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## MANUFACTURING: Between sea and hilltop, a niche for bikes

Local manufacturers are small in size, larger in repute

**CHRIS BAGLEY - [cbagley@nctimes.com](mailto:cbagley@nctimes.com) | Posted: Saturday, August 15, 2009 6:30 pm**

The bicycle manufacturers tucked into local industrial parks and backcountry vales are far less visible than the packs of Spandex-clad riders on the Coast Highway, but they're well known inside the quirky worlds of road cycling and mountain biking.

They produce 2,000 to more than 100,000 frames a year, not enough to become household names such as Huffy, Giant or even Trek that produce hundreds of thousands or more each year. Most have just one or two dozen local employees.

But people in the industry say small scale can make for big respect. Innovative designs become actual bicycles much faster and with consistent quality, the manufacturers say.

Bill Strickland, editor at large for *Bicycling Magazine*, pointed to Ellsworth Handcrafted Bikes Inc. near Ramona, Intense Cycles Inc. in Temecula, and Turner Suspension Bicycles Inc. in Murrieta.

"Their influence is much bigger than their sales figures," Strickland said.

Those three companies specialize in mountain bikes, though Ellsworth has expanded its offering of road cycles. Two larger companies, both in Vista, specialize in beach cruisers.

Small scale can also make for big price tags: Several of their lines start around \$3,000, and the price of a bike can reach \$10,000, depending on the wheels, derailleurs and other components that a buyer selects. Entry-level mountain bikes typically cost a few hundred dollars.

To someone who spent less on their last car or rode to school every morning on a Schwinn 10-speed, such numbers may defy logic. But they underscore cycling's tendency to produce enthusiasts, both in the sport and in the industry.

Ellsworth founder Tony Ellsworth said his mission began as a personal one in 1991, while he was working as a retirement planner.

He rode a mountain bike in his free time, and said he sensed too much of his energy being absorbed by the frame, rather than the frame rebounding to propel him forward. So he designed his own aluminum frame, had it made in a machine shop, and put it together with the wheels and other components. The Ellsworth brand and the employees followed years later.

"I'm a geek," Ellsworth said, standing at the top of the stairs in the two-story concrete-and-stucco building that serves as his company's headquarters.

Southern California's widely varied terrain and reliably clear weather have helped to make it a cradle for several sporting-goods industries, notably cycling, motocross, triathlon and golf.

"When you're covered by snow six months out of the year, it really takes a bite out of your research and development," said Jill Hamilton, brand manager for mountain bikes at Haro Bicycle Corp. in Vista.

Sporting-goods manufacturers employ about 3,400 people in San Diego and Riverside counties, and pay annual wages of \$190 million, according to state data.

Bicycle manufacturers account for just a fraction of that, employing about 120 in north San Diego County and southwest Riverside County. Most of the actual manufacturing has moved to lower-wage locations overseas, a common pattern among

labor-intensive industries.

Even so, the owners say their companies' growth has benefited from Southern California's history as a seat of high-tech and defense-oriented manufacturing. Several order tubing and other aluminum components from factories that also supply ---- or used to supply ---- the aerospace industry.

Ellsworth set up his main factory in a suburb of Portland, Ore., a larger cluster for the bicycle industry, when he moved it out of his garage five years ago. His company also contracts with a factory in Taiwan.

"The bike industry has pretty much moved to Asia, Taiwan, China," said Intense founder Jeff Steber, whose company manufactures in Temecula.

The sheer number of bikes made by Haro and Electra Bicycle Co., the Vista-based companies, is large enough to necessitate production in Asia, representatives said.

Haro says it produces more than 100,000 bikes annually, putting its annual sales perhaps in the range of \$100 million. Like the others, Haro is privately held and does not disclose precise financial information. A spokeswoman for Electra declined to give production numbers but said it is one of the 10 largest brands in the U.S.

Both have sought out niches within the larger bike world. Strickland, the magazine editor, described Haro as well-respected for its mountain bikes and beach cruisers. An Electra spokeswoman said high-quality components and stylish designs have made Electra's bikes popular among Hollywood celebrities.

Ellsworth, Steber and Dave Turner say they themselves are more concerned with the tastes of professional and competitive cyclists than with those of Paris Hilton. The manufacturers' new designs typically incorporate feedback from professionals on their payrolls.

And from the folks who actually build the frames and put them to use, Ellsworth said. He's spending this weekend mountain-biking in eastern Oregon with 25 Ellsworth bike owners.

For month-to-month design and testing, though, Ellsworth said his headquarters' location off Highland Valley Road is nearly ideal: He and employees can hump it up toward Ramona to see how a new road bike frame flexes while rocking from side to side, or zig-zag up and down the steep dirt trails on nearby hills to test part of a suspension system, which is frequently the key selling point for a mountain bike manufacturer.

On an unseasonably cool morning earlier this month, he and a couple of less experienced riders took a 28-mile loop through Ramona to compare one of his aluminum-frame road bikes with a carbon-fiber frame that's based on it. He hung back for a couple of minutes as a riding partner zipped down Highway 78 into San Pasqual Canyon, where dirt trails snaked among the dry grassy hillsides and the sky was a brilliant, clear blue.

And then he caught up, tucked in behind an SUV at nearly 50 miles an hour, became a speck, and disappeared behind a curve.

Call staff writer Chris Bagley at 760-740-5444. Read his blogs at [bizblogs.nctimes.com](http://bizblogs.nctimes.com).