheels. The bike needs to withstand the occasional tip-over. Within reason, the components should be prioritized around durability, serviceability, and cost before weight is considered.

Appropriate: Now that Jon is a councilman, he spends a lot more time in suits than ever before. The new bike should be happily rideable in a nice suit. Jon prefers a somewhat upright riding position, too. In addition, he always has an Ortlieb office bag

stuffed to the gills, which needs a home on this new bike.

Fast: While durability, serviceability, and not crazy-expensive are all well and good, the bike needs to suit Jon's speed requirements. Building up an indestructible tank is not going to work. Jon likes to ride fast and his new bike shouldn't slow him down.

Nondescript: Finally, this bike can't be the looker in a rack full of bikes. It needs to be understated and to blend in. Jon leaves his bike locked up in all parts of town at all hours of the day.

The Platform

The Kogswell P/R G2 (for 26" wheels)

Like all bike nerds, I have my dogmatic beliefs that define what makes a good frame. Had Jon's officemate been you or any other bike nerd, it's likely that the frame choice would be different and just as justifiable as mine. I picked a used Kogswell P/R as Jon's frameset, because:

- It's standard diameter steel, which means it gives a little and may soften the



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Jon's completed bike. Note his initials formed from supports in the front rack.



But the Kogswell frame and fork make a great-handling bike for carrying an over-the-wheel front load.

ride a bit for Jon and the bike. This was the big gamble for Jon, who has, until now, been riding a super-stiff aluminum frame with narrow, hard tires. Which brings me to...

• It takes 26" wheels. This was the other big gamble. I like 26" wheels for Jon because they are cheap, durable, and light enough. They also feel faster to me on acceleration. But that could be wishful thinking and myth. Jon can put his ultra-hard, super flat-protection tires on there and still get a little cush by running a fatter version of the tire.



• It has road geometry. Nice steep head and seat tube angles make for a quicker, livelier-feeling ride. Geometrically-speaking, this frame is very similar to the near-mythical-in-status Bridgestone XO-1, which really was a great commuter, rough-stuffer, and general all-rounder.

• The front-end of the P/R, when

paired with the correct Kogswell fork, provides optimal handling for carrying a load on a rack above the front wheel.

• It includes fenders, and not the wimpy plastic jobbers that are not long enough to keep the rider clean. This version of the frame ships with beautiful, super-long metal fenders. These are lifers. The frame also has the correct braze-ons for mounting fenders, which, along with a dab of blue Loctite on each bolt, means they'll stay put and not rattle.

• Horizontal dropouts. It would be great to put an internal hub on this bike, but it's not in the budget for the first build. But perhaps when a bit more money loosens up in the future, this frame will wear an internal hub. And we can slap a chainguard on it, too.

• Kickstand plate. Like the fender braze-ons, this is a small touch that really makes a big difference on a commuter bike.

• Black. No decals, no pinstripes. There's a nice head badge, but that's it. This bike will blend.

The Bits

Once the frame is figured out, the bike sort of builds itself. Aside from the rack, there is nothing really spectacular on this bike from a component perspective. Just about all of the parts are used. I bought them at our local community bike shop, Pedals2People.

The wheels are Shimano Deore hubs laced to Bontrager rims with straight-gauge spokes. Jon really likes flat handlebars, but asked about trying bar-ends for more hand positions. I found a used Zoom Brahma bar at Pedals2People. The Brahma provides some more hand positions and helps protect the bike when it tips over. I also found a nice pair of Suntour friction thumb shifters. For the drivetrain, I put on a 2x8 setup, figuring 8 speeds are easier to friction shift and it's a good value for eventual replacement. Rear derailleur is a pretty well-used Shimano LX. Pretty basic, serviceable stuff.

The Rack

Jon loves his Orlieb office bag. It's always stuffed with papers, lunch, laptop, and other normal commuter stuff. Because Jon wears a suit, he doesn't want a messenger bag or backpack. He's always put this bag on the rear rack of his bike. Of course that works fine, but the anal symmetrical policeman in me wants the bag centered on the bike.

In the last few years, I've found carrying loads on a front rack over the front wheel to be the ideal location for urban/commuter riding. You can see your load, it's easy to fuss and adjust with it while riding, and it feels somehow more efficient to push a front load than to lug a rear load around. However, if your bike is not designed to carry the load above the front wheel, then the bike can feel unstable, sluggish, and it likes to drop unpredictably into turns.

But the Kogswell frame and fork make a great-handling bike for carrying an over-the-wheel front load. In addition, the fork has braze-ons that are specifically placed for attaching a front rack. While there are some production front racks that you can

fit onto a Kogswell (or any fork), the stiffest and best solution is to find someone to make you a rack. We're lucky to have a friend here in Spokane, Pat Sprute, who makes racks.

The Verdict

Jon has been riding his bike for a couple months now. He likes it. His initial comments about the bike expressed amazement at how fast a steel bike with 26" wheels could be. We've just finished the front rack, so he doesn't have as much experience with the rack as he does with the bike.

As noted previously, the two remaining changes he wants to make are putting on an internal-gear hub and a chainguard. Although an internal-gear hub isn't maintenance-free, it does simplify things quite a bit, and it makes covering up the chain much easier.

He hasn't broken anything on the bike



yet, and he's comfortable and fast. I guess time will tell if this is the right bike for him or not. Can it hold up for five years of hard, daily riding, and almost no maintenance? We'll see. 🚲

More about Kogswell

Kogswell Cycles was founded in Minnesota in 2001 by Matthew Grimm. A selection of models had been available through the brand's website and through dealers, but in 2009, Grimm ceased production. He handed the reigns of the Kogswell P/R model over to Longleaf Cycles, a shop focused on practical cycling located in Wilmington, North Carolina. Longleaf will soon have their own version of the P/R available, exclusively in the 650B wheel size. Check www.longleafbicycles.com for updates. For information on original Kogswell frames, there is still a Kogswell Owner's Group online at sports.groups.yahoo.com/group/KOG.