



interviews

Are ebikes finally close to having their day in the US?

Martes, 20 septiembre 2011

Dan McCue

A team of riders from Optibike, the US-based electric bike manufacturer, successfully defended its title in the "Assault on the Peak Hill Climb" up Pikes Peak, one of the more storied of the Rocky Mountains of Colorado.



All of Optibike's riders summited the mountain, taking 1st through 7th place in the annual competition. The first place Optibike covered the 7,500-plus foot ascent over a 26 mile race in just 1:06:45, besting the team's previous first place finish in the race, which took 1:47:00.

"It was amazing. Totally amazing," said Craig Taber, sales and marketing director for the Boulder, Colo.-based company.

Some 30 million electric or ebikes are expected to be sold worldwide in 2011, according to Electric Bikes Worldwide Reports (EBRW). But of that number, a mere 80,000 to

90,000 are likely to be sold in the US.

Advocates for ebikes, like Taber and EBWR publisher Dr. Frank Jamerson, point out that while scores of countries and several US states have tried to promote their proliferation through laws that designate them bicycles, rather than mopeds or light motorcycles, America's car-centric mindset and car-focused infrastructure development has nevertheless tended to marginalize them.

Instead, much of the excitement over ebikes has been in China, which has been encouraging residents to adopt them by banning models and motor scooters from dense urban environments, and in Europe, where the scale of much of the development is more conducive to bicycling than many US communities.

As a result, some of the best known manufacturers of ebikes are based outside of North American, including Xinri, in China, Merida, in Taiwan, Flyer, in Switzerland, and Storck, in Germany.

Taber said Optibike hopes to change that.

The company was founded in 1997 by Jim Turner, a champion motocross rider, who hoped the electric bicycle would address three growing world problems: climate change caused by man-made pollution and CO2 emissions, unpredictable fuel prices and a growing obesity epidemic in the US that had caused a profound increase in heart disease, diabetes and other weight-related ailments.

Taber, whose background is in marketing, was the first employee Turner hired, and in 2005 Optibike began shipping its first bicycles.

"When I joined Jim, it was just the two of us in his garage, basically wrenching on bikes," Taber said.

Today the operation has grown to 12 full-time and several part-time employees, who not only "wrench on bikes" but also build all of Optibike's motors and batteries.

"Electric bikes are real popular in Europe and in Asia and it's been that way for awhile, but when we started the company, there really wasn't a big electric bike following in the US, and we've dedicated ourselves to changing that," Taber said.

"From our perspective, it's an amazing way to get around, gets an energy equivalent of 2,000 miles per gallon, and uses far less resources to build than a car," he continued. "The other thing is, it's ridiculously inexpensive to operate. I used 14 cents worth of electricity to go up Pikes Peak."

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The company doesn't disclose annual sales figures, but Taber assured Renewable Energy Magazine that Optibike "sells all the bikes we build", adding "We usually have a waiting list of at least a couple of weeks for those wishing to get one of our custom-built bikes."

Optibike's entry-level model sells for about \$6,000 and from there the prices rise to \$24,000 for a limited edition, gold-plated model. The average sale price for an Optibike is between \$10,000 and \$12,000, Taber said.

What makes the Optibike distinct from a traditional bicycle is what the company calls the "motorized bottom bracket", which is essentially a lithium cobalt battery and an 850 watt, DC motor, which is coupled to a transmission system.

Taber said early on the ebike inspired rebukes from riders of traditional bicycles, who characterized their ebike-riding brethren as "cheaters".

"I've personally found myself in discussions with these people when I'm out on my ebike, and the thing I always say is, 'Listen, I'm not disrespecting you. My only alternative to what this electric bicycle provides me is a car,'" he said.

Taber quickly explained that when he rides to work he does so with a smaller trailer on the back in which he carries his dog, and any exercise gear he might want to use at lunchtime. On the way home, he might also be carrying groceries.

"You just can't do that on a bicycle," Taber said.

"So you know, you do still get these comments from time to time, but I think that situation is changing," he continued. "At first there attitude was, 'You're not like us; you can participate in our events,' but as time has gone on and we've had a lot more conversations with people about the technology and as we've sat on panels and so forth, I think people have started to understand that we are not trying in any way to replace the traditional bicycle."

"Our attitude is, if you're already riding a bike and riding a bicycle to work and so on, awesome," Taber said. "But if you're one of the 99 percent of Americans who is not riding a bike to work, this might be an alternative."

Few have waited as long as Frank Jamerson for the ebike to capture a place in America's popular imagination.

A lifelong engineer and holder of a doctoral degree in Physics from the University of Notre Dame, Jamerson worked on nuclear submarine reactors with the Atomic Power Division of Westinghouse during early 1950s, before embarking on nearly 40 year career in engineering with the General Motors Corporation.

Among the highpoints of his GM career were serving as assistant program manager of the automotive giant's electric vehicle program and serving as head of the Gm Research Lab's Electrochemistry Department, which initiated programs in Lithium-Polymer rechargeable batteries and fuel cells for EV applications.

But it was while at conference in Europe in 1993, the year he retired, that Jamerson first became enamored with the potential of the electric bicycle.

"I was there to deliver my last talk on behalf of GM, the topic of which was batteries and electric vehicles," he remembered. "My wife and come with me, and after I spoke she said, 'Frank, you've got to take a look at these electric bicycles they have outside."

"I had never heard of an electric bike before, but at her prompting, I went outside and rode a few of them, and thought, 'My God, if I could sell these things, and get people to ride electric bikes, they'd get to know about motors and batteries and ultimately, they would buy electric cars."

Jamerson would go so far as to suggest Gm giveaway an electric bike with every electric car it sold in the US states of California and Arizona – the only two markets it planned to market its EV at the time – just to help promote the idea of electricity in transportation.

The idea – and in fact, GM's first go-round with the EV – never got off the ground.

"That was an opportunity missed, I think," Jamerson said. "But in those days, GM's top management was all that enthusiastic about electric cars. They didn't have the vision, and gas was a buck and a quarter back then, so the public at large didn't give a damn."

But by now, Jamerson was transfixed by the electric bicycle and after his retirement, actually began to try to distribute them.

"I tried to hustle them to individual stores and the owners would say, 'Get the hell out of here; we only pedal.' So I guess you could say, I was ahead of the curve."

But he soon would come to know several fellow "travelers," if you will, including Malcolm R. Currie, the former chairman and CEO of Hughes Aircraft and Delco electronics, and Malcolm Bricklin, the serial automotive entrepreneur who successfully introduced several foreign cars to the American marketplace, including the Subaru and the Yugo.

In the early 1990s Bricklin, became increasingly interested in electric vehicles and fuel cell technology and established his own company to market an electric bicycle known as the EV Warrior. The company went bankrupt in 1997, but Bricklin is still involved in fuel cell technologies to this day.

In 1998, Currie established Curries Technologies, a developer, manufacturer and distributor of high performance electric bikes and scooters.



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But there was a brief period when the work of Currie and Bricklin intersected, and during that time they asked Jamerson to write up a white paper on what he was seeing at the bike show conferences he was by then regularly attending.

That report eventually morphed into Electric Bikes Worldwide Reports, which comes out every two years – with a supplement in-between – and is now in its 10th edition.

So what will it take for the ebike to take off in America?

"Ten dollar a gallon gasoline," Jamerson said. "That's the only solution, really."

"In my view, the American public is just too much in love with the car, and the reality is they've had access to cheap gasoline for a very long time," he said. "So one thing we need is higher gas prices, and the other is for more people to start talking about electric bicycles and their attributes."

"Electric bicycle technology has come a long, long way – it's as good as what's in cars. The technology really right up to snuff, and the other thing is, it really does enhance the life of the rider. I mean, let's face it, Americans are getting older and these bikes will allow people to stay active longer because they give them the option of using electricity on hills or at times when they are experiencing a lot of wind resistance, and then going back to pedaling on flat terrain."

Jamerson pointed to recent media reports, including a New York Times report about ebike tourism in the Alps, as showing the technology's potential for expanding the experiences and options available to all ages.

He also spoke of a friend who recently set up an ebike tour of Morocco. For the tour participants carried a solar-powered battery charger in a small trailer carried behind their bikes, and always had one battery charging while the other was in use.

"It really goes to show you how sophisticated the world of ebikes has become," Jamerson said.

Taber shared Jamerson's enthusiasm for the here and now – and the future – of ebikes.

"I think we are in an exciting place," Taber said. "Ebike usages is exploding around the world, and in a sense, the US is kind of the last frontier for the electric bicycle.

"The thing is, I think we're going to get over that last hurdle, and I think it's going to come about as Americans continue to think and talk about energy and energy use and resources," he said. "And the other thing is the ongoing health crisis here in America.

"I think electric bikes hit nicely right into the middle of these things as a solution, and the more they come into use, the more we'll see development of the infrastructure needed to support the use of ebikes and bicycles alike," Taber said. "Momentum is often borne out of necessity. The more people who ride these bikes, the more bike lanes and zone will be established for them, and the more infrastructure there is, the more likely the ebike is to gain acceptance"

Taber said Optibike's constituency already includes a variety of different kinds of riders and personalities.

"We have a certain percentage of our audience that is into renewable – wind farm developers, CEOs of big renewable energy companies, and there's a large group of customers who share some concern about the environment and energy use. But I would say there's also a big contingent of folks for whom that is not even on the radar," he said. "We have a lot of couples who buy these bikes and just want to tool around and have fun."

For additional information:

[Optibike](#)

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[joan](#) yes finally people are really getting into electric bikes- thanks for helping share the word. I found good information about e-bikes at <http://www.chargedelelectricscooters.com>

[Dave](#)
dking@westmont.edu Virtually every comment I read about Optibike contains these two things: Optibike is a fantastic machine; Optibike is too expensive for me in comparison to other options. I agree with these sentiments, and hope Optibike will eventually offer a more reasonably-priced commuter (not merely an awesome e-mountain bike with over-the-top components). I would buy an 850 watt, 26 ah Optibike one if it was under \$4K

[Gary](#)

garyares@cox.net

I'm one of the boomers who's using an eBike to level out the hills, BUT still working hard to get a good workout (I use the motor to keep up with the other riders when I need it). It's my hope that some day I'll be able to afford the best electric bike on the planet - an Optibike. I've tried one in the past, and it is definitely an incredible ride with superb quality. As for others, I'm certain that whoever tries an ebike will at least have a big smile afterwards.

Rynstone

glprospecta@yahoo.com

I love mountain biking and trail riding on my bicycles. Two problems with this taking off big 1. You can buy a lot of gasoline for the kind of money were are talking about 2. The morning & evening commute for most of the population sucks due to traffic and weather. Not too many people are going to commute through the rain & snow and in the dark 6-8 months out of the year. That being said, I wish I could afford one of these bikes for the 4 months I could use it for commutes.

john

Forgot to mention I am also the EV technician at a North Texas Nissan dealership

John

I have been commuting with a china built Schwinn E-bike for almost 3 years. Prompted by gasoline prioces and need to get out and exercise. It is the economy holding me back from a new Opti-Bike right now.

rem



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er



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