

Feel Me,

Veteran mechanic

Ken Bukowski can't see the bikes
he works on,

Hear Me,

but he
knows what they're trying
to tell him.

Fix Me

By Stephen Krcmar
Photographed by John Myers



Bukowski, 55, has been blind his entire wrenching career.

KEN BUKOWSKI'S CAREER AS A wrench almost ended before it began, when he missed his first shift at Shickluna Bikes and Darts, in Buffalo, New York. A bundle of nerves, he sat on his couch and listened to the phone ring as his boss-to-be left message after message, which were soon followed by calls from a counselor at the state Commission for the Blind. Bukowski's excuse had little to do with first-day jitters. It was the snowy commute that was stressing him out. A self-described "horrible cane traveler" who'd lost his sight almost four years earlier when he was accidentally shot, he was nervous about the route, which included a barely shoveled path.

After coming clean to his boss, Bukowski was invited back to learn the basics of bike maintenance. Since that day in 1981, he's taught a steady stream of new mechanics, whom he calls "rodents," and conducted repair clinics for countless customers. He's a small part of the history of a shop that opened in 1899, where burning bike tires once kept the store warm during winter. Here are some of the lessons he's learned over the past 28 years.

JRA puncture) and shows it to mother and child before admonishing the lad: "Someone was riding on those pegs or doing something crazy, and don't tell me different." The kid usually comes clean, proving one of Bukowski's commandments: "You can lie to your mother; you cannot lie to the bike guy."

When you're fixing a flat, make sure the rim tape is intact and all the spoke nipples are covered before replacing the tube. Inflate it slightly and line up the valve by the tire's label so you have a reference point for your next flat. To reduce the risk of pinching the tube, put the tire bead back on the wheel without tools, and make sure the bead is seated around the rim before slowly inflating the tire.

ADJUST THE HUBS If there's side-to-side play in your wheel, use a cone wrench to tighten the cones, leaving just a smidgen of play when you spin the axle, says Bukowski. The compression of the quick-release skewer will eliminate that lateral movement when you secure it. If it's buttery smooth before being clamped down, it will be a little tight when it's in place, which can lead to premature wear.

TWO WAYS TO STAY TRUE Bukowski comes from an era of "step truing" to fix bent rims on the fly. (Roadies and sensitive tech weenies may want to skip to the next paragraph.) Mountain bik-

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TRIAGE AND THE TUNE-UP Bukowski starts each day by filling his back pocket with the four tools he uses most: Phillips screwdriver, 6-inch adjustable wrench, 9mm wrench and 8/10mm combo. After almost three decades on the job, he can distinguish the sizes by feel, and he knows the location of every tool in his station. He suggests that home mechanics also stay organized and be wary of loaning tools, something he does only with certain coworkers. "I can't function when I'm missing a tool," he says.

When his work area is ready, Bukowski begins each fix by listening to a coworker read the repair tag and listening to the bike while he spins the wheels and crankset, and turns the handlebar. Consistent, rhythmic sounds mean one of two things: Either the rodents are listening to hip-hop, or there's a problem with a component.

One issue sound won't help with is a loose headset, which can be difficult to diagnose if your bike has a suspension fork. If that's the case, Bukowski suggests grabbing the front brake lever with one hand and slowly rocking the bike back and forth while the other hand is on the head tube. If the headset is loose, you'll feel it.

For full tune-ups, he recommends working in a logical progression, from the back of the bike to the front, so you can remember where you were when you return to a repair after an interruption.

FIX A FLAT Bukowski often hears "just-riding-along" stories from irate mothers who come in with a son in tow. "My kid keeps getting flats in the back tire," they complain. "He tells me that he's not jumping over curbs." Bukowski pulls out the tube, identifies the problem (almost always a compression flat—a sure sign of anything but a

ers: Read on to learn about the step-true two-step, which consists of identifying the problem area, supporting the nonbent sections with a few logs and making sure the axle is touching the ground. Then grab a buddy. His job is to stand on the wheel above the blocks of wood so that when you apply pressure to the bent area with your foot, the wheel will stay put. Use minimal force even if you have to repeat the exercise a few times, because if you apply too much weight, you'll destroy the wheel and have to walk out of the woods—and endure the jeers of your buddy. This imprecise method can come in especially handy on bikes with disc brakes because you won't have to worry about the rim rubbing against brake pads.

For those who prefer to tackle the task in the workshop, "truing a wheel is a matter of feel and sound," Bukowski says. He'll sometimes use the brakes as an ersatz truing stand and his thumbs as the adjustable guide. He starts by spinning the wheel and listening for the biggest problem area. Small issues make a skipping sound, while large ones make more of a chirp. If the latter exists, he addresses it first before going on to the rest of the wheel, starting at the valve. If the wheel hits the guide on the right side, for example, he tightens neighboring spokes on left side—the ones that go to the left hub flange. When he gets back to the valve, he reverses direction, making finer adjustments. Bukowski tells new mechanics to be careful when truing wheels, rotating each spoke only one-eighth of a turn at a time. He recommends loosening spokes on the problem side before tightening on the opposite side, to avoid breaking a spoke. He jokes that all amateur mechanics should be given free spoke wrenches—to keep bike shops busy fixing their mistakes.

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SMOOTH YOUR SHIFTING Listening goes a long way when it comes to diagnosing shifting problems. When Bukowski hears customers getting all *Car Talk*, mimicking the “click-click-clickety” they hear, he thinks of two possible culprits—a stiff link or a worn-out cog. The former is identified by consistency: With spinning cranks, the sound arrives at predictable intervals. Remedy the problem with a little lube and by working the link back and forth. If the sound persists, it could be a worn-out cog, especially if the customer used the phrase “favorite gear.”

To diagnose other shifting problems, Bukowski suggests spinning the crank to get the wheel in motion and trying to move the shifter lever—if it’s reluctant to budge, it may be worn out. If it moves freely, check cable tension. A chain that doesn’t drop to higher gears is a sign that the cable isn’t moving smoothly through the housing and that you need some lube—or a new cable and housing.

If the cable is moving properly, adjust the limit screws before fine-tuning the cable tension. If that doesn’t do the trick, check the alignment of the hanger and rear derailleur—they should both be perpendicular with the ground. You may be able to do this with the naked eye: Make sure the pulleys are parallel with the gear you’re in. Bukowski uses an alignment tool to check the derailleur. “It can be ever so slightly off and that will make it shift poorly,” he says.

STOP SQUEALING BRAKES “You can never get some brakes to shut up,” says Bukowski. The first thing to try: Toe the brakes in, so that the front of the brake pad hits the wheel first. If that doesn’t stop the squeal, Bukowski suggests filing the brake pad to remove the glaze that comes with use, cleaning the rim, and finally, trying a different compound of pad. Bukowski favors Shimano’s replacement pads for its brakes; on mountain bikes, he’ll use Jaguar, Eagle Claw or Kool Stop. He warns that just because your buddy swears by a brand doesn’t mean it’s for you, because some rim and pad combinations don’t work well together. Most brake pads have vertical grooves; if they’ve disappeared, replace the pad immediately. A worn-out pad scrubs stopping power and could damage the rim.

When changing linear-pull brakes, Bukowski says to pay attention to the order the pad washers go on. Some are convex and others are concave. Adjust the pad

so it’s parallel with the rim before toeing it in. You may have to release some cable tension because the new pad has, well, more padding.

For caliper brakes, remove the wheel, open the caliper, remove the set screw from the pad carrier, slide in the fresh pad, replace the set screw, reinstall the wheel and adjust the cable tension.

And if you’re unfortunate enough to be working on a cheap-o, such as a neighbor’s department-store bike, Bukowski facetiously suggests toeing the brake pads out. This won’t silence the stoppers, but, he jokes, it “will probably hush the neighbor.” 

Stephen Krzmar is a former bike messenger, shop owner and mechanic.

These days, all he hears his bikes say is, “Take me to a professional.”