



# FOX RACING SHOX: BOB FOX

**T**hroughout its 35 year history the name Fox has become synonymous with high quality suspension products. The company might well have first made its name in the world of motocross, but ever since 1993, when a Fox rear shock appeared on Cannondale's first full suspension bike, they have been prominent in the world of mountainbikes. Lots of things have changed and evolved throughout the company's history, not least turning a one man band set-up working out of a friend's garage into a multi million dollar business, but one thing has remained constant...Bob Fox is the man in charge.

#### HOW DID YOU COME TO START FOX?

It's the old story of a sport or hobby that you love that leads you into starting a business. In the early 70's I loved racing motocross. The so-called 'Long-Travel Revolution' was happening then, wheel travel went from about 4" in the early 70's to around 12" by the mid-70's. The problem was that the shock absorbers that had been working OK with 4" of travel were now over-worked with 12" of travel. They were overheating and fading (losing damping during the race), and all too often an over-stressed shock would break apart during the race.

As a motocross racer I knew about these problems, I was in the middle of all this. I'm also a mechanical engineer, so in 1974 I decided to take a shot at designing a better shock, one that would handle the demands of the new long-travel suspension designs, and work really well. I was also fascinated with the idea of using internal air pressure to replace the conventional coil springs usually used, and so I called them 'FOX AirShox'.

How well did they work? Well, just two years later Kent Howerton put FOX AirShox on his factory Husqvarna and went on to win the 1976 U.S. 500cc National Motocross Championship! After that, as they say, the rest is history.

#### HOW'S THE COMPANY CHANGED OVER THE YEARS?

There have been lots of changes. Probably one of the more interesting is that when the company began, the only market we were involved in was motocross. Motocross was 100% of our business, but a decade later we were completely out of motocross, by the late 80's motocross was 0% of our business. What happened? The biggest change was that the bike OEM's began producing new motocross bikes with better shocks. Whereas previously any serious rider would immediately purchase aftermarket shocks for his or her new motocross bike, now many riders found this was no longer a necessity. Also, our aftermarket competition had become a lot tougher.

So with our motocross orders declining rapidly in the early 80's, the company was struggling. Compared with the instant success we had enjoyed with the AirShox (and the sense of "Wow, where has this been all my life?"), these tough times came as a bit of a surprise to us. What I found out, and what I like to tell people who ask, is this: you learn an awful lot more

about business when sales are bad than you do when sales are good. When sales are good it seems easy, but until you've gone through a period when sales go bad, there's still a lot about business that you don't really know yet.

We decided that in order to survive as a company, we had to find new markets. So over the years we've learned to design winning shocks for off-road cars, for Indy cars, for snowmobiles, for ATV's, for bicycles, and for various other applications. We've learned that each market has unique requirements, and we've developed a broad range of technologies to meet them. Because we were forced to broaden ourselves beyond just motocross we are a much better and stronger company today. And, going full circle now, the really great news is that after a 25-year absence we are now getting back into the motocross market!

Our return to motocross was enabled by all the new technology and new ideas we've learned and developed over many years in many different markets. We are confident that, by combining, twisting and tweaking the various technologies we've learnt, and by coming up with some new ones, we can once again offer suspension products for motocross that will provide a winning edge. For me, this is *deja-vu*. All the changes have taken us full circle right back to motocross where it all started, and it sure feels good.

#### DID YOU EVER IMAGINE THE COMPANY COULD GROW TO WHAT IT IS TODAY?

Absolutely not. Never dreamed or imagined it. That was never the goal. What drove me was mostly a 'pride of engineering' kind of thing. I believed in myself, that I was a pretty good engineer, and I loved racing, and I just wanted to make the best possible shocks. So I just went for it.



Looking back at it now, I think to myself, "Wow, I guess that's the beauty of youth (I was just 35 then), you think you can do anything." You don't think about how it's just one guy (you) against the big corporations out there that are going to compete with you, and how likely it is that you will fail. It was just taking one day at a time, there was no master plan. It was sort of like that saying about a thousand mile journey begins with a single step, except then I had no idea that I was going on a thousand mile journey. But, it sure has been an exciting trip.

#### WHY DID YOU START PRODUCING MOUNTAIN BIKE PRODUCTS?

It was a perfect fit. Given our background in motocross and other kinds of racing, this was a natural. We didn't need to have an MBA degree to figure that out. So when the mountain bike market began to take off in the early '90's we jumped right in.

#### WHAT PROPORTION OF THE COMPANY DOES THE BIKE SECTION MAKE UP?

That varies year to year, but currently the bike division is roughly three-quarters of our business.

#### HOW COME IT TOOK YOU RIGHT YEARS TO MAKE THE MOVE INTO PRODUCING FORKS AS WELL AS REAR SHOCKS?

Forks and shocks (of course) are both 'suspension components' involving spring rates and damping. However, one very major difference is that the design of forks involves testing, analysis and optimization of many structural aspects (such as strength, weight, stiffness and fatigue behavior in various modes, etc) to a far greater degree than rear shocks. Prior to year 2000 we didn't have the right in-house experience and expertise for design and procurement of the magnesium lowers - one of the most critical structural components. We didn't want to enter the market until we had a superior top-end product, and that's always been a core FOX new-product philosophy.

In 2000 all the stars aligned so to speak,

everything we needed just kind of fell into place. We decided the time and opportunity was right to launch our mountain bike fork project, so we did it. The plan was to focus on the top end of the market only. Our goal was to be the industry leader in that category within five years. We like to think we have succeeded...and then some.

#### DO YOU THINK YOU'LL EVER MAKE MX FORKS?

Complete forks? Maybe, but it's too soon to say. We are working on development of new technologies for MX forks, but in general these technologies involve the fork cartridge only, not the fork chassis. Features and performance of the fork cartridges are where we see the biggest opportunities for enhancement, therefore that's what we're focused on now, and not complete forks. Whether or not we might decide to offer complete forks at some later date remains to be seen.

#### DO YOU DO MUCH RIDING YOURSELF?

Not as much as I'd like to, but that may

change as I free up more time. I still love the challenge of being an engineer and designing cool new products, but after 35 plus years the time has come for me to cut back on my hours a bit. Then I'll do more riding.

#### WHAT IS MOUNTAIN BIKING TO YOU?

Fun and great exercise. Also, and I think all the top design guys would agree, to do your best work as a design engineer there's no substitute for actually riding the product (in addition to getting feedback from pro test riders). You need to personally experience the features and performance of your new shock or fork design. So that's another reason I ride.

#### WHAT'S YOUR COMPANY ETHOS?

Work hard. Work smart. Whatever you do, try to do it better than anyone else could. Take pride in whatever you do. Do it because you love it, not just because it's your job.

#### WHAT'S YOUR GREATEST MEMORY?

Hmmm...I'd have to say that no one particular memory stands out above all the rest, but here's a few that are definitely up there: When Kent Howerton won the 1976 500cc National Championship on FOX AirShox. That was huge, and very exciting. And when Marty Smith won it again in 1977. That also was huge, and again very exciting. Those first MX Championships are really what launched the company.

Being there in the stands at the 1983 Indianapolis 500, and watching along with 400,000 other fans as Tom Sneva won the Indy 500 using FOX shocks was another great memory. Thanks to TV coverage it felt like the whole world was watching, and we had won it.

But, the best memories aren't the race wins. At the end of the day, the best memories are the people, the many really terrific individuals I've had the pleasure and privilege of working with, racing with, and getting to know over the last 35 years. And many of them I'm still working with every day right here at FOX in Watsonville. I won't even begin to try to make a list, it would be too long. But, I'd just like to take this opportunity to say "thanks for everything" to each and every one of them. They made all the difference, they made it happen.

#### ANY FUTURE AMBITIONS?

Keep on having fun as an engineer, designing really cool, great products. Start doing more of the things that I've postponed for 35 years while I was dedicated to running the company. Like traveling more, and spending more time with family and friends. Another goal is to help others, and to find ways to 'give back' to the sports (like mountain biking and motocross) that were the foundation of the company's success. Another ambition is to spend time learning more about, and becoming involved with, organizations dedicated to helping make the world a little bit better place to live for the many among us who are less fortunate.

#### FINALLY, ANY LAST PEARLS OF WISDOM?

The best way to find happiness and success is to do something you love and are good at. As for me, I've been lucky enough to have spent the last 35 years of my career following that formula, and I wouldn't trade it for anything. 