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Active Cultures: bikers find balance at Yojimbo's Garage

by **Anne Ford**

December 18, 2003

When Marcus Moore started Yojimbo's Garage six years ago, he decided to do something most of his competitors didn't: open at 8 AM. About half the bike shop's customers are bicycle messengers, as was Moore until 1995, and the early hours make a difference to them. "I know what it's like to work all day, have something happen to your bike, and then have to have it ready before work the next day," says Moore. "When I was messengering, the earliest a bike shop was open was at 10 AM, and that pretty much guarantees you're going to miss half a day of work."

Moore's familiarity with the practical needs of his customers has made Yojimbo's a favorite among messengers, bicycle commuters, and others for whom biking is a primary means of transportation. "Marcus will help you out in any way he can," says one messenger. "He'll loan you a wheel or a bike if yours is broken, which is huge because you can't work if you don't have a bike."

In 1997 Moore was splitting his time between working as a carpenter and as a mechanic at Village Cycle and, later, Upgrade Cycleworks. He noticed that many local bike shops seemed to focus on sales rather than maintenance, and decided there was a gap to be filled—and besides, he says, "I needed a decent job."

Behind a nondescript door on Clybourn near Cabrini-Green, the compact garage is a cyclist's vision of Ali Baba's cave. Every inch of the unheated space is filled with new bikes as well as frames, wheels, rims, bike clothing, and hundreds of small parts and accessories. The customers waiting for Moore's assistance mill about in heavy jackets and trouser legs rolled up to midcalf; a fat orange cat named Gary wanders out now and then in search of a lap. Underneath framed photos of cycling teams sits a stack of well-thumbed books: *Bicycle Track Racing*, *No Brakes!*, *The Back Pain Book*.

Moore works efficiently without moving particularly fast. With a disheveled blond beard and an intent, quiet demeanor, he looks a little like a monk. He named the shop after the Kurosawa film that inspired the *Man With No Name* westerns. Yojimbo is Japanese for “bodyguard,” or, loosely interpreted, one who looks after other people’s needs.

Moore’s influence reaches deep into the local bike racing community as well. In 1999, inspired by a race he’d been to in Toronto, he and his friend Patrick Babcock founded the XXX Racing-AthletiCo Team. He hardly knew anything about racing at the time, and remembers it as an intimidating process. “There are a lot of strategies in bike racing that aren’t evident unless they’re explained to you,” he says. “You show up to a race, and you see all these guys on these really nice bikes that cost thousands of dollars that are all shiny, and they’ve got their uniforms, and they know things you don’t know.” But with the help of Randy Warren, a program director at the Chicagoland Bicycle Federation who’s coached cycling for 16 years, the team quickly increased in both size and skill. Nowadays the 70 members regularly compete at velodromes across the north central United States. There are several state champions in their ranks, and they’ve placed in the top three in about 100 races this year.

Moore is also the founder of one of the local bike community’s most popular events: the annual Tour da Chicago, a six-race winter competition in which bikers race through traffic on downtown streets. About 150 people participated last year, with an average of 30 riders per race. The last and best-loved event, “the Stairmaster,” requires racers to dismount and run up and down multiple staircases around the Loop. The tour’s legality is questionable—its organizers have never sought a city permit for racing through traffic-filled streets—but no one’s ever been arrested. The only casualties so far have been the few teeth a racer lost when he ran a stop sign and slammed into a van a couple years ago.


XXX member Gareth Newfield says Moore’s knowledge of the messenger and racing communities translates into practical benefits for his customers. “I want a bike that’s going to hold up to potholes on Chicago streets, but that when I get to a race will still be fast,” Newfield says. “There are a lot of shops who totally understand that I want this bike to hold up to the brutality of riding across Chicago’s industrial section year-round. And there are other shops that can hook you up with something fast. Marcus really knows both.”

But it may not be enough. Yojimbo’s is struggling. He says times are hard for small bike shops, which are increasingly forced to compete with the Internet and large retail chains. Chris Stodder, co-owner of North Avenue’s Rapid Transit Cycle Shop, concurs. “It’s been a tough time, especially as we go into winter,” he says. “I talk to other bike dealers and they agree. We’re fighting like hell for market share.”

Yojimbo’s sales have been particularly sluggish the last few months; and right now Moore’s stuck with too much inventory and too many bills. In an attempt to boost sales, he’s discounting all purchases over \$100 until the end of the year. If that doesn’t work, the garage may have to close.

Moore doesn't know what he'll do next if that happens. After being his own boss for six years, he's not sure he wants to work in someone else's shop again. But he's optimistic that the business can survive a little longer. "If I were only to look at the books," he says, "I would have closed the doors a long time ago."

Yojimbo's Garage is at 1310 N. Clybourn; hours are 8 to 6 Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, 8 to 3 Tuesday and Thursday, and noon to 4 Saturday and Sunday. Through December 31 all in-stock, nonconsignment purchases over \$100 get a 15 percent discount; purchases over \$200 are marked down 20 percent, and those over \$300 are marked down 25 percent. Call 312-587-0878 for more information. The sixth annual Tour da Chicago takes place January through March 2004; see <http://tour.chicago.il.us/> for more.

Art accompanying story in printed newspaper (not available in this archive): photo/Paul L. Merideth. 

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