

Gerrit Gaastra, creator and consultant:

On Tubeless Trends, E-Bike Concerns, and Long-Term Success

WACHTBERG, Germany – As the fourth generation of the Gaastra family in the industry, Gerrit grew up with bicycles. His great grandfather founded Batavus and his parents started Koga. No wonder Gerrit became involved in bicycles and no surprise that he founded his own company, Bike Basics, to manufacture idworx and Gaastra bikes. Bike Basics also distributes US-made Lynskey titanium frames. Through his GG Concepts consultancy he has close links with Schwalbe tires and the German-based retail buyers organization ZEG, which he helps by building up Bulls brand bikes. Above all he is a communicator who likes to implement great products ideas for his clients or on his own brands. “I am not an engineer but I create cycling products from my international cycling experience and with the passion of somebody who loves to ride his bike as much as he can,” says Gerrit Gaastra.

By Jan-Willem van Schaik

As a consultant for Schwalbe he was responsible for the development and introduction of the balloon tires. “It was a great project,” says Gaastra, about the concept that brought tires to the forefront in bicycle design.

Bike Europe: Regarding bicycle tires, everybody is waiting for the introduction of tubeless for more segments in the near future. When will it finally be launched for city and trekking bikes?

Gerrit Gaastra: I think soon, at least for high-quality bikes, although the advantages of this technology are different for this type of bike. Trekking bikers and commuters rarely have pinch flats, but they hate punctures more than any one else riding a bike, with the exception of the racing crowd, obviously. When riding a commuter bike you’re typically in a hurry and often dressed in anything but cycling specific wardrobe. So, a flat tire causes trouble because you will not arrive in time and after you have managed to fix it, there’s typically more that’s dirty than just your hands. Tubeless technology on trekking and commuter bikes can combine increased protection against punctures - caused by glass and other intruders - by using long lasting sealants with reduced rolling resistance and increased comfort. With conventional tube-type tires you need some kind of protection layer, which typically increases the rolling resistance especially if you lower the tire pressure in order to increase comfort and grip. An effective sealant enables you to use more flexible, faster tire casings, which roll significantly lighter, especially when inflated properly. Which typically means less than what many riders do. By overinflating their tires they give up so much comfort and grip. And the latter is really important especially in the city environment with its changing and often wet surfaces. But the main challenge that comes with the implementation of tubeless tires on trekking bikes is the rate of the gradual air loss. The typical commuter understandably doesn’t want to check his tire pressure before each ride as all road and even most mountain bikers do. Compared to them, commuters and many trekking bikers treat their bike’s tires like most of us treat their car tires. They simply forget about them and only re-inflate

them after noting a significant decrease in air pressure. As soon as the tire industry has found a solution for the loss of pressure, the tubeless city and trekking tires will be on the market. For idworx we have already developed, together with Ryde, the first tubeless-ready rims for trekking bikes: the Darim II and the Darim Disc.

BE: What other technical developments can we expect regarding tires in the coming years. Do you foresee big steps in terms of carcass or compounds?

GG: Definitely, but I can’t say anything about it. As a consultant for Schwalbe I can only tell you that you can expect new products related to new carcasses and compounds at Eurobike 2013.

BE: What is your opinion about the current wheel tire combination? Designers say the existing range from 26 to 29-inch spoke wheels are hopelessly out-dated.

GG: I believe in proven technology and prefer functionality over design. That’s what I learned in the Canadian MTB scene in the eighties and early nineties. I took the concept of proven technology with me to Europe in 1994 and I still see that real bikers prefer functionality over cosmetic design. The conventional spoke wheels are still the lightest, most comfortable and stiffest wheels you can get. So why change it just for the sake of changing the looks? I don’t see the use of it as long as the “modern” wheels offer less performance. Design should never pre-empt function.

BE: Will the bicycle industry ever be able to develop the most efficient tire and wheel combination?

GG: Only a few companies in the industry, like Bontrager, Mavic, and WTB are developing wheels and tires within one company. The industry does have standards, but these do not prevent the reality that assembling tires is often problematic for OEMs. Thanks to my contacts and background I have the possibility to develop both products together, as well to avoid these problems. Currently we are pushing for wider rims to get a better fit for wide tires.

BE: You are not really known as a supporter for e-bikes. Why this opposition against this booming market segment?

GG: As consultant for ZEG I was involved in the development of their e-bike range. I paid a lot of attention to the right geometry, wider tires, and rims; all aimed at creating an e-bike that handles well and is safe to ride at higher speeds. Too many e-bikes on the market are just bikes with the traditional geometry and an electric drive-train system. Many suppliers go for a short-term market approach and they are not really developing this product. As a result there are a lot of technical problems and that is not good for the market. One segment within e-bikes, the E-MTBs have the potential to put inexperienced riders in dangerous situations. They are starting to become popular in Germany and Austria at the moment. I foresee more trail closures due to the increased perceived risk of these suddenly much faster bikers by other trail users, which would be very sad.

BE: How do you look at all those new entries like Pon Holdings. Will these new companies change the market drastically?

GG: If this trend continues it could certainly change the market. It will make it harder for the traditional bicycle dealer to stay independent from the bike companies. Dealers now offering two, three or even more brands from different suppliers will be pressured into offering brands coming from only one bicycle manufacturer. Perhaps these huge manufacturers will begin to develop their own outlet shops similar to the car business.

BE: These new entrants to the market result on concentration of brand and companies. What is the future of small companies in this business?

GG: In my opinion small companies in the bicycle industry are more efficient than the larger ones. A 10% decline in turnover is not catastrophic for small ones, while listed companies have to always keep in mind their all-important shareholder’s value. For sure the small companies lack the spending power on R&D but they appreciate their independency. That’s why our new company slogan is: “The independent bikery with a cycling heart”.

Gerrit Gaastra



“Keep in mind the cycling experience when developing new products”

BE: According to BMW designer Adrian van Hooydonk the urban mobility vehicle of the future will have two wheels instead of four. Do you agree with him?

GG: I think he is right. The roofed BMW C1 was an ideal urban mobility product but ahead of its time. I suspect that they will soon launch an electric version of this vehicle that does not require the rider to wear a helmet for safety purposes. Next to a bicycle this type of product could soon fill the streets of big cities.

BE: What can we expect in the segment city and trekking? More electronics for adjustable suspension and automatic gears?

GG: I find electronic shifting very appealing, as it helps racers to become faster and makes bike riding easier for novices. However, I’m still a little hesitant regarding electronics on the bike. The main problem is the reliability of the batteries and the whole system. We should not forget that reliability is very important for daily commuters and world travelers. The bicycle industry has to keep this in mind when developing new products. When testing new ideas and products I always ask myself: would I put it on my own bike? Is it good enough to reach my quality standards? I know that is not the finest way to approach new products business-wise, but I prefer the long-term strategy for my company and brands that makes long-lasting and reliable products.

BE: The European bicycle industry is struggling with long lead times and production planning. How will it affect the development of the industry in the years ahead?

GG: I do not believe we will see any changes here soon. I would love to have the frame production back in Europe, but it will be very hard, as we have lost a lot of know-how and experience and even for my idworx brand the prices would be too high. Until now, people who are considering the relocation of frame production to Europe are looking into the “rear-view mirror” too much. They only think about how frames are being made in Asia and want to do use the same technology over here. That is impossible in Europe; it has to be done completely different.