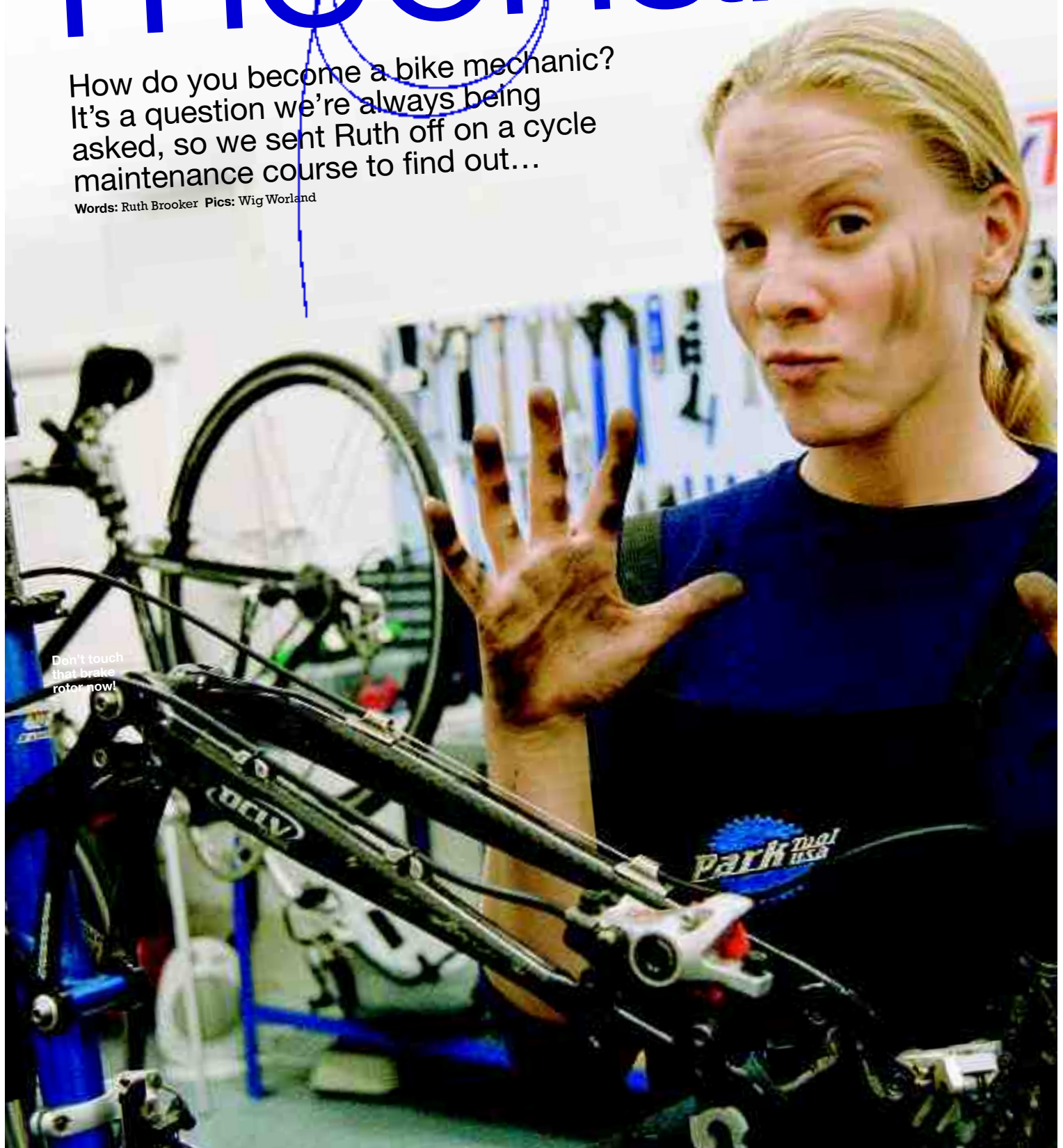


Make me a

mechanic

How do you become a bike mechanic?
It's a question we're always being
asked, so we sent Ruth off on a cycle
maintenance course to find out...

Words: Ruth Brooker Pics: Wig Worland



Don't touch
that brake
rotor now!



Sometimes, if it's not lashing with rain, I like to ride the 17-mile trip home from the office. One day recently, I was vacantly cruising along when my front wheel clipped the kerb; this launched me cartwheeling into a twisted heap on the pavement, much to the bemusement of the stationary queue of traffic nearby. Fortunately, there was only minor scuffing to myself and the bike, so I jumped up, detangled the handlebar and shuffled home. But for the rest of my journey I couldn't shake off the thought that had I slammed my bike, I probably wouldn't know what was wrong; I certainly wouldn't know how to fix it and it's a very long walk home in SPDs.

I must point out that this is not my fault; I've been allowed to be this useless by the gaggle of bike-tinkering boys around me who are only too eager to debate, diagnose and bang my bike back into shape. So when I was offered the chance to go on a bike maintenance course offered by the guys who train loads of the UK's bike shop mechanics, I grasped the opportunity with both of my mechanically inept hands.

Ruth'll try to fix it

Operating out of his workshop in Milton Keynes, the trainer and assessor, Pete Cowling from PJCS Cycle Training, has a variety of options available. Previously, the only option on offer to anyone interested in entering the bike mechanic industry was to bag a job in a bike shop and learn from a good mechanic. The CyTech 1 course offered by PJCS is widely recognised as the standard entry-level qualification for a cycle mechanic. If you're just an enthusiast, you can do a five-day course on installing and servicing core components; and for the really passionate, there's a course dedicated to wheel building.

After investigation, I decided a two-day enthusiast's general maintenance course would be adequate for my needs. It covers everything from the basics of removing an inner tube to facing the bottom bracket and



Always a few bits left over

DOING A COURSE

IS IT WORTH IT?

Andy Kyffin, a trained mechanic and Steve Peat's technical advisor, as well as the owner of the North West Mountain Bike Centre, expects candidates applying to him for jobs to have the industry-recognised CyTech 1 and 2 qualifications. Mechanics who want to work in a Shimano Service Centre are also required to have CyTech 1 and 2.

If you are unqualified and a bike shop wants to take you on, the CyTech 1 course is free to under-25 year olds. If you have the qualification you will earn more money, so it's in your interests to pass the tests.

In addition to your CyTech qualifications, Andy says you will need common sense, good people skills, preferably some retail experience and, in some cases, first aid training.




After 20 minutes looking, Ruth finds the right tool

wheel truing, but there isn't time to deal with the more tricky specifics of suspension (cue sigh of relief as I'm just about getting to grips with pedal removal). Each of the areas on the course is structured into talks, demonstrations and practical sessions.

Signed up to this crammer course with me are Matt and Hamish, who are both bike enthusiasts (that strange breed of pain-loving triathletes to be precise) hoping to understand their bikes fully. Three students constitutes a full course, which allows plenty of time for answering inane questions like: "So which bit is the rim?" And during the practice sessions there's more opportunity for one-on-one monitoring; very useful if you are just about to heave your body weight on to a spanner when the bolt's got a left-hand thread.

Our morning commences in Pete's immaculately clean workshop (not dark, dusty and grimy as I was expecting), which has a dizzying array of torque wrenches, spanners, allen keys and unidentifiable tools neatly aligned on the walls. Pete hands us a disturbingly thick copy of the Park Tool School student manual and a list of torque settings, which to me is just a bewildering list of complicated numbers and names. He then talks us through the basics; here I learn handy hints such as you should only use plastic tyre levers and that you shouldn't touch a brake rotor because oil from your fingers can contaminate the brake system. Ah, so that's what caused the loud screeching noise.

At times I feel swamped with new info because it's like learning another language, and Pete, the all-knowing Jedi Master of the bicycle, is so immersed in the industry that one innocent question can spiral into a



Ruth's 'yes, I'm listening' face

HOW DID THEY DO IT?

FROM THE MOUTHS OF MECHANICS

Paul Vincent

As a young lad, Paul was hooked on motorbikes and learnt to fix them, but gradually his self-taught interest transferred to bicycles. After being made redundant he decided to pursue his passion for cycling and he was employed by a local bike shop.

In 1989 there was no set exam, so they made him take a trade test to check his skills. Overwhelming enthusiasm also helped to get him the job. He then became a part-

time mechanic for Future's bike titles and progressed into the role of Deputy Editor on Cycling Plus. Paul maintains that most of the time being a mechanic isn't glamorous; to enjoy this career you have to be passionate about bicycles and you must remember that the safety of the customer is paramount, so the bike must be set up perfectly.

Jez Loftus

Apparently Jez has always fiddled with bikes, and in 1991 when he

had no money at university he started working on Saturdays in a bike shop and learnt on the job. When the funding fell through for the postgraduate studies he intended to do he started working part-time at a bike shop, and nine years ago took the job of Workshop Manager for Future's bike titles, including *MBUK*. He's been here ever since.

Paul Byrom

Paul is a mechanic at John's Bikes

in Bath, and though he hasn't done any formal training himself, he considers the CyTech training a great asset that can only help future mechanics. His experience of the cycling business is that it's a close-knit industry and if you want to get involved, it's important to get into the scene. Try joining local cycling clubs and getting your face known at the local bike shop. John's Bikes really value enthusiasm because being a mechanic is a job you pick for the love of it.



Really, she should have the tip of her tongue slightly out for the trickier stuff...



"Maybe I should be writing this down?"

12-year history tour of Shimano. But there's a plentiful supply of tea and regular breaks on offer to let my flagging brain absorb all the useful facts we've just rattled through.

To illustrate all this new information, Pete gives a few demonstrations on how to remove the drivetrain, set up your gears correctly and clean out the bottom bracket. Watching these smooth operations makes it all look so easy and obvious; he talks us through what he's doing while tweaking this, turning that, banging the mallet and twiddling knobs, as he casually reaches for the correct tools without looking. Ah yeah, it's a piece of piss this bike maintenance malarkey. I also observe my Trek's bottom bracket being faced, something I'm unlikely to see ever again. But Pete does manage the textbook bike maintenance mistake of spilling some ball bearings across the floor. It's reassuring to see that even the professionals make mistakes occasionally.

By the afternoon I'm itching to be let loose on my bike's internal organs so I can learn for myself. The first job is dismantling a hub to clean out the grime and I have to restrain my wry smile whenever the word 'flange' crops up. However, I quickly find myself making lots of mistakes on tasks I'd seen Pete do not five minutes before.

Which tool was it? What size? Which bit do you undo first?

Get practising

What I discover is that there's no substitute for practising yourself and getting it wrong; it's the fastest way to learn and here you still have the security that someone much more knowledgeable is shadowing you, correcting your fundamental bodging and explaining why it wouldn't work that way. Doing the two-day course won't make you a pro mechanic, but it does mean less time and money spent visiting the bike shop for problems that can be fixed at home. It also helps you identify the significant problems that can't be sorted in the shed.

But this is a working knowledge that requires regular tinkering for you to benefit from it, so the following weekend I try cleaning up my road bike and brazenly scatter all its little bits and pieces over the

garage floor. Ordinarily this would have prompted mass panic and a run round to the bike shop, or a long wait for a sympathetic mate to sort it out. Now I'm confident that I have a reasonable understanding of my bike and I can even pick holes in my mates' techniques. I never thought I would see that day...

CAN I BE A MECHANIC?

OF COURSE(S)...

PJCS General Maintenance Course

Duration: Two days
Cost: £188

This is the course Ruth went on. Considering that a full service at a shop can cost £100, it's decent value because your bike will be stripped down. Make sure you take your own bike to practise on because it will be more relevant to you and fun.

CyTech 1 Practical Theory training course

Duration: Three days
Cost: £381.88

Passing this course will get you the qualification you need to become a bike mechanic. It covers workshop practices, health and safety, correct use of tools and frame alignment and preparation. You can then move on to higher level CyTech courses.

CyTech 2

Duration: Five days plus three days wheelbuilding
Cost: Varies.
These courses are flexible and tailored to the needs of the employer/candidate in terms of time scale and modules covered. CyTech 1 and 2 are the minimum requirements for a mechanic to be given Shimano Service Centre status.

There are many other courses available, such as wheelbuilding and bike maintenance for enthusiasts, and specialist courses at CyTech 3 level.

For more details contact PJCS Cycle Training on 07050 207369 or log on to www.pjconline.co.uk. Courses are held in Milton Keynes or in your own cycle workshop.



Impressive straight face during the flange demonstration