

Between Brothers



By Valerie Carter
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Several decades ago, two kids went in search of an alternative outlet for their competitive energy. While mainstream sports like football and basketball weren't really their cup of tea, they, like many others, still enjoyed impressive displays of athleticism. As such, the world of cycling entered their radar. In the beginning, one brother dominated the other when they would race together. Eventually, however, the underdog broke through to claim a score of junior championship titles and, later, two fourth-place finishes in the Tour de France and a first place in the Giro d'Italia (Tour of Italy). The first brother became a chef.

The former ace is Steve Hampsten, co-founder of Hampsten Cycles, a growing, high-end bicycle company. The underdog is his brother Andy Hampsten, retired pro racer and founder of Cinghiale Cycling Tours. Like their racing roots, the Hampsten brothers' companies, goals and lives are completely intertwined. Andy and Steve co-founded Hampsten Cycles and, while the touring company is more Andy's pet project, Steve is nevertheless president of Cinghiale Tours. Julia, Steve's wife, runs the office for the touring company, in addition to designing logos for both.

Cinghiale Cycling Tours, begun in 1997, was the first to pop up. Andy is a former resident of a village in Tuscany, Italy (where he bought a farmhouse in 1994), and now arranges and personally guides five or six tours annually throughout the region, all of which originate in his former hometown. Cinghiale (pronounced cheen-GYA-le) is the word for a wild boar found in Tuscany and prized for its tasty meat. Like its namesake, the various tours, while being perhaps a little difficult to tackle, make for a choice reward at the end of the day.

Cinghiale's web site contains a "Fitness Check" section, outlining the details and requirements to join one of Andy's rides. It starts with the pig rating system. One pig equals an intermediate-level ride. "We don't have any of these," the site states frankly. Two pigs means, "Plenty of hills. Some long, others steep, non-regrettable for our standard ride-ready client." For three pigs the site opines, "Where we all want to be. Only two of our trips have the mandatory very long, hilly days to be considered truly hard." And finally, for four pigs, "Stay tuned."

The remainder of the site explains, rather openly, that these tours are only for those who

are willing and fit enough to handle consecutive days of challenging, hilly riding. While this might be enough to scare off quite a few on-and-off cyclists, Andy, who wrote most of the web site's content, insists, "People who ride a lot know what I'm saying." He continues, "You can't have someone take all day, and you can't have one person doing it for their own masochistic reasons."

But, with that said, Andy places equal, if not more, emphasis on enjoying the ride. He explains, "We don't have people anymore who aren't aware of the challenge," which is his biggest concern. "They just need to tell me they know what they're getting into," he adds. Clients have the option to ride in the support van when necessary, an offer which many take up for the last day of the tour. Groups are limited to around 20 people, with a guide ratio of one for every four or five people. Having enough guides is extremely important to the spirit of the tour. Says Andy, "We don't want clients to have to think about where they're going...We spend a lot of resources making sure the group stays together."

And, while cycling is the primary reason for the trip, the tour itself is actually fifty percent culture and fifty percent cycling. "Most days we finish the ride by lunch time," notes Andy. The cultural aspects of the tour are carefully orchestrated by Andy and his team of guides. Travelers stay in small, family-owned bed and breakfast inns, which offer wonderful Tuscan wines and delicious home-made food. On the rides, the guides keep the group to a scenery-viewing pace, ensuring that everyone gets a chance to appreciate Tuscany's beauty. Most of all, guests experience an entirely different way of life. From his time living in Tuscany, Andy remembers having to adjust to

the two-hour break in the workday, when all shops and businesses would close, and everyone would return home for lunch and a mid-day nap, or perhaps a bike ride. He is a big fan of Europe's approach to work and play, which he hopes to impress on his clients; "There's a priority on a life where you can get out and ride your bike."

Meanwhile, Steve is back in Seattle working with framebuilders and customers, and consulting with Andy, to achieve each individual customer's ideal bike fit. Hampsten Cycles founded in 1999, started with Andy's friend, Marcello Solca, owner of a tiny bike shop in Switzerland. He asked to put the Hampsten name on a few frames from Japan, which he then sold to friends. Steve and Andy decided to take the idea to the United States, introducing it to Match Bicycle Company in Woodinville, WA. Although Match later closed shop, the idea took hold, and eventually expanded to include current

builders Dave Levy (steel), Moots Cycles (titanium), Co-Motion Cycles (aluminum) and Bob Parlee (carbon). Once the brothers found framebuilders who met the level of quality they were searching for, Steve and Andy were able to focus on their customers' needs.

"It's all about fit and how the bike should ride," says Steve, who brings expertise in building and works with the builders. Andy has the professional experience to know how the bike should handle and provides expertise in fitting and selecting various components for the bikes. Both know what the end product should be. They bring this knowledge and experience to the table when a customer requests a bike. Steve explains, "We get to talk to the customer and really understand what they want. Then we bring that to the builder...It's almost like [we're a] bike consulting firm."

Hampsten Cycles currently offers nine models for racing and touring, with a range of material choices to suit any rider. Andy's personal bike in Colorado is their Strada Bianca model, which is similar to a '60s or '70s era road bike. It is built for any type of road, whether paved or not. Steve and Andy try to bring this level of custom options to their customers. "It's a lot of work," explains Steve, "It's not like we're getting bikes from Taiwan and putting our name on it."

One driving difference between Hampsten and many other companies is that the design of each bike is centered around the stem, which they explain provides a more accurate fit. Per Andy, "It's the only way to get the performance from the bike. The stem is the lever; you want an optimum lever. It means everything [when it comes to] handling." He adds, "It's like shoes. You don't buy shoes that kind of fit, you buy shoes that fit. Same thing for bikes."

So far, customers have been "absolutely delighted," the brothers report. They've asked themselves, "Does the world really need another bike company?...No." However, reception has been positive. Most of the people who come in search of a new frame have been riding for 20 to 30 years, and know exactly what they want. The unique experience the Hampsten brothers bring to the business between the two of them can usually satisfy any criteria a cyclist can put up.

Future plans for Steve and Andy will include searching for ways to branch out. They have talked about doing a kid's bike or a city bike. But, for now, they are happy with the success they have had. "We're looking at a few new projects; a prototype cyclocross design this fall, maybe some wheels, and the first version of our new lugged model showed up yesterday," says Steve. Additionally, Cinghiale Tours is getting ready to branch out next April. The former racer will host bike tours in California,



Photo courtesy Hampsten Cycles

Hampsten Cycles currently offers nine models for racing and touring.

this time geared more towards racers. "It'll be more like a training camp," explains Andy. He is also looking to host another tour, similar to the Tuscan rides, in California next October. "The challenge is to make the riding on the same level as in Tuscany," says Andy.

For now, both men are happy with the choices they have made with their companies and personal lives. Andy retired from pro racing when his daughter joined the family. When asked if he misses the world of competitive cycling he emphatically exclaims, "No!" Though he enjoyed racing, he does not look back with regret. Cinghiale allows him to maximize his time with his family while leaving him the time and resources to pursue his passions - cycling and the rich culture of Tuscany - and share them with fellow cyclists. Steve, the former chef, is also doing what he loves. In his eyes, frame building and cooking are very comparable: you have the ingredients and you make something beautiful out of them. With their unique set of skills and their passion for the world of cycling, this duo may have all they need to make for their second round of success.

Steve and Andy Hampsten in a Nutshell

Steve Hampsten began his cooking career in 1978 and continued on that path for 18 years, while also working in bike shops in his spare time. In 1996 he switched over to welding and other work in metal shops, where he stayed until 2001. Again, he worked on bicycles when he could, this time with Match Bicycle Company, starting in 1997. In 1999, Steve co-founded Hampsten Cycles with Andy, making it a full-time commitment in 2001.

Andy Hampsten started his professional bike racing career in 1985, when he won the Gran Paradiso stage of the Giro d'Italia. Over the span of his 11-year career, Andy served with teams La Vie Claire, 7-Eleven, Motorola and Banesto. His greatest achievements were winning the Giro d'Italia in 1988 and placing fourth in the Tour de France in 1986 and in 1992, where he also took first place for the Alpe d'Huez mountain stage of the race. He retired in 1996, when he and his wife had a baby girl.