

The Force Who Rides

If There's a Renaissance Man in Cycling It's Jobst Brandt, Who Can Tell You All About Wheels, Can Ride You into the Ground, Yet Still Has Time for Alpine Flowers and Philosophy

By Laurence Malone

One must resist the temptation to call Jobst Brandt a “bicycling guru” or even a coach. He would certainly disagree with any such references. Yet the 45-year-old mechanical engineer from Palo Alto, California, has for years been the inspiration and force behind many of the cycling activities in and around the San Francisco Bay Area. They call his celebrated 100-mile Sunday jaunts “Jobst rides,” and they usually end with a trail of weary riders, all struggling to hold the wheel of the six-foot, six-inch [6’ 5”] Brandt, churning in some oversized gear.

One look at the man brings to mind a bird of prey. He deftly handles his custom 27-inch Tom Ritchey bicycle; few seasoned USCF racers can keep up with him on any challenging descent. Originally involved with motorcycles, he has been riding since the late 50s, when, as he puts it, anyone on a two-wheeled machine was something of an “outlaw.” He humorously charts the development of cycling over the past two decades: “There we were back then,” he says, “woolly pants, clicky shoes, long hair, you know – targets. Then the hippies came along and suddenly it was ‘do your own thing,’ and we were in. They said ‘right on’ when they saw us on bikes.” Brandt’s irony spares no targets, not even himself.

Beyond Radical Chic

Brandt’s multifaceted involvement with bicycling goes far beyond the superficial demands of radical chic. Besides being the acknowledged leader of group rides in his area and an informal coach of developing riders, he helped start the famous Mt. Hamilton Hillclimb race, put on by Pedali Alpini, a local club. He is currently applying his vast technical knowledge to a book on bicycle wheels and wheelbuilding soon due for publication. Some recall his early warnings of the inherent weaknesses of six-speed wheels and the added dangers of axle breakage.



Jobst Brandt climbs Gavia Pass, Italy, in the late 1970s. This photo inspired a poster series sold by Palo Alto Bicycles. Sadly, the transparency of this photo was lost.

His book will cover all phases and aspects of bicycle wheels, with computerized data on relative strengths of rims, spokes and spoking patterns. He compiles a structural analysis showing how the wheel deflects under torque, taking into account the elasticity of such things as aluminum rims and steel spokes. "I don't want the book to be tied to the 'State of the Art' 1975 or 1978," he says. "It's completely general and won't be changed by the advent of titanium rims or anything like that. Pure

information.” Brandt, who formerly worked for Porsche in Stuttgart, has also developed a sophisticated, well-machined two-way tire pump; only a few exist at the present time.

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With stories of Brandt’s phenomenal endurance, one wonders what has kept him from testing it in racing. He gave racing a shot in the late 1950s and tells an amusing story of his first race, on an old three-speed. He and future Olympian Jack Hartman broke away from the field, but Hartman soon flatted, and Brandt, who knew nothing of drafting technique and pack mentality, allowed Hartman to talk him out of continuing on alone. “It turned out there was no pack left to speak of. Everyone had blown up,” Brandt says. “So I waited for nothing.” What clearly emerges from Brandt’s view of racing is a distaste for the craft and guile of competition. Pure cycling alone holds enough fascination for him. “I get a euphoria out of cycling a lot of people probably don’t. Besides,” he says, echoing the self-deprecating assumption of so many riders, “I can’t sprint.”

An Alpine Superman

Brandt’s vivid, almost passionate accounts of dirt road rides high in the Swiss Alps (he knows scores of obscure routes) leave little doubt as to the true nature of his involvement. He has taken his bike over snowfields and mountain meadows, and has the slides to prove it. Jobst shuns any suggestion that his vast geographic knowledge could be put to use leading bicycle tours in these mountain realms. He cites problems of liability, but one suspects such an individualist would be ill-suited to consistently bring up the rear of any group excursions. His own mental toughness allows for little weakness in himself and in others; he is almost Nietzschean in this regard.

Yet he is known to encourage novices who turn out for the Sunday rides. He objects to the secrecy and hocus-pocus that surrounds much of racing – the unwillingness to share ideas of riding style and technique. He has little patience, too, with those who “hold back” on large group rides, as if it were a race. When Brandt feels strong, he goes to the front and tows the others for miles. He feels no need to mask his moments of strength, or his moments of weakness for that matter. But he tries to keep the group together; everyone waits at the top of the climbs for the stragglers. “It’s what I would have liked to have seen when I started cycling,” he says, aware of the need for demystifying the cycling process for maintaining its availability to everyone.

It was on the “Jobst rides” that such notables as former Junior World Team members Dave Perry, Keith Vierra, Steve Lundgren, and Tom Ritchey honed their skills. It was a different ride every Sunday; Jobst knows virtually every road, paved and unpaved, in the region.

What about co-existence with motorists? Brandt does not seem especially militant, though he has, as he puts it gently, “done some things (in retaliation to over-aggressive motorists) that I thought necessary. But generally, I’m very disarming...you know, a wave, a smile. We try to do that on most of the rides,

unless we're really hassled or attacked." Riding in different countries presents different challenges. "When I was in Europe in the late 50s, a lot of drivers had gotten their first car, and were behaving like teens. Middle-aged teens, though, with all the self-righteousness and sureness of the 50-year-olds they were." It is a tribute to Brandt that he has fared so well over the past 25 years in the perilous survival game of bicycling.

Brandt is fortunate to live in a university town, sensitive to the needs of bicyclists, especially in terms of planning and traffic engineering. The coast range, with its tiny backroads winding through sage and redwoods, artichoke fields and apple orchards, lie within easy striking distance of Brandt's home. His daily 20-mile commute to work through the technological heartland of California known as Silicon Valley is not nearly so pleasant; he often takes detours around the patchwork of shopping centers and gas stations that lie between the Hewlett-Packard plant where he works and his home.

Darwin in the Morning

It has been remarked that in California you are what you drive. It has been more broadly understood that anything but motorized transport is just not "realistic." How do Brandt's co-workers and acquaintances relate to this modern aberrance within their midst, this towering eagle of a man who spurns more conventional modes of transport for two-wheeled vulnerability? "For the most part," Brandt says, "they don't even understand, and I don't bother explaining. How can you explain it? How can the experience of crossing a pass in the Alps by bicycle, all those wildflowers and snowbanks, that air..." Brandt must be forgiven for his conversational quantum leap here. "How can that be explained to anyone?" His enthusiasm is no less contained than his mobility. He is not one to proselytize; the actions of his Alpha speak louder than words. Imminent gas crises, warnings of the New Austerity, are no threat to him.

In an age when rugged individualism is fast giving way to indulged conformity, Jobst seems the last of a breed. Rather than drive to the stadium track for a jogging session, his recreation and exercise is neatly integrated through the everyday function of commuting, an atypical blend of work and leisure. Come the weekend, however, there's a sterner survival test, 8 AM Sunday morning, when the exhalation of cyclists (see covey of quail, pride of lions) rolls out of town for the 100-mile Jobst Ride. Escapist? Perhaps. Primitive? Ask the tall fellow out there in front of the pack what he thinks of Darwin. I'm curious myself.



Laurence Malone, six-time U.S. Cyclocross champion, takes on a barrier at a Santa Cruz race held in December 1985 (he finished third). This well-crafted article appeared in *Bicycling* magazine, May 1980. (Ray Hosler photo)