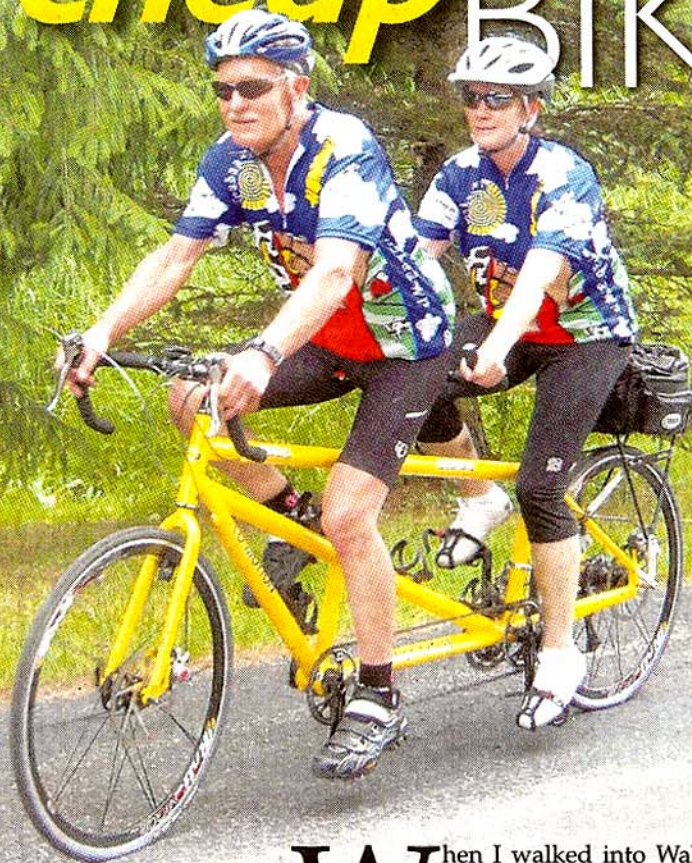


Health & Fitness with Bill Hauda



THANK GOODNESS FOR *cheap* BIKES



The author and his fiancée, Linda, ride their custom Co-Motion tandem.

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When I walked into Walmart the other day, I had an instant flashback to the 1980s and '90s when a fellow known as "Crazy TV Lenny" tried to put everyone in Madison, Wisconsin, on a bicycle as he sold appliances. What precipitated the memory was the display of a tandem bicycle right inside the Walmart's front door.

"Get a bike! Get a bike! Get a bike!" was Len Mattioli's TV and radio pitch as the American TV founder offered a free bike with every major purchase. He also bought full-page ads - sometimes two abreast - in the local newspapers.

It was one of the most brilliant advertising ideas that

ever came along. Thousands of bicycles went out of American TV's doors, along with refrigerators, ovens and freezers. Some people speculate all those bikes may have even started the revolution that made Madison pre-eminent in bicycling today.

Yes, they were really cheap bikes. Like the Kent tandem offered by Walmart. It's listed for \$275. Target's also got it for \$300. Who and where is the Kent bike company? Unknown. All we know is that the country of origin is "imported," as are the components.

Back in TV Lenny's day, bike shop owners scowled because they saw business being taken from them. Even today, they don't like what big-box stores like Walmart have done by offering inexpensive bicycles. Some bike shops have even folded as economically challenged or uninformed shoppers seek the best price, which is not necessarily the best bargain.

The bicycle industry is very diverse. It goes all the way from top brands like Trek to those sold in hardware and department stores. There are lots of in betweens, each with a niche in a market that ranges from road racing to BMX.

I was certainly aware of that when I walked into Walmart. I've seen their bikes before. What stopped me in my tracks and made me remember Crazy TV Lenny was that tandem with that unbelievably low price. I've spent more on a single wheel than what was being asked for that entire tandem.

The Co-Motion tandem Linda and I ride cost \$8,000. It was custom-made based on precise specifications. The frame weight is 26 pounds, lighter than some single road bikes. It's a fantastic mix of aluminum and carbon fiber.

That price did not give me sticker shock even though I could have pur-

chased nearly 30 Walmart tandems for that amount. I know a Walmart tandem would not allow us to cruise along comfortably in the 20 to 25 mph range. Or experience the thrill of descending the hills of southwestern Wisconsin at speeds over 50 mph.

With that said, I still think the cheapies first introduced by personalities like Crazy TV Lenny years ago and those currently in big-box stores have a role to play in bicycling. People who might not be able to buy something better can still afford a bike. And if they can get more people off their butts, the cheap bike retailers are doing us all a service by helping put them on a path to fitness.

The big-box stores don't service the bicycles they sell, though. So if their cheap bikes don't just gather dust in countless garages, the bikes will break down and the buyers will end up going to bike-specific stores for better built and cared for replacements.

When they find out that cheap tandem has plastic parts in the bearing assembly that wear out rapidly but can be replaced with steel at a cost of \$75 – a customer testimonial on the Walmart website – they may just conclude they need a entirely better bike.

I suspect some of the recipients of American TV's free bikes did just that and are now out there riding quality machines today.



The tandem bicycle Wal-Mart is selling may be cheap, but will it hold up?

PHOTOS BY BILL HAUDA

So I thank Crazy TV Lenny for what he did to make a buck. People are likely biking with us today on much upgraded equipment simply because they bought a refrigerator and got a free bike years ago. And along the way they probably learned the basic lesson in life: You get exactly what you pay for.

Bill Hauda is a bicyclist, veteran of some 50 marathons, including 13 in Boston; a former competitive triathlete; founder and first president of the Bicycle Federation of Wisconsin, and currently a BFW board member; and former director of Wisconsin's two major cross-state bicycle tours, GRABAAWR and SAGBRAW.

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