

Ko Zieleman

...began constructing frames after the war. His dad, who started doing so in 1928, still keeps an eye on him doing a neat job. Ko Zieleman was a competitive cyclist himself for years, and even made it to the pro ranks in '59 – '60. Standing in his workshop talking quietly, sometimes almost mumbling, he emanates tremendous rest and peace of mind.

Riding Practice

'I am not a believer in those ultra lightweight frames. It will do for a time trial on a flat and straight parcours. In a criterium these guys will run aground because they will go flat out too early. You'll need a stable frame for that. And why does a tourist need a super lightweight bike? It is just to brag about while the frame will get flexy and sloppy within the year. I prefer to build firmly.' Zieleman is sceptical towards the latest developments. 'You can impress a 16 year old with an aerodynamic bike perhaps, but surely not a mature rider, can you?' What with those handlebars being mounted upside down and all that: this requires a completely different way of riding because the rhythm between body and bike is different.

Construction

I have no preference for either Columbus or Reynolds tubes. Both are fine. I've never used anything else, but I can tell you that the tubes that do break during a race are mostly Japanese jobs. That stuff is meant for those lightweight fellows of course. For the lighter frames I use silver soldering which is quite tricky. It starts running sooner than copper which can be managed more easily. You can get that in any place you want it to go. Heating ages the material faster than normal, so I 'glow' out a connection: not only do I heat a connection at the lug itself; I do so as well away from the lug, diminishing gradually. This prevents abrupt changes in the characteristics of the different parts of the tube which could cause breakage. The tube becomes more tough."

In a factory, a frame will be fixed to a mould for soldering. These moulds are made of iron causing the frame to cool too quickly, as a result of which it becomes more brittle than when cooled by air alone. A mould also requires another way of soldering: tubes have to be soldered step by step. This will harden the soldering paste which should ensure the proper fluidity of the solder itself. It won't flow anymore. Myself, I always solder a lug in one go, and there is no need to do it as fast as all that,' Zieleman says, smiling meaningfully. 'Added to that, in a factory there is one man soldering the bracket, another the headset, etc. All these guys have different ways of soldering and do so with different temperatures. This can never be good for the longevity of a frame.

The Japanese

When Shimano had just started business, they came here, gave me some dropouts and asked me if I could build 3 framesets for the IFMA in Cologne. Well, I thought, they will find out how I am doing things anyway, so I made those bikes. In passing they had also taken a couple of jars of Campagnolo grease and an entire groupset.

I used to build a lot for cycling teams when these were not yet sponsored by large manufacturers. I built for Acifit, Frisol and Ketting; for Hennie Kuiper, Leo van Vliet, Piet van Katwijk, Herman Snoeyink, just to name a few. Just recently I finished 8 track bikes for Batavus which were shipped to Greece.'

Pro's and amateurs

Most of the current customers are amateurs while 10 years ago they were almost all professionals. These are being sponsored nowadays. In both categories however, opinionated fellows occur. Zieleman sighs. 'Many people nowadays have read some little book or another. They arrive here, booklet or ad in hand, to show me how a bike should be made. They sometimes can ask even the shirt from your back! In the old days once in a while I built a frame as the customer wanted it, while I actually didn't support the way it was done. I once finished a frame for a very well known Peugeot rider. It couldn't be done like that, really, but he insisted. He returned after one month and said: 'Ko, that bike won't run. Can't you take it back? Well, I didn't of course, I told him to just keep it.'

Being a craftsman one tends to speak from the heart when giving advice. I regretted that once. A few years back, an 8 year old boy came here with his parents. His father told me that his son had always played soccer, but now wanted to become a bike racer. The most expensive stuff wasn't good enough for him. So I asked him, is this wise? What should you give him when he will turn 16, an aeroplane perhaps? After that, I never saw these people again...

It can be difficult to make clear to some what a real bike is. Most think that anything with racing handlebars is a proper racing bike.' Laughing contently: 'these bikes are also my hobby, really. They are always on my mind. I went on a real holiday for the first time last year. It wasn't very enjoyable...'