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## Fixin' to ride

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Lately, I've been feeling like a gearhead dilettante. The realization that there is indeed a gap between acquired knowledge and wild conjecture has been nagging me — particularly in regards to my beloved bicycle. Said beloved bicycle, once such a pleasure to ride, has recently taken to dragging its vulcanized heels every time we start up Potrero Hill, gasping, “I think I can't, I think I can't.” Does the problem lie with my bearings, my rims, my gears, my chain? Should I have been filling my tires more than once every six months? Do I need to invest in a Shimano 105 RD-5501 Triple Rear Derailleur? (Full disclosure, I don't actually know what that is.) I'm embarrassed to turn up at a bike shop and admit that although I once traversed the pays Tamberma of northern Togo on a single-speed clunker, I can't even fix my own flat. And frankly, judging from the way I've seen some of you court death with your squealing brakes and your red blinkies in the front, I don't think I'm the only bike enthusiast in San Francisco lacking the fundamentals.

Question is: where can we go to gain some mad cycle skills of our own?

I naturally begin my search with the San Francisco Bicycle Coalition. Andy Thornley, the boundlessly encouraging SFBC program director, provides me with a list of fix-it-yourself resources that astounds me with its paucity. I'd rather expected that a city with as flamboyantly visible a bike culture as San Francisco would have a greater emphasis on the DIY. But a little list is still a list worth checking out, especially if it promises to save me some coins and squeals. Thornley also clues me in that although SFBC doesn't offer anything in the way of bike maintenance, it does give a free 10-hour, 2-day course on road safety for urban cyclists of all levels. The course, certified by the League of American Bicyclists, includes instruction on “riding in traffic, necessary equipment, crash avoidance, and legal rights and responsibilities.” He recommends registering for the class online, where it's also possible to sign up for weekly e-mail updates on events, bike-related news, and volunteer opportunities.

On to my FYI FIY list. First stop: the Freewheel, a Western Addition fixture since 1978. The current course instructor, Wayne Brock, ushers me into what was once a health food and hardware co-op, and points out some of the amenities of the community workshop: four bike stands in the center of the room (plus two others for classes against the wall), a big blue solvent tank, a wheel-trueing stand, and a wall of shop-quality tools. A row of new hybrid cycles lines the far wall, but the emphasis here, unlike at the Freewheel branch on Valencia Street, is less on retail than on repair and custom building. Brock, 31, is a science teacher by day and actually acquired his own basic skills at Freewheel eight years ago.

“The curriculum has been ironed out over a long period of time,” he says. “Really boiled down to the essentials that will get you going.” These essentials, taught over two four-hour sessions, begin with flat repair, then continue with wheel-trueing, brake adjustments, hub overhaul, crank removal, drive train cleaning, chain maintenance, and derailleur adjustments. Already I'm a little overwhelmed. Which part is the crank? Fortunately for class participants, a take-home cheat sheet covering all of the above is provided and the \$100 course fee includes a six-month

Freewheel membership, with unlimited access to the community work space and tools during regular business hours.

One former student I talked to praises the Freewheel technique for “demystifying” the bicycle for her, though she admits to not availing herself of the membership benefits. She does, however, keep her bike much cleaner and better-lubed than before and feels more able to perform minor repairs on her own. Classes, generally held on Mondays, are limited to six students, and an absolutely nonrefundable \$50 deposit guards against no-shows. To get on the waiting list, it's best to go directly to the shop, deposit in hand. Your bike should already be in good repair, since the object of the course is familiarization, not parts replacement. Still, with complete in-store tune-ups going for \$120, the value of a class that gets you even partway there seems like a good deal.

Over at San Francisco Cyclery in the Upper Haight, shop owner Heather Bixler, herself a former Freewheel instructor, is pioneering a schedule of classes with an emphasis on specialization. After a free class in basic maintenance, participants have the option to take one or all of a series of successive one-hour, \$15 classes focusing on one component at a time: brakes, shifters, bearings, and wheels. Sometimes an additional class in roadside repair is offered, and graduates of all of the above may take a final class in complete tune-ups. Not coincidentally, the Cyclery's female-facilitated workshops attract many women, though the classes are open to everyone. The emphasis is “to really get your hands dirty,” Bixler says, though, as with Freewheel, your cycle should be in working order prior to the course. Classes range in size from five to six people and are normally held on Wednesdays or Thursdays. A \$15 deposit is required to hold your space (except for the free class), and booking is best done over the phone.

While Pedal Revolution in the Mission District has a community membership workbench plus occasional free seminars on a variety of repair topics, the nearby Bike Kitchen offers sliding-scale courses with a bit more regularity. I drop in on a wheel-building class (\$30–\$60 plus parts purchase) and watch as five newly threaded wheels are tried and trued. Instructor Brian Cavagnolo circulates while his students, including a former bike messenger and an editorial intern from a local luxury magazine, squint intently at their truing stands, spinning their wheels. I've been frustrated by the Bike Kitchen in the past when trying to get on the repair class waiting list, but Cavagnolo seems optimistic that this will be less of an issue after its big move from the Mission Village Market to Mission at Ninth Street. (The grand opening is Aug. 19.)

“It's a smaller space,” explains Cavagnolo. “So we're going to have to be more organized.” Due to be streamlined is the build-a-bike program, which allows one to earn bike parts through volunteer labor and use Bike Kitchen tools to construct a working two-wheeler. In 2005, the volunteer-run Bike Kitchen was awarded a San Francisco Bicycle Coalition Golden Wheel award for its contributions to bicycle culture in the city, and the newbie wheel builders seem pleased with the experience they're gaining.

“I took a wheel-building class [in Berkeley],” the magazine intern says, “and it was totally useless. I watched a guy build a wheel.” He rotates his self-made wheel with satisfaction. It hisses against the fork of the wheel-tuning stand as he reaches over to tighten another spoke. Cavagnolo recommends keeping abreast of class schedules via the SFBC newsletter or by visiting the Bike Kitchen Web site and e-mailing [info@bikekitchen.org](mailto:info@bikekitchen.org) to get on the waiting list.

My survey at an end, I ride my still-recalcitrant yet soon-to-be-purring steed home, my head spinning like a newly tuned wheel. I stop by Needles and Pens and pick up “A Rough Guide to Bicycle Maintenance,” a slim but informative bike zine compiled in Portland. With clearly labeled diagrams of various bike parts, some simple repair methods, and the tools I'll need to get started, I already feel one step closer to bicycle demystification. Now all I have to do is sign up for my first repair class ... and you folks with those screeching brakes and front-mounted red blinkies should probably consider doing the same. SFBG

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FREEWHEEL

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