The History of the Bicycle

Origins, Inventions, and Development to Present Day

The history of the bicycle began in 1817. It was created by Baron Karl Von Drais of Germany and was called the "running machine," or in German, the Laufmaschine. A year later, it was patented. An improved version, made of wood and featuring a movable front wheel, was developed by Denis Johnson from London. However, both designs lacked pedals, so the "rider" had to propel the bicycle with their feet, similar to how children use balance bikes. Over the following years, the designs underwent significant changes, adding pedals, additional wheels, cranks, and so on, but despite the initial excitement, interest in velocipedes waned.

A significant breakthrough came with Pierre Michaux's design. The bicycle designed in the second half of the 19th century featured rotating cranks and pedals on the front wheel. Everyone dreamed of having such a bicycle, and for a while, the trend returned. However, it was uncomfortable and not very maneuverable. The steel frame and wheels did not provide good shock absorption despite the use of a spring saddle. The bicycle weighed just under 50kg, making it difficult to carry. Significant improvements that greatly improved the riding experience included rubber tires and ball-bearing pedals.

The Huge Front Wheel, or the Popular Bicycle

At the end of the 19th century, bicycles, or two-wheeled bikes, were very popular in the USA and Great Britain. The front wheel was monstrously large, while the rear wheel was very small. This type of bicycle was difficult to handle, and the high position posed a significant risk of falling and head injuries. It was mainly suitable for smooth, high-quality roads, which were rare at that time.

Despite the flawed idea of increasing the wheel diameter to the limit, bicycles featured many modern and practical solutions such as reinforced spokes, ball bearings, and more advanced rubber compounds in the tires.



China – Birth of a Bicycle Power

The first half of the 20th century was a tumultuous period in the history of Europe and the world. Two world wars, the Cold War, and economic crises profoundly affected people's lives worldwide. With technological progress and the development of cars, bicycles in Europe and the USA fell out of favor. The situation was different in China, where they were initially not looked upon favorably, and their precursor – Bin Chun – was mocked. In the 1920s, there was a bicycle boom, and the Communist Party began to strongly promote this means of transportation. To this day, China remains the world's largest producer and exporter of bicycles. Despite the significant increase in interest in motorization, bicycles are still the most popular means of transport in the Middle Kingdom.

The First Gear Shift in a Bicycle

In 1900, the Fichtel & Sachs company introduced the first freewheel hub, still used today and known as the torpedo. Two years later, the duo of Henry Sturmey and James Archer created the first gear shift that allowed changing gears while riding. Since then, the bicycle has evolved significantly, but the fundamental principles such as equal-sized wheels, a rear derailleur, and the riding position have remained largely unchanged. A front derailleur was added, shock absorbers were introduced, materials used for frame and components changed, and over time, specialization for specific disciplines became more pronounced, leading to the creation of road bikes, time trial bikes, touring bikes, folding bikes, city bikes, mountain bikes, and downhill bikes.



History of Mountain Biking

The history of mountain biking is relatively young. Gary Fisher is considered the inventor of the first mountain bike, introducing innovations such as thumb shifters, a derailleur allowing climbing hills, and an adjustable handlebar stem. Another improvement was changing the geometry of the legendary Schwinn Excelsior frame and using aluminum rims to significantly reduce the bike's weight. In 1982, Shimano and SunTour companies introduced the first complete sets of equipment containing: crankset, brakes, hubs, chain, and cassette.