



Interview with Dick Ryan

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Paul had the good fortune to be able to interview Dick Ryan on January 30, 2003. He wanted to ask questions that he had not seen asked in the past. After this interview, though, he found that some of these questions had already been asked by [Kelvin Clark in Recumbent Cyclist News #57](#), which is a very nice interview. Despite that, we think there are still some very worthwhile questions in the interview below. The photo to the right is Dick at the time of his 2002 ride from Oregon to Boston (is that a Bob Yak trailer bag??)

Q: Where were you born, where did you grow up?

A: I was born in Boston in 1936, and grew up in Boston suburbs.

Q: What part did bicycles play in your childhood?

A: Just like any kid, I rode bikes until I could drive -- nothing out of the ordinary. I did give my mother fits because a friend and I rode from Arlington, Massachusetts to the New Hampshire border (about 29 miles) at nine years old.

Q: What was your education?

A: The sixth grade.

Q: How about your career before the bicycle business? (I did read in a newsgroup post that you started riding during the cycling boom of the 70s and that you worked in a bike shop.)

A: I had a variety of jobs before I got involved with bikes. I was a compositor (typesetter) at a rubber stamp manufacturer for a few years. One could say that my interest in telescope building led me to my involvement with recumbents because an old friend joined the telescope club, he got me a job with a high tech company that made precision microphotolithography equipment for the semiconductor industry where I met Dick Forrestall.

I became interested in bikes at that time and got Dick Forrestall interested in cycling. Dick is a tool and die maker and an all around brilliant guy. Dick quit his job and with a friend of his (Harald Maciejewski) opened a bike shop and also started importing bikes from Germany. They eventually opened a second shop and I worked for them part time doing the normal bike shop stuff.

While this was going on I got a new job at Sylvania working the second shift. Later I went to work for Raytheon and ended up working there for nineteen years.

Q: The origins of the Avatar have been written about a few times, but what about the beginnings of Fomac? (Dick Ryan was a partner/employee of Fomac, which was the manufacturer of the Avatar 2000).

A: I believe that Dick and Harald originally incorporated as Fomac for the bike importing business. After [getting involved with Professor Wilson](#), Dick and Harald sold the bike shops and concentrated on the Avatar.

The goal was always to try to get financing or be bought out by one of the big companies. They thought they had some interest from Ross, but when they showed up for a meeting in Pennsylvania, the Ross people said "We don't have time to talk to you today," so that was that (laughs). Schwinn acted interested,

but it turned out they were just stringing them along trying to get Dave Wilson to be an expert witness in a court case.

The Avatar 2000 is probably one of the best-designed bikes ever built, probably even better than the Vanguard. It was beautiful, but it was too labor intensive with so many custom-machined parts. It took a year and a half to build 140 of them.

Q: When you say it may have been better than the Vanguard, what do you mean?

A: Things like the seat and seat support rods that could be removed without any tools and a nice accessory luggage rack.

Q: What was your position/responsibility in Fomac?

A: They gave me 5% of the company in exchange for working, basically. You know, "Work for nothing now, but if this thing takes off..."

Q: In an article that you wrote for RCN 62, you stated that Fomac had [a patent on the Avatar design](#), but that within two years, many companies were building. Did you mean they were building Avatar look-alikes or recumbents? Was that a statement about the difficulty of protecting patents?

A: It was there just for general information. But yes, I meant they were building Avatar look-alikes. It is tough for a small company to try to defend a patent. Also, when I saw the patent, I thought it was kind of vague (laughs). The look-alikes were the ones like Infinity and Linear, but it was the Europeans who really copied it, I mean piece for piece, like Radius and the Swiss Fateba.

Q: Was DeFelice one of those look-alikes? (The reason I ask is that they were built in Indiana, not far from my home in southwest Michigan, so I've seen a couple of them.

A: Yeah, that was one. But on that bike, the steering is separate from the seat, where ours was connected.

Q: Describe the transformation from the Avatar to the Ryan (the company as well as the bike).

A: They were smart enough to know that there was no way they were going to make any money out of it. So I took it over, just as a hobby really.

Q: From what I've read, a major difficulty for you over the years was finding competent frame builders to build your bikes.

A: In the beginning it was a problem, I had a number of deals that fell through. I could write a book about all of my experiences over the years in regard to trying to get the frames built. I would have been a lot better off if I had built them myself from the beginning but I just didn't have the time to learn to be a good TIG welder. In Oregon, I had a good welder doing the frames. Then my son moved out to Oregon to work with me. He took some welding classes at the local community college and then trained with the welder and eventually took over welding the frames. Your bike was welded by my son. I never did any welding.

Building the frames was no problem compared to building the rest of the bike. The welder could do five frames per day, then once my son learned, he could do 4 per day. That was plenty of frames to keep us busy putting bikes together. I think the Vanguard had about three times the labor of a bike like the Tour-Easy. Even though it was simpler than the Avatar, there was still a lot of custom work to do. S&S made parts for us eventually, because they had a CNC machine, but before that, I made most of the seating/steering parts with sand castings that then required a fair amount of machining.

Q: How many bikes did Ryan Recumbents make?

A: 1200 Vanguards and 250 tandems over 10 years.

Q: Did you have a day job during the years you were building?

A: For the first couple of years when I was building them in my cellar.

Q: How was the Recumbent Bicycle Club of America founded (1990)?

A: It was an attempt to popularize the concept of recumbents. That group got combined into the group that became the subscribers of RCN. There was also an Avatar owner's club prior to the RBC.

Q: What prompted the name change from the Fleetwood to Duplex?

A: My lawyer told me that GM could give us an argument, since they had a trademark on it, but I probably should have kept it, since I don't think they could have made the legal connection (between the car and the bike)

We did get contacted by a lawyer from Rolls Royce, telling us to cease and desist copying the logo (laughs). I talked to the guy on the phone. He told me that because of the law, they have to vigorously defend their logo. We replaced it with a single 'R'.

Q: You have written about your experiences "Some of it was fun, most of it wasn't." Do you regret entering the bicycle business?

A: (Laughs) From a money viewpoint, yes, certainly. I blew \$60,000 of my own money on it. But you know, a lot of other companies have done a lot worse. We were never in debt. We didn't go out of business owing people money.

Q: It seems like the various bicycle advocates fall into a few groups: the anti-car group, the Forester "we belong on the road" group, the fitness group. Do you consider yourself a bicycle advocate? Do you fall into one of those groups? What is your bicycle philosophy?

A: No real philosophy. Of course, I'd like to see more bikes. But I don't hate cars. The way the country is laid out, cars make a lot of sense. The weather is another thing that makes it tough to be without a car. But Dave Wilson rides to work at MIT every day at 75! Dave used to come to the shop in the Avatar days, and one day, he was working on his roof and he fell off his ladder, got a concussion and broke a couple teeth. He talks his dentist into coming in at 11 at night and fixing his teeth, then he comes into the shop the next day with his concussion.

Q: Bicycle companies seem to have their share of lawsuits. Does it feel scary to be a small bicycle manufacturer? Was the risk of lawsuits a concern to you?

A: We never really worried about it. You have to have manufacturers' liability insurance. In fact, today, the suppliers won't sell you anything without proof of your liability insurance. I was considering building a few bikes a while ago and I was talking to people I did business with for years and they said, "Sorry, Dick." They wouldn't sell to me because I no longer had liability insurance.

Q: For years, topics of conversation within the recumbent community have included the question of "When will the recumbent go mainstream?" Would going mainstream be good for recumbents, or is one of the things that makes recumbents so much fun their "outsider status?"

A: For some people, maybe, but not for me. From my viewpoint, it should be a mainstream product. The only reason that it's not is due to the bike shops. The bike industry does not understand that people quit riding due to comfort problems. The jock thing is all-pervasive in the bike industry. The financial guys understand that the major problem lies in the attitudes of the retailers. But the marketing people don't seem to understand it, or can't find a way around it.

Look at the ski industry...you can't buy straight skis any more. But when they introduced shaped skis the response from all the guys in the retail shops was that "yeah maybe they are better for beginners, but real men use straight skis." So the ski makers set up tents at ski areas and gave them to people to try. The people all saw they were better, and in 4-5 years, shaped skis took over the ski industry. But recumbent makers don't have a captive audience at the top of a ski hill. And no one in the business has the financial ability to do that type of marketing.

(Regarding mainstream companies entering the recumbent market): I thought the Trek was OK. It had a couple problems, but nothing that couldn't be dealt with. When Wheel and Sprocket first got them, they sold one a day for two months. The local Trek dealers each had one on the floor, and never sold a single one. How could one shop sell 60 and another sell zero? It's because of the jock-centered staff at most bike shops.

There are maybe 200 shops doing a decent job of selling recumbents out of 6,000. We've (the recumbent industry) been at it for 20 years, and in Boston, there's only one shop that sells any recumbents.

Q: It often happens that artists find themselves with few if any examples of their work from over the years, because they sell it all to make a living. Recently, you put "wanted to buy" notices on the Internet for a Vanguard and a Duplex. Were you able to get a hold of them? Were they for riding, or some other purpose?

A: Those were for friends. I think there was one I found for someone.

Q: Are you completely out of the bicycle business?

A: Yeah, for all practical purposes, unless someone comes along who wants to start something.

I haven't ridden a bike in years. I have a Dahon folder, but it's the only bike I have. I gave my last recumbent away to the [Owls Head Transportation Museum](#) in Maine last fall. My last long trip was in 1984.