

In Praise of the Front Derailleur

Written by Steve Yates

It's gone 5:15 on a Saturday morning and I'm in my driveway thinking I'm ready to head off for the century ride. It's not been a well-planned departure with last-minute filling of water bottles and retrieval of dark lenses for later in the day, but I was taken by surprise when my chain popped off before I even got on the bike. For a moment I was nonplussed, faced with the inevitability of soiling my hands putting the chain back on. I contemplated fetching some gloves from somewhere, but gave in to the grease. The chain promptly popped off again. This was odd, but it was dark and I was in a hurry and not properly awake, so I put it back on again and went to find something to clean my hands with. Luckily there was a painter's dropsheet on the verandah so I didn't have to go inside. Not perfectly clean but not entirely filthy either. Ready to go again and off popped the chain. At last my brain started to attain some higher function and I realised the problem was that because the part joining the derailleur plates at the rear had broken off some months ago, my chain was no longer captive, and in fact I'd been remounting it outside the grasp of the plates.

"Dérailleur" – it's a word I don't like to say out loud because I'm always caught between sounding like a twat for using French pronunciation, or sounding wrong by anglicising it to "derailer", like the rest of the English-speaking world manages to do without a second thought. I've occasionally tried to convince myself "changer" or "shifter" make reasonable substitutes, but neither really cuts it. Sadly I lack a copy of *The Dancing Chain* (but with Christmas approaching, there's hope), so I cannot share much authoritative insight into the history of the front derailleur. Chain derailment systems first appeared in the late nineteenth century, but with cumbersome rods to operate them they were not immediately popular, and were not used in races until the 1920s¹. With cable actuation and parallelogram linkage they became reliable, and the same basic design endured for decades. Since I first jumped on a "ten-speed" in the seventies the only significant innovations have been electronic shifting and the recent move away from front derailleurs altogether with systems like the SRAM 1x.

Chain on, hands wiped sort of clean again and I'm off. It's 5:25 so I while I push the pace to Tom Brown I'm expecting to arrive with the debate on where to go still in swing. It's a "hills" ride to the Tropic, with an out-and-back to the airport to complete the century. A typical Saturday morning with the front changer-shifter-thingy no more than a little dead weight on the front of the bike. I just have to concentrate on not wiping my face with my fingers any time before I get home.



1. p. 26, Wilson, D.G. *Bicycling Science*, The MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 2004