

ONE HELLUVA J.O.B.

Layout & Interview by Connor Bondlow | Photos by Casey B. Gibson



Bissell Pro Cycling's Legendary Mechanic, Jim O'Brien, reminisces with ROAD

Obviously working for a small team on a small budget, there are a lot of times when you have to make due with things, and Jim had this great way of saying "Uh... yeah!" when things went wrong, which basically said; don't let it bother you; we'll just fix this; nothing is wrong. Jim and I shared a lot of the same interests, and the stuff I really remember are all the fancy steak houses we would visit at various races and training camps throughout the season; Joe Greensleeves at Redlands, Stark's in Santa Rosa; the list goes on. Jim was always down to hang out with the staff after the work was done, and for the five years I was with Bissell he was the centerpiece of our staff, even though he didn't always come to every race. Honestly, the race stuff was always smooth sailing with Jim. After twenty-five years of doing this stuff, he's developed a pretty good system where if you just let him do his thing, everything will get done fast and efficiently. He really taught me how to succeed as a professional race mechanic. The best time I ever had with the guy was when we designed and built the current Bissell trailer from the ground up. It was ten days in China Grove, NC with Jim working on the trailer, shooting archery and eating barbecue with him and his entire family. It was the epitome of Southern Hospitality. It was all the small stuff: drinking margaritas at the trailer after we finished our work, listening to the guy tell jokes and shoot the shit about books and what we saw going on in the world. That's what I'll probably remember until the day I die. He's salt of earth.

~ Ben Oliver / Mechanic - Bissell Pro Cycling



When you aren't traveling with the team, you run a shop (The Right Gear) in Kannapolis. Do these two positions ever clash, or are they complementary?

The only sticking point down through the years has been how much I have to be gone during race season. Obviously racing season is the same time as The Right Gear's selling season. Since my team employers want me at ALL the races sometimes we have to negotiate which races I attend, so that I'm home every now and then throughout the year, so my employees don't mutiny! I have always been proud of the fact that my teams have wanted me for as much time as I can give each season.

How, in your eyes, has professional cycling changed since your immersion, for better or worse?

It's an arms race. If only one guy has 500 watts, he wins. If everyone has 500 watts, the one who weighs the least wins. If everyone is a scarecrow, the one with the lightest bike wins.

If everyone has a light bike, the most aerodynamic one wins. If everyone is aero, the one with low drag bearings wins. Reductio ad absurdum. Nutrition/training methods have gone down the same road. I remember teams that had beer and chocolate milk for recovery. Heck I watched Horner eat a Carl's Junior burger and large McDonald's fries (McDonald's fries have the plastic coating that keeps them crispy longer) plus two Cokes to get ready for Trenton. Now everyone weighs their food!

What is the worst mechanical you've dealt with?

I'm giving you two different kinds of bad mechs here. One was fixable; the other was just cleaning up and moving on.

The first was in 1998 with Shaklee, at the time a power in track racing. We received our high-zoot supercool new track frames about a week before nationals, custom built in Italy by an old world craftsman. The only problem was the clearance

was wrong, and the single track chainring hit the chainstay unless you liked a 44t ring! We had waited four months for them, so no way were we going to get them fixed in time. I wrapped a deep-wall socket in electrical tape, and with a 24oz ball-peen hammer personally improved the chainring clearance on each bike by denting the drive-side chainstay. I had to beat the crap out of them too; that Columbus tubing was tough!

The second was at the 2004 Redlands Bicycle Classic. A big peloton was chasing a break up the road. On a fast descent a 12" piece of truck rubber got thrown up into the front wheel of one of my guys. The spokes grabbed it, took it around to the back of the fork blades, and at 50kph his front wheel STOPS. His whole body pivoted on the front fork for just an instant; then the fork blades tore away. He went straight in on his face and shoulder. The field parted around him, and being car 1 in the caravan we were first or second to him. There

was a HUGE puddle of still spreading blood, an unconscious rider, a destroyed bike in three or four pieces, and he's still clipped in. The EMT's stabilized his legs, while I un-clipped him (they couldn't get his shoes open). I couldn't rack the bike (nothing to clamp to), so I toe-strapped the pieces on the roof. I went back for his shoes, and the pair of wheels I left the car with. It was my director's first day in the caravan, and he wants to stay with our guy. I tell him we aren't doctors, and we still got seven guys in this fight. We jet; it was ugly.

What makes a good mechanic?

Shop mechanics fix bicycles well. Road mechanics understand HOW things work and fix EVERYTHING, sometimes with almost nothing. A good mechanic works a little everyday, so he doesn't have to work a lot very often. Crashes throw the schedule off a bit, but hey that's bike racing! A road mechanic spends a lot of his time thinking about bad things that might happen and what his response will be. What we aspire to is zero defects, so we get extra credit for being anal-retentive. I never want to find out exactly how long something lasts! In a perfect world parts would get replaced the day before they break; I'm sure we replace OK stuff each day, but we can't let it break in the race.

What are your favorite tools/manufacturers?

That might change from year to year based on which manufacturer's components we are using, but right now it's

a set of pre-set torque t-handles that Glenn Kalnins from Snap-On has me testing. I have a different one for 4nm, 5nm and 6nm, and the bits interchange for all the hex sizes. With all the carbon and titanium out there right now only a rich fool sets torque by feel. These things are sexier than red socks on a rooster!

What do you think of the team bikes at Bissell?

We ride Dogmas with Campy Record and Easton wheels. Usually a bike is like a hammer to a pro; if it breaks he'll get another one. Not these. There is a reason that every year the Pinarello is voted the most Lusted after bike on Earth. They look spectacular, and the Torayco fiber makes them super efficient but comfortable. My guys LOVE them. I've had riders from other teams tell me to call them if we get rid of any after the season.

What do you ride?

I ride a Surly Long Haul Trucker w/flat bars and Open Pros on Mavic 556s for the three miles each way coffee shop run. I ride a Guru VelociTi for the long days, but there aren't any of those right now.

Hobbies?

Bulldozer restoration so I can build a road to my house site. We are restoring a 1953 M38A1 army jeep right now so I have something to drive around the farm.

How would you describe your day to day for a big race?

You plan your day by backing up from race time. Take Philly for example. The race starts at 9:00 am. Riders need an hour to fart around before race time. 8:00 am. Mechanics need an hour to air up, rack cars, do the little crap some young rider forgot to ask for the day before, etc. 7:00. You want breakfast? 6:15 am. Shit, shower, shave and shampoo? 5:30 am. During a stage race like California, I do hotel transfers, so I can do prep work for the next day after getting the team checked in and all the riders luggage in their rooms. You can tell from my pictures I'm a LITTLE older than your average pro mechanic, so I'm not usually the jumper (guy in the car all day). At Philly I typically get to nap in the feed zone, though last year our captain tangled with a moto early and broke his bars/shifter. The jumper spare-biked him and dropped his race bike off in the feed zone. On the radio the captain said he needed his race bike back, so I rebuilt the front end and gave it back to him the next lap, just another day in paradise.

If a drunk grizzly bear broke into your shop with the sole intention of destroying your inventory while devouring your staff and patrons, what tool would you imagine yourself instinctively reaching for to dispatch the beast?

A HK P7 Squeeze cocker with 9mm Black Talon hollow points, and a double tap center mass. It's a Southern bike shop, and the bear should learn to hold his likker! 🐻

