



For the Love of the

Bike

Ernesto Colnago's obsession with quality built an empire and made him an icon

By Jayme Otto

Ernesto Colnago yanks open the desk drawer only to bang it shut again as he opens the next. The slams reverberate through the large office as Colnago traverses his way through the drawers of his mahogany desk. Dissatisfied, he pushes his chair back. With the agility of a much younger man, the 76-year-old Colnago strides to the second desk beside his own.

"Questo e Colnago! Questo e Colnago!" ("This is a Colnago!") Colnago finds what he's looking for: a pair of carbon fiber head tubes, both severed in half. He places them on the desk for inspection. Both pieces appear identical until he turns them over. The Colnago version, with its sleek woven fibers in shades of black and grey, looks like a piece of art. The competitor's head tube, a disjointed mess of fibers lacquered with glue, calls to mind a junkyard scrap pile. "Questo e Colnago!" he repeats loudly, lifting the Colnago head tube and snapping it back down on the desk. *Elegante* in a button-down dress shirt, his hair the color of steely black carbon fiber, Colnago hovers around the desk, staring down over his glasses.

A Rare Heritage

Colnago envisioned a carbon fiber bicycle in 1986, after a meeting with Enzo Ferrari. Colnago was inspired to meet the king of racecars after an actual king — King Baudouin of Belgium — dubbed Colnago "the Ferrari of two wheels" upon having marveled at the bike Colnago made for Belgian superstar Eddy Merckx.

Years later, when Ferrari opened Ferrari Engineering in Maranello, the 54-year-old Colnago saw an opportunity for direct collaboration between his organization and the young satellite office. He arranged a meeting with the

88-year-old Enzo Ferrari, bringing his son-in-law Vanni Brambilla and world champion Beppe Saronni with him. The subsequent relationship between the king of racecars and the king of race bikes would forever change the anatomy of the bicycle. "Much like Ferrari, people came to me for innovation, not price," Colnago explained. "It was the perfect partnership."

To this day, Colnago aficionados recount the early efforts of the Ferrari Engineering-Colnago marriage. One such man, a retired Italian banker named Fabrizio Corsini, recalls the story of the invention of the precise fork. Corsini recently returned to Italy after completing a 3,000-mile ride across the U.S. for his 60th birthday on a Colnago.

Corsini explained how Colnago and Ferrari revolutionized bike forks in 1987 by changing the design from curved to straight. As Corsini told it, when the design was analyzed from the structural point of view of a racing car engineer, it was obvious that "a curved fork was silly." Back then it was assumed that a curved design absorbed shock better. Using Ferrari's wind tunnel to study how vibration went through a bicycle, Colnago demonstrated that was simply not true.

At that, Corsini raised his glass to honor the enduring brilliance of Colnago's design. "The man is a genius," Corsini said fondly.

Decades before Colnago was proclaimed a genius, or the king of anything, he was the son of a farmer in an impoverished post-World War II Italy. Colnago worked, from the age of 13, as a welder's assistant at Gloria, a bicycle company in Milan. He also raced competitively. At age 19, a crash left him housebound with a broken right leg. The factory sent wheels for him to build, so that he could

continue working through his recovery. Colnago realized he was making more money as a subcontractor than he was working at the factory. Thus, the Colnago Empire began as a humble workshop at 10 Via Garibaldi, in Cambrigiato, the small rural town of his birth. Colnago earned a reputation for repairing and assembling bicycles for a fair price. "It was a lot of hard work," he said. "The Colnago you know today did not happen by chance. It was hard, hard work."

Colnago stopped racing after the crash, but continued to train. On a training ride in 1955, a friend introduced him to Fiorenzo Magni, an Italian cycling legend. When they stopped for water, Magni complained of pain in his right leg. Colnago diagnosed the problem immediately. "I told him that his cranks were not positioned right," Colnago said. "The pedals were not perpendicular." Several hours after the ride, Magni's masseur came to Colnago's house and asked him to fix the bike. Colnago removed the crankset and reassembled it. Two days later, the champion himself came to find Colnago. The pain in his leg was gone. He invited Colnago to join his team as a mechanic, beginning with the Giro d'Italia four days away.

That decision set Colnago's life on a new course. "I was 22 years old and had never been away from home," Colnago recalled. "I look back on it now as a very smart investment. The travel, the new experiences, these things expanded my mind, broadened my perspective."

The opportunity also introduced Colnago to the top names in the industry. He recalls an evening in France when Tullio Campagnolo, Italy's reigning bike deity, took him to dinner. "He was such an inspiration to me, an example of a man who had made it," Colnago said. "At that



A BICYCLE MAKER AND HIS FRIENDS
Ernesto Colnago as a youth, with Eddy Merckx, in his shop and presenting a bike to the Pope.

time, I couldn't have afforded even a piece of bread at that restaurant."

One could guess that there isn't much Colnago can't afford today. The name is synonymous with quality — with innovation. A privately held company, Colnago employs around 30 people.

After 55 years, Colnago is not tired of running the show; to the contrary, his energy is dizzying.

A Man at Work

On his feet once again, Colnago indicates the front wall of his office, studded with photos, plaques, letters of recognition and other awards. "See this?" he says, sweeping his arm before him. "None of this counts. Eating breakfast with my staff every morning counts. Owning a home in the town of my birth counts."

His workday begins at 7:25 a.m.

"When I get to the office, I start the coffee and then I set up breakfast for everyone," he says. Colnago gestures to the views from his office windows; one overlooks the manufacturing floor, the other, his home, literally across the street, marked by a dignified wrought iron gate that separates his haven from the outside world. The iconic Colnago logo, the ace of spades, is elegantly embedded into the iron's design.

That logo sprouted from one of Colnago's early career achievements. The year was 1970. An important early season race, Milan-San Remo, was about to start. An Italian had not won in 17 years. Michele Dancelli, racing on a Colnago bicycle, reinstated national pride when he crossed the finish line first. Bruno Rashi, a reporter from *La Gazzetta dello Sport*, wrote that Dancelli had won on a bicycle that was in bloom, a clever statement considering San Remo was known as the flower city. That evening, Colnago attended a celebratory dinner with Rashi and Dancelli. The journalist suggested Colnago create a symbol for the victory. While playing cards after dinner, the idea solidified in Colnago's mind — the ace of spades, or the ace of *fiore* (flowers). A new logo was born.

Colnago doesn't call attention to the framed photo of Dancelli's victory on the wall. Nor does he mention the

framed certificate designating him *Cavaliere del lavoro* of the Italian Republic. Nor does he point out the photo of him and the president, nor him and the pope. Instead, he pauses before a framed yellowed letter, typewritten in 1950. He reads the letter out loud, though it's clear he knows the letter by heart. This letter, an admonishment from an old coach, scolded the 17-year-old for betraying his team at the Italian national team time trial championship. The team finished third. The letter accused Colnago of failing to do his best at this critical race, as evidenced by his first-place finish later that day in a low-profile race in his hometown where he aimed to impress the woman he would later marry. The letter threatened suspension and remarked that it was about time Colnago started paying for all the stupid things he did. It's clear that his coach's scathing words still drive him today; Ernesto Colnago learned early not to rest on his laurels. "I read this letter calling me stupid every day," he says. "Those are the life experiences that build character and integrity."

To Taiwan

This would not be the last time Colnago was criticized. A decision he made in 2005, to outsource frames to Taiwan, drew the ire of the Italian biking industry and culture. A staunch advocate for the supremacy of Italian-made cycles, Colnago did an abrupt about-face when he joined Specialized and Trek in a Taiwanese sourcing consortium controlled by Giant Bicycles. Critics claimed he'd sold out. Colnago saw it another way. A man of dynamic ideas, he realized putting price secondary in all matters was an outdated viewpoint in today's economy. Taiwan presented an opportunity to respond to the market's demand for value. Colnago could maintain the design and innovation aspects of his business in Italy, move the majority of the manufacturing to Taiwan, and maintain the best of both worlds — Italian-born innovation and a competitive price point. In the end, it was quality that sealed the deal. "I did not have to make a single concession on quality," he said, referring to Taiwan's increasingly respected manufacturing standards. "There's been not a single problem, not even one bike out of 5,000."

If Colnago is obsessed with quality, he's equally obsessed with innovation. One wonders if he does anything but work. "Do not laugh at me," he said. "But when I have downtime, I think I try to figure out something new for the sport, for the bike."

He pulls out a manila folder from his desk, bursting at the seams, barely held together by a thick rubber band. He places the folder on the desk with flourish and an Italian phrase, which can only be translated as "ta da!"

The folder is titled in black marker, the translation: "Traveling Around the World and Sleeping Little." It's stuffed with sketches on napkins, notes scribbled on the backs of menus, even musings written on airplane bag tags; they all bear testament to Colnago's penchant for pondering. His wife, Vincenzina, had quietly collected these gems while unpacking her husband's suitcase after business trips. She saved them over the years and compiled them as a recent birthday present for him. He shows one note written on the back of a Lufthansa business class brochure: "Make a special bike for Ferrari's birthday." Another, a napkin, flaunts a sketch for an early design of the C-50, the flagship carbon fiber bicycle produced for the 50th anniversary of Colnago.

Will there be a C-55? "Yes," Colnago says. Then he winks. "No one knows yet, but you can break the story." He takes one final piece from the folder, scribbled on the back of a Chinese take-out menu in 1998: "My idea is that no one will be able to stop the Chinese." He closes the folder and returns the rubber band, smiling like a kid at show-and-tell.

For 2009, Colnago changed its distribution model, establishing a U.S. office to sell to retailers instead of using a distributor. This will increase availability and lower retail prices, according to Colnago. Another big change for 2009: the company is not sponsoring a ProTour race team. However Colnago is still active in racing.

Downstairs, Eva Lechner, a Colnago-sponsored professional athlete has just completed a bike fit on a bike that would be raced at the world road championship in Varese, Italy. Ernesto runs down the stairs. He greets her with a "Bellissimo! Bellissimo! Perfetto!" He murmurs words of adoration and approval as he slowly circles Eva and her bike. Eva hails from a German-speaking region of northern Italy.

On the way back to his office, he takes a detour to introduce his 41-year-old daughter, Anna. Small in stature like her father, Anna makes up for it with an air of nobility, also like her father. Colnago's only child has been involved with the business since her youth.

Nearby is Colnago's 3,000-square-foot showroom, a combination bike museum and technology showcase. Inside is the Colnago ridden by Franco Ballerini when he won the 1998 Paris-Roubaix. The bike still sports dried mud from the race. Colnago calls out the bikes of several riders who've particularly endeared themselves to him: Eddie Merckx and Greg LeMond, two of the world's greats. He begins to reminisce, citing his loyal disciples: Felice Gimondi, Giuseppe Saronni and Thiago Motta, and many others over the years.

Today, with more than six decades in the business, Colnago is still going strong. His motivation? "Love," he says. "I love my company, my customers, the champions. I don't feel the pressure or the fatigue because of this love." **VM**