

The Statewide Committee for Research honors Alaska's

Northern Innovators



Mark Gronewald The Snow Biker

Northern Innovators Hall of Fame Member

A few months after opening a bike shop in Palmer, where winds wage a tug-of-war between glaciers and big mountains, Mark Gronewald traveled to Las Vegas and saw the future. At a trade show in the Nevada desert, Ray Molina unveiled a bicycle with tires as thick as loaves of bread. Molina, who knows Mexico's Copper Canyon like most people know their backyards, had invented a bike for riding on sand.

Gronewald took one look at the balloon tires and envisioned them floating over the snowmachine trails in Alaska. Standing there at Molina's booth a few decades ago, Gronewald ordered five of the sand bikes for his shop in Alaska. There started the evolution of a product now seen everywhere in Alaska, from the squeaky cold trails of 40-below Fairbanks to the wet salt beaches of the Lost Coast of Southeast Alaska.

After placing his order with Molina at the trade show, Gronewald waited. The bikes did not arrive. They still haven't. But Gronewald did receive from Molina some large tires and rims three inches wide, made in Mexico.

Having experimented with his own recumbent version of a bulbous-tire bike, Gronewald had all he needed with Molina's tires and rims. He used them and Molina's idea to create one of the first versions of the fat bike.

"You go around here now, you see more fat-bike tracks than you see ski tracks," says Gronewald, 54, who recently retired as trails program coordinator for Matanuska-Susitna Borough.

Alaskans have been riding bikes on snow for a long time. During the Gold Rush, Alaskans Max Hirschberg and Ed Jesson, with no better options, rode their bicycles from Dawson City to Nome.

One of the few snow-biking breakthroughs of the last century came in the late 1980s, when Steve Baker of Icicle Bicycles welded two rims together and bolted them to the front and back of a bike. David Ford of Girdwood used the four-wheeled bike in 1990 to win the 100-mile Iditabike race when almost one foot of snow fell the night before.

Baker later merged three rims. Roger Cowles rode that "six-pack" more than 1,000 miles from

Anchorage to Nome, making the journey with partners on conventional mountain bikes. He arrived in the dozen villages along the route hours before his friends, who shoved when he could ride.

In the 1990s, Simon Rakower of Fairbanks developed a "Snowcat" rim twice the width of a conventional bike but with much less weight than Baker's multi-tire designs.

Gronewald, then living in Fairbanks — where bikers are just as likely to meet dog teams on the trail as snowmachines — in 1995 saved enough of his wildlands-firefighter money to buy Snowcat rims from Rakower.

"It made a big difference (for riding on snow)," Gronewald said. But he wanted more.

One of those guys who creates a tool when it doesn't exist, Gronewald soon afterward opened his Palmer bike shop, Wildfire Designs Bicycles. A few months into his risk/reward adventure, he received his shot of inspiration from Ray Molina at the Las Vegas trade show.

With the Mexico-made wide rims and fat tires in his shop, Gronewald dreamed of a better snow bike. He enlisted his friend John Evingson, a fellow adventurer, welder and custom bike-frame builder, to help him develop an architecture that could accommodate the big tires. Evingson and Gronewald came up with a frame that looks skewed to the side when viewed from the rear. The three-quarter inch slant allowed the chain to clear the fat tire and set the rear gears in line with the front gears. Their offset allowed them to use a standard mountain bike hub.

"The clever thing was figuring out how to use off-the-shelf parts and still work with the big fat wheels," Gronewald says.

Laboring into the long winter nights in his Palmer shop, Gronewald put together Evingson's frame with Molina's tires and the lightest components he could afford. In a few weeks, he had a prototype fat bike that resembles those being sold today.

When he rolled his creation to the starting line in the 2000 Iditasport race, a 100-mile loop starting and ending in Knik across Cook Inlet from Anchorage, Gronewald drew stares from bikers on Snowcats,

the standard of the time. Next to the bikes on tires with two-inch rims, his creation was a clown bike.

"Everybody was skeptical," Gronewald says of what he named "fat bike" years before the name stuck. "They thought it was a gimmick. They thought these things would be so hard to pedal because of the extra rolling resistance."

With the ability to drop the tire pressure down to as low as five pounds per square inch, riders were able to spread their weight out on the trail and pedal where others were pushing. Gronewald was convinced of the bike's merits, but his customers still resisted.

"I had one on display in the shop, and I sold maybe 15 a year," Gronewald says. "They were such a hard sell. People were so skeptical of them."

But bikers took note when Alaskan Mike Estes rented one of Gronewald's fat bikes and pedaled it to Nome along the Iditarod Trail. Peter Basinger, a bike mechanic in Anchorage at the time, won the Knik to McGrath race on a Wildfire fat bike in 2004. Racers were riding on snow that would have made them walk before. And riding, even at four miles per hour, is always faster than pushing.

In 2005, Surly Bikes of Bloomington, Minnesota, introduced fat bikes to the mass market with the introduction of "Large Marge" rims. A few Alaskans soon started making fat bikes in Anchorage. Bill Fleming and Jamey Stull manufacture the 9:ZERO:7 fat bike. Greg Matyas honed the design for comfort and speed and creates them for his shop, Speedway Cycles. In endorsing Matyas's lightweight "Fatback," a writer for Outside magazine declared 2012 "the year the fat bikes took to the mainstream."

The idea born at a bike expo and refined in a Palmer shop has indeed reached the masses: while the finest Alaska-made versions of the fat bike cost as much as a four-wheeler but are as light as a toddler, a 50-pound fat bike with coaster brakes is now available for about \$200.

"Now Walmart has come out with one," says Gronewald, who closed his small shop before the fat bike craze exploded. "I think they're going to get a lot more popular."