



FLAT TIRES DON'T SING

Derailleur bicycles

This is the fourth of a five-part series on bicycling and do-it-yourself repairs.

Everything that's been said in this series about flat tires and brake blocks applies equally to three-speed and five-to-fifteen-speed bikes. These many-gear bikes, however, have special problems of their own because of the mechanism used to shift from one gear to another.

This mechanism is called a derailleur, and these bikes shall henceforth be referred to as derailleur bikes.

A five-speed has one derailleur, in the rear. The ten-and fifteen-speed machines have two derailleurs, one in the front and one in the rear. The front one moves the chain from one chain wheel to another. A ten-speed has two chain wheels, the fifteen has three.

The rear derailleur moves the chain wheel from one to another of a cluster of five gears (sometimes six) that is screwed onto the rear wheel hub.

The strengths of these derailleurs (wide range of gears, ease of shifting) are at the same time their weaknesses—the mechanisms are open and are constantly collecting dust, grime, sand and all manner of other crud. In short, with relatively little use, they grow filthy.

This is both aesthetically and practically objectionable, the first because it's ugly; the second because the derailleur won't work properly when it's full of crud.

Buy a can of spray lube. There are several brands, and as far as I can tell, they're all the same. They come in an aerosol can along with a skinny plastic tube that fits into the spray opening and thus becomes a jet that permits you to aim the lubricant exactly where you want it.

If you have a Huret-type rear derailleur, with a steel body and arms that extend and pull in as you work the changer lever (never, but never, change gears with a derailleur unless the chain is moving in the forward-motion direction; also, never back pedal furiously a derailleur bike), put the bike in first gear. In that gear, the arms will be extended toward the spokes to their greatest reach.

With other derailleurs, it doesn't matter what gear the chain is on.

Now take an old rag in one hand and your can of spray lube in the other. Hold the rag (it should be fairly large) up under the derailleur (this catches the excess lubricant and keeps it off your rim and tire) and spray the bejabbars out of the mechanism.

The spray lube knocks off the crud and lubricates at the same time. If some of the crud persists in sticking, work it loose with a corner of the rag (a friend uses Q-tips, but he's a fiend for cleanliness) and spray some more.

Do the same with the front derailleur, this time holding the rag under the derailleur on the seat tube. Be sure to hit all points on both derailleurs where parts pivot. On the rear derailleur, also spray the rider wheels over which the chain rolls.

These wheels, if ignored, will accumulate great globs of grease and dirt. If let go too long, the derailleur has to be taken apart and the wheels cleaned and oiled.

If your derailleurs are slipping out of gear on their own, chances are good that the problem is in the control levers. These levers are held in place by a bolt with a screwdriver slot in the head, or, more commonly, a wingnut. The levers are held in whatever position you put them (except all the way forward) by friction that is applied by the wingnut. If that little jasper loosens up, the derailleurs will shift on their own. So just tighten it up a little (clockwise).

If that doesn't solve the problem, take the bike to the shop.

If your derailleur is out of adjustment (throwing the chain off the front chainwheels, refusing to shift into the highest or lowest gear in the rear), search until you find whatever adjustment devices control the maximum travel of your derailleurs. On the

rear, these are usually two set screws that act as stops at the extreme reaches of the derailleur. Take a thin-blade screwdriver and screw them in or out until they do what you want them to do.

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The travel of some front derailleurs is controlled by set screws, others by a bolt-headed device on the front cage itself.

If all this strikes you as too complicated, seek professional help.

Weird things can happen with bikes. A friend's rear derailleur refused to shift the chain up onto the largest sprocket. After we both fiddled with it without success, he took it to the shop and learned that his rear axle had broken. I had never heard of that. Neither had the bicycle mechanic.

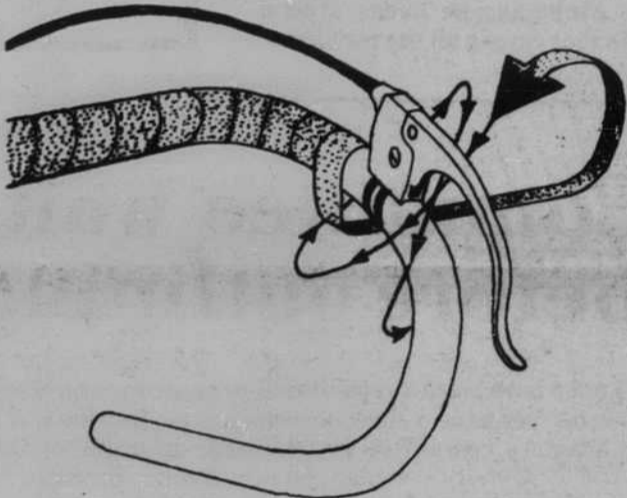
So much for derailleurs.

I have a thing about handlebar tape. None of the commercially produced tapes pleases me, cloth or plastic. The adhesive backing on the cloth tape always seemed to work out to where my hands touched it, and the plastic was sweaty and unpleasant to the touch.

Thus, I shall pass along to you this trick, picked up from the "Letters" column of a bicycle magazine.

Go to any sewing notions counter and buy four packages of three-quarter-inch twill tape. Go to the hardware store and buy a roll of cloth friction tape. Unscrew (not too far; just loosen) and pry out the plugs in the ends of your handlebars and unwind the nasty tape from the bars.

Starting about 3 inches from the center of the bar, wrap on the friction tape. Leave small gaps between wrappings rather than lapping this layer, but wrap it as tightly as you can. Tear it off at the brake lever and start again on the other side. Tear it off again when you get to the end of the handlebar.



Take a package of twill tape (it comes only in white and black; the white is spiffier, the black shows less dirt) and start wrapping where you started the friction tape.

Take two turns over the end, pulling tightly and keeping the tension on all the time, before starting down the bar. Lap each turn a little less than half the width of the tape.

Okay, you've sweated and cursed your way down to the brake lever. If your levers have hoods, peel them up and take two turns, crisscrossing under the bar. About four turns later, you're going to run out of tape. Thus four packages instead of two. The three-quarter-inch comes only in 2-yard lengths, which can't be helped.

You can now splice in the new length of tape by holding about 3 inches of the ends together while you wrap, or you can sew the ends together. Take your choice.

Continue to wrap to the end of the bar. Leave a couple of inches to stuff up into the bar, cut off the rest, stuff the end into the bar and replace the end plugs.

I think you'll like it.

The chain on a derailleur bike poses a special cleaning and oiling problem. Because a master link would hang up on the rear rider-wheel cage, this chain doesn't have one.

To remove a derailleur chain you have to have a chain rivet extractor. This device drives the rivet out of any link in the chain, permitting the chain to assume the shape of a snake.

If you're really interested, buy one. The cleaning and oiling process is the same as for other chains. One thing to remember: Once the rivet extractor is engaged, turn the handle only six full turns. You'll find out why the first time you turn it seven.

If you're not interested, take your bike into the shop for a good chain cleaning at least once a year. Oftener, if you ride a lot.

And have a nice trip.

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