



RCN ROAD TEST: THE EASY RACER GOLD RUSH REPLICA

by Bob Bryant
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A Magic Bike

I've been testing various Easy Racers bikes for over ten years—many test bikes, all models and many variations. In all these years I've had a few unanswered questions about the Gold Rush Replica. What makes this bike so great...so fast...so smooth? And what makes it different than the nearly seemingly identical Tour Easy (steel frame)? After ten years of asking these same questions, Gardner finally leveled with me and said, "Well, you know Bob, sometimes things just work. You can't find scientific theory to back it up." It shouldn't be that much faster, but it is, and it shouldn't be that much better—but it is. We came to the determination that the Gold Rush Replica is a magic bike.

Magic or not, there are some immediately noticeable differences between the steel Tour Easy and the aluminum Gold Rush Replica.

1. **Weight:** The Gold Rush Replica is not just a lighter Tour Easy. Yes, it does weigh 3 or so pounds less than a Tour Easy SS/EX.

2. **Stiffness:** The aluminum frame is stiffer at the bottom bracket, but flexes more vertically offering a smoother, livelier ride and taking the edge off of the harsh road bumps and imperfections.

Most aluminum frames feel very stiff, and dead, and they beat the rider up badly. Gardner Martin's careful design mix of frame tube diameters on the Gold Rush offers a unique blend of optimum power transmission and smooth ride.

3. **Performance:** The Gold Rush Replica is faster than a steel framed Tour Easy.

What Legends Are Made Of

The Gold Rush Replica is the street version of the legendary race machine. The Easy Racers Racing Team has been dominating HPV races since 1979. A fully faired Gold Rush streamliner ("Old Gold") was piloted to 65.48 mph by Fast Freddy Markham in 1986—and the bike now rests in the Smithsonian.

This past summer, the Gold Rush team dominated the field at the HPRA event at the Indianapolis

Motor Speedway. The Gold Rush won 1st and 2nd place overall, and won in the 200 meter top speed, Road Race, and Velodrome events. Gardner Martin is currently working on a new race bike to go after a high altitude record as well as the DeciMach in 1999. Few other recumbent manufacturers have comparable race histories, and no other are more respected in both the sport of HPV racing and commercial manufacture of recumbent bicycles.

Systems

The GRR frame are now made in-house in the Easy Racers Freedom, California shop. GRR frames are TIG welded, heat treated 6061-T6 aluminum. The frames are then powdercoat painted and hand built-up at Easy Racers. The Tour Easy and GRR forks are Easy Racers designed and custom built overseas by Spinner. There are two forks, one for the dual pivot brake and the other for cantilevers.

The GRR frame is among the finest in design and execution of recumbent bicycle frames available today. The durability and reputation of this bike are beyond reproach. The aluminum GRR frame fabrication will come in house for 1999.

Drivetrain

Our GRR test bike was a '98 model. Ultegra, 105, wheels, XTR rear derailleur, SRAM "Plasma" 8-speed Grip Shifts, and a Shimano Ultegra splined bottom bracket, hubs, road triple crankset and front derailleur were all installed. The outcome is dramatic. The drivetrain is quieter (go figure...). The indexed shifting is very dependable—and shifting under load (hill climbing) has never been better on any RCN test bike/recumbent. The Grip Shift gear-display reads backwards and the gear range is exactly opposite of other drivetrains (Nexave is the same way). With the derailleur pulling in from the large cog, the GRR shifts fast and perfect. The only missed gears have been due to me forgetting which way to twist. I've always been a big fan of Easy Racers drivetrains, as the spring loaded midship mounted chain idler takes in so much slack that the bike will accept the outrageously wide gear ranges that we as performance recumbent enthusiasts require (high highs and low lows). This alone sets Easy Racers apart from other manufacturers.

Most recreational riders will find the Gold Rush gearing near perfect in the low end, perfect in the high end, but too high in the mid-range. If you ride a lot of hills, or rollers, this will affect your performance. My suggestion is to ride the bike stock for a few months, and then plan on customizing the gearing more to your personal riding style. Hammerheads will need a higher high, tourists will need a lower mid-range and possibly lower low.

Wheels

Beauty, performance and ultimate simplicity—that is why the Shimano 105 SC brakes are my personal favorites for skinny tire bikes. Nothing even comes close to the 105's in refinement, simplicity and finesse. They last nearly forever, anyone can adjust them and they stop fast. The only downside is that the 105 brakes do not work well with fat tires. A 32mm is the limit on the rear and a 451 mm 20" x 1-3/8" Primo Comet on the front. A fender won't work with this tire, though it's my favorite. Rear brake swaps are not simple on this bike. It is either a one-bolt caliper brake or some kind of custom mount.

Easy Racer wheels have always been at the upper end of the quality spectrum—and superior to many stock recumbents. This GRR test bike is no exception. They are built up hand built in house of WheelSmith stainless steel spokes, Shimano Ultegra hubs and Sun aero rims. The wheels were touched up just once in our six month test. The spokes on the radially laced 451mm front wheel did come loose, but the wheel never came out of true. Over the years, our Easy Racer wheels have earned the reputation as the best we've ever tested. Even the stock skinny tires and aero section rims offer a smooth and comfortable ride, while offering exceptional performance.

Wheel Size

Zach Kaplan (Zach Kaplan Cycles) makes some interesting changes to the Gold Rush Replica's

that he sells. He uses a 559mm (26") drive wheel, a 406mm 20" front wheel, Maguras or V-Brakes and sometimes Rans "T" handlebars. This wheel combo allows easier fender mounting and a wider tire selection (fat tire rant...) and lowers the bike somewhat. Zach's system requires custom brake mounts (call Zach Kaplan Cycles for updates and availability) and larger chainrings to accomplish the equivalent stock gearing (559mm 26" requires a 55-tooth chainring to achieve the same high gear possible with the stock 52-tooth with a 700c).

I've tried the 559/406 combo on our test GRR and prefer the stock 700c/451 set up for performance riding, though for touring (rough roads, winter, etc.), I would opt for the 559/406 if it were available. Shortly after the original printing of this article, I had my second catastrophic blow out/flat tire on the GRR test bike. The first was during the spring of 1998 on an IRC Roadlite EX which exploded with no warning on a busy state highway. This most recent experience was with the 700c x 28 rear tire on a recent winter ride. There needs to be a fat tire option for this bike—preferably a 559mm 26" wheel 20" 406mm front with adequate clearance for big fat tires and fat fenders to cover them.

Seats

During the past six months, I have had the Cobra and two Cool Backs and a Rans seat on my GRR test bike. Here is a bit more about Easy Racer seats:

Cool Back—After years of comfort criticisms, Easy Racers now offers by far the best seat ever placed on an Easy Racer—the new Cool Back. It starts with a polished T-304 stainless steel back with nylon mesh now laced on with a kevlar cord (instead of zip ties) and the seat base is newly widened and recontoured with more foam added (maybe too much foam for skinny riders). This seat works best for medium-large and XL sized riders. It allows you to slide back on the base for optimum positioning over the base and the seat back is totally breathable. Most riders can push equally well into the Cool Back, though athletic body types may still opt for the Cobra.

The quality of Easy Racers seats is excellent. The Cobra shell and Cool Back base are layered fiberglass/kevlar/carbon fiber. The foam is three layers, glued and contoured with the top layer being a Swiss Air-Rex. The seat foam quality is far superior to Vision and Rans. The only drawback is that tiny twin hose-clamps connect the seat back to the base. Owners should never need to tighten or remove these clamps so this is an acceptable use, however, I am against the use of hose-clamps on expensive commercially built bicycles, recumbent or otherwise.

Cobra—This is the latest version of the original Easy Racer seat. It utilizes a composite shell with lycra covered foam. The seat base has been updated and is now the same as the Cool Back. This seat works best for light(er) athletic performance riders who want to push hard with their backs into the seat back. The new Cobra now shares the Cool Back's seat base. The Cobra is far more comfortable than the original naugahyde covered seats.

Easy Racers is now in their 3rd generation Cool Back seat (mesh back) and it is the best seat that has ever been put on the Easy Racer, though after testing the Rans Stratus—I found myself wanting even more refinement. The Rans seat back and base are still better—though the Rans seat does not work as well on the Easy Racer due to the mounting method and height.

Ergonomics

Designing a seat for a low BB (bottom bracket) recumbent is difficult. The primary reason for this has to do with leg/thigh clearance over the forward edges of the seat base when pedaling in a downward angle (SWB and higher BB Compacts and LWB don't have this problem). The question of optimum recumbent seat comfort can be a no-brainer, or a challenging debate. For upright cyclists, any recumbent seat is light years better than a ti-railed wedge. For serious recumbent enthusiasts, who test ride different bikes and seats, the experiences and answer will vary. What I have found is that it may not have as much to do with the seat design as it does the rider position. Easy Racers have a relatively upright seat back and a low-BB/pedal position. Reclining the

seat back too far is difficult—as it places the rider too far away from the controls. The bike begs for this upright position. This is very effective performance-wise (the Gold Rush Race bikes actually have a lean forward position). The downside is that it places more weight on your tail-end and can lead to premature recumbent-butt. Riders who believe that optimum comfort comes with a more reclined (and adjustable) seat angle, may not find recumbent comfort nirvana on the Easy Racer.

This is not a universal problem. In fact, in our local rider group I am the only one who brings this up. Kent Peterson and Tony Licuanan have ridden double centuries on old style Cobra seats. Wayne Boone and Jim Giles crossed the USA on old style Cobras. I haven't heard Zach Kaplan or Ron Bobb complain either.

The most recent Cool Back offers by far the best comfort of any Easy Racer seat we have ever tested. It doesn't get much better than this. This is an optimum seat design for the Easy Racer ergonomics built with exceptional quality.

The Ride

The ride of the Gold Rush is nothing short of spectacular. I sometimes look behind me to see if somebody is pushing me—or if I have a tailwind or something. Yes, it is that fast—the center of the 'bent universe where all points connect and all is good. The trademark Easy Racer handling has yet to be duplicated—though many have tried. The trick is in the steering geometry, handling and handlebar design. It isn't a neutral handling bike. The GRR has a refined bit of chopper-like wheel flop that is ever so dialed in—though it's not really tiller-like in the negative sense of the word. The GRR travels like it is on rails. It is as stable at 50 mph as some SWB models are at half that speed. The acceleration is quick and smooth. Maintaining speed is effortless as the GRR rides fast on flats, over rollers easier than most 'bents, and even faster down hills. Weight distribution is better than on just about any LWB.

You don't know how many times I've heard people say that they didn't believe me—until they finally experienced it for themselves. The handling of this bike is perfect.

Options & Accessories

A handlebar bag is handy, and fits in front of the bars and behind the Super Zzipper. Mine is a standard drop-bar touring bag. Rear racks work well, and Easy Racers can carry a heavy load if they need to. The dual water-bottle cages on the bar risers work well—though they tend to drip on hot sunny days (especially if you freeze your bottles). For long rides, I place my hydration system in place of the handlebar bag. The very large new design BikeE seat bag can be used on the GRR Cool Back seat, providing you have a rear fender. This seat bag is by far my favorite seat bag available today and fits many different recumbents. Hopefully, somebody will come out with an Easy Racers seat bag. If you opt for a kickstand, your bike will eventually fall over—and dent your fairing. I finally took mine off after several years.

Most GRR's come in black (Black Gold). Some owners don't like the fact that they look like a black Tour Easy. In the old days, they were polished natural aluminum. Easy Racers will still do this on request and there is a charge. A limited number of white Gold Rush frames are available as well. These also have clearcoat over the powdercoat paint. Our preference is the white or the optional natural polished aluminum.

Rants

Easy Racers builds quite possibly the finest fenders known to man. They are handmade of kevlar in the Easy Racers shop in Watsonville, California. The fenders are available in 406 and 451mm 20" front sizes only, though Gardner is contemplating a 700c size. They should mount to any 'bent 20" wheel.

In the past, a rear fender was not completely necessary on the Tour Easy or GRR (Cobra seat and a

mountain bike style rack). With the new mesh “Cool Back” seat, the need for a rear fender and a fender set has never been greater. For such a versatile bike Easy Racer’s biggest failure is outfitting it for wet weather. The bike is missing a rear fender lower mount (at the front of the wheel). I use a series of zip-ties to anchor and center the lower forward section of the fender to the frame (in between the stays), though this is barely acceptable.

Since the 451mm Primo Comet won’t fit under the fender, I had to revert back to the narrower and less sure footed IRC Roadlite. This change made me realize how nice fat tires would be for rainy season riding. With the GRR’s 105 dual pivot brakes, a rear fender is a tight fit. 32mm is about the maximum width for the rear tire.

Gardner Martin & Company

You won’t find a better recumbent manufacturer, or better service. In fact, it’s tough to find anything to complain about. Okay, maybe the long wait to get one. Well, the warranty issue is another, so we called and checked. It is a lifetime warranty on the frame, 5 years on the fork and 1 year on the seat and cover (web site incorrect). Easy Racers is so confident that you’ll love your bike, they offer a 30 day buy-back program that if you don’t like it, you can return it (minus a 10% restocking fee).

Verdict

Easy Racers are durable, dependable and built to last. Long time RCN reader Dave Burgess of Dolan, Alabama has owned many recumbents and his GRR is his favorite. The bike has an amazing 46,000 miles on it, 39,000 of which he rode (he’s the 3rd owner). Dave recently rode from Miami to Maine with no problems and says his newly polished GRR looks like new! Easy Racers ride and wear well.

The Gold Rush Replica is a versatile recumbent. It is very fast, yet nearly anyone can effortlessly ride it. It makes mediocre riders into fast riders. The bike makes all of its riders look good and the Harley-esque looks are beyond cool. The design is as bulletproof as a recumbent can be. No other recumbent is as refined as an Easy Racer LWB.

The GRR is not exactly a lightweight, though they are a few pounds lighter than their steel counterpart the Tour Easy. From the factory, a small GRR with no options can be as light as under 26 pounds. Our large size with pedals, water bottle cages and a Super Zzipper can weight 30.6 pounds. The Cobra seat is lighter by up to a 1/2 pound, polished GRR’s are lighter and seat weights vary—though Gardner is planning to keep a closer eye on this.

We do have some nitpicks about the GRR. The powdercoat finish is fine, though lackluster for a bike of this level—the GRR deserves a custom paint job or have the aluminum polished natural (optional). We’d also like to see higher quality decals under the paint or clearcoat.

We found a few parts on the GRR that we didn’t care for. Cheapie Tektro levers (similar to that found on bikes costing 1/3 as much) are still outfitted on the GRR. You are almost forced to use them since the fairing mounts are integra (you can get around this by using a Super Zzipper from Zzip Designs with T-bracket mounts). I’m not too keen on the Shimano spline bottom bracket as it is new and different. I’ve never had a problem with the old style bottom brackets that I have tools for.

As recumbents go mainstream and values get better, Easy Racers will need to offer more value in the GRR. Aluminum frames are really no longer commanding a premium— as we’ve seen with Sun’s EZ Sport/Limited. However, there’s no doubting the fact that this is a special bike. They hold their value, owners love them and there has been a waiting list since about 1992. My experiences with the GRR are consistently among the most pleasing road tests that I have—maybe there is something to the magic of the GRR.

Contact

Easy Racers Inc.
Tel. 831-722-9797
www.easyracers.com

Sneak Peak: TiRush

Just before press time, I received a call from Gardner Martin alerting me that I needed to be at the People Movers Rock & Roll Recumbent Rally to ride the new Titanium Gold Rush to the beach. Steve Delaire is building the new TiRush frames for Easy Racers. Steve finished frame #001 a few days before the People Movers event. The bike was my size—a large. With two days notice, I drove 18 hours to LA for the event. The People Movers Rally is the west coast premier ‘bent event—and I have become a regular.

I rolled into town during a rain storm Friday, mid-morning. On Friday evening—the Easy Racers crew roll into Orange, California. We are all sitting around shooting the breeze when out rolled quite possibly one of the most beautiful recumbent bicycles I’ve ever seen—a natural polished Titanium Easy Racer Gold Rush Replica—TiRush! The unpainted Titanium finish is background to new (and predominant) Easy Racer Ti-graphics that prominently announce that the TiRush has arrived.

I was excited to be the first pilot of #001. I threw on my pedals, checked the air pressure of the tires, and checked the X-seam (perfectly adjusted already). We installed the fairing—and then stared at the bike in unison while Gardner gave us a lesson in Titanium bike building. Titanium is rare, expensive, very strong and resilient. It has a memory and bounces back. It is also a lighter material, so the TiRush is immediately 1/2 pound lighter than its aluminum stablemate. The difficult build process and costly Ti-tubes will make this an expensive machine—\$5,000. Gardner Martin will be using a custom Ti stem, and lighter handlebars—which should make the bike a full pound lighter.

Titanium is lighter than steel or aluminum (when sized for bike frames). Ti’s strength and rigidity are between that of steel and aluminum and corrosion resistance is superior to both. Ti is scratch resistant and cannot be marred like aluminum (which is very soft). Ti actually dulls files and holesaws used in fabrication. They are often good for only one cut. Titanium is considered the premier building material in the bicycle world. The only negative seems to be the cost of raw materials and difficulty of fabrication.

The test on TiRush #001 was awesome. This was People Movers’ yearly Recumbent Rally. The crowds were building and the coffee was brewing. Southern California was experiencing some odd weather due to the tail end of a hurricane in the Gulf of Mexico. Blistering hot temperatures and thundershowers the days before brought an unseasonably NW-like overcast day to ride to the beach.

Our group of 100 or so riders headed off to the beach. I’m not in the killer-shape that I was in a year ago, though any Gold Rush—as usual—made me look good. The new TiRush rides much like the aluminum bike with a stiff bottom bracket offering very direct power transmission, but with equal or maybe even more shock absorption in the ride. The TiRush performed every bit as good as our aluminum test bike. Ron Bobb has been testing the TiRush and says it does climb better than his personal GRR—which made him faster.

Do you need a TiRush? If you have to think about it—the answer is probably not. This is the supreme \$5,000 Easy Racer—for the Gold Rush connoisseur and the \$2,000 question (\$2000 more than an aluminum Gold Rush). Expensive, yes, and as good as it gets in the recumbent world.

2003 Update

The Gold Rush and TiRush are the benchmarks of high quality performance recumbent bicycles. The bikes are even more refined today than they were in 1997/1998 when this article was written. The Easy Racer style LWB is the most classic, timeless, user friendly (rideability and performance) recumbent there is. It's also the most popular style in N. America (and probably the world (by overall sales numbers). While lowracer and highracers are the internet and industry buzz, thousands of buyers opt for Easy Racers, Sun EZ's, Strati, and other LWB OSS recumbents. On a personal note, this style of recumbent still works best for me after 16 years of recumbent riding.

Bob, RCN

RCN Info

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