

# Fat bikes gaining traction among Sonoma County cyclists

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At first glance, a fat bike looks a bit like something a cartoon clown oughta ride, its big, bloated tires somehow suggestive of huge floppy shoes on guys with too-tiny hats.

A leading fat bike manufacturer, Surly, even sells a 4-inch-wide wheel rim called the “Clown Shoe.”

But in the decade or so since the Minnesota-based company first brought a fat bike to the mass market, the heavy-set frames with thick, knobby tires have gained serious cred in the cycling world — though fans say they mostly like riding them because they’re so darn fun.

“It’s like being 4 years old and riding your first bicycle,” said Santa Rosa resident Sebastian Brewer, an acknowledged fattie ambassador. “It’s absolutely amazing. It’s so grin-inducing, it’s crazy.”

From the makeshift bikes first assembled in garages and workshops, largely by tinkerer cyclists in the snowy north eager to get out on two wheels in winter, fat bikes have successfully found a niche in the mainstream, especially among mountain bikers like Brewer.

Their wide, low-pressure tires provide for a broad plane of contact with the ground, offering grip, superior traction and shock-absorption while allowing flotation on sand, snow and mud, as well as stability on rutted or rocky terrain, even at very low speeds.

Though still a novelty in a universe populated mainly by slender road bikes and trim, muscular mountain bikes, fat bikes — some now with tires up to 5 inches wide — are reported to be the fastest growing sector of the cycling market. They're available from many brands, at multiple price points, and through everyone from bike shops that cater to the high performance crowd to discount stores like Kmart.

Windsor resident Miguel Suarez, 36, said he knew as soon as he tried one about two years ago that he had fallen "in love."

"I was shopping for a bike ... trying to try all the new things," he said. "Once I came across that fat bike, I knew that's what I wanted."

The earliest fat bikes on the evolutionary timeline are said to have appeared in the late 1980s, the product of necessity and its offspring invention, and the innovative instincts of cyclists who jury-rigged conventional rims and tires so they could ride two- and three abreast across snow, ice and desert, creating a broad footprint that would keep them from sinking.

Early experiments appeared largely in Alaska, on the Iditabike race first launched in 1987, eventually resulting in more refined, one-off products a decade and a half later.

Finally, came the wide tire and wheels that led in 2005 to the release of Surly's Pugsley, the first commercially available fat bike.

Manufacturers have continued pushing the envelope, producing larger wheels, different tire widths and trends, adding full suspension to rigid frames.

Overall, the bikes have only gotten fatter, so the newer models "are like elephantine, obese bikes, in fact," said Sonoma County Bicycle Coalition Executive Director Gary Helfrich.

Helfrich said he rides a 3 1/2-inch wide tire, but says the true fatties "are in that category that you really hope your best friend buys one, so you can borrow it."

Tim Anderson, government affairs manager for the Sonoma County Water Agency, said he saw his first fat bike in Truckee about a year ago but thought maybe 62 was too old to become a trendsetter. A friend convinced him otherwise, and a month ago he bought one to work into his commute between Fountaingrove and his office at the Airport Business Center, north of town.