

Browning Smartshift Limited Edition

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Known for their innovations with guns, the family now revolutionizes biking.

Between the gun in police Lt. Chris Jensen's holster and the patrol bike he rides on Winslow's streets are five-generations of Browning family innovations.

Inventors of the first auto-loading shotgun and standard-issue pistols, semi-automatic rifles and machine guns spanning four U.S. wars, the island family's name is synonymous with guns.

But the latest batch of Browning-bred innovators has shifted gears a bit, transferring their genetic penchant for mechanical miracles toward bicycles, right here on Bainbridge Island.

"Our dad, Bruce, got us started with a brainstorm around the dinner table," said Marc Browning, 50, as he held one of the patented split-sprockets found on all nine Bainbridge police bikes. "Dad was tired of paperwork at the gun company and wanted to invent.

"He chose bikes because they're cheap and sat us down to help him solve the problem of shifting."

Bruce Browning had toiled in the family company as a gun designer for almost 20 years. The four sons he gathered around the table were on break from college studying film, chemistry and math.

While none were particularly bike-savvy, the Brownings quickly crafted a mechanism that replaces the traditional shifting derailleur with a hinged sprocket that smoothly guides the chain to the next gear. The innovation, which resembles the swinging rail-shifting mechanism on train tracks, eliminates skipping and grinding under full, uphill pedal pressure.

The family established Browning Components in the mid-1970s to tackle their next goal in pedal-powered evolution: fully automatic shifting.

After 20 years of development, the Brownings unveiled the first computerized bike transmission system in the mid-1990s.

Like an onboard co-pilot, a palm-sized black box of batteries and microchips automatically shifts up or down, depending on pedal speed or pre-programmed preferences.

Marketed for a new genre of "comfort bikes," the Browning SmartShift technology allows a casual bicyclist to focus more on the ride than the mechanics that make it happen.

For Bainbridge police, computerized shifting means patrol officers can devote more attention to their surroundings.

"It's one less thing to think about when you're riding through Waterfront Park, or checking to see if drivers have their seat belt on or what that person down the alley is doing," said Jensen, who established the department's bike program two years ago. "It allows us to focus and concentrate on the job at hand."

Custom built by the Brownings for Bainbridge police, the bikes were also outfitted with heavy-duty shocks, and quiet-rolling wheels and came with individually adjusted handle bars and seats to match each officer.

Bainbridge Rotary chipped in half the cost for the bikes, while Browning covered the rest. The Browning brothers still offer free tune-ups and replacement parts, should the bikes need any maintenance.

"But they haven't really, yet," Jensen said. "They've held up pretty well. The family has always had a good reputation for quality."

Family smarts

That reputation begins with Jonathan Browning, a Mormon pioneer who rode west alongside Brigham Young.

Busy with three wives and 22 children, Jonathan also worked as a farmer, tanner and blacksmith.

"Blacksmiths were the first engineers," said Paul Browning, 43, who handles much of the company's finances and mechanical research. "If you needed something built, you asked the blacksmith."

Guns were in high demand on the frontier, and Jonathan's early experiments with firearms caused a spark in his son John's imagination. John Browning built a long-lasting empire in American gun manufacturing, with innovations that included the Browning Automatic Rifle, used by GIs in World War II and the Korean War, and the perennially popular Colt .45.

While the Day Road office is decorated with portraits of the Browning forefathers, the three brothers stress they

have no affiliation with the old family trade.

Questions about a black-and-white photo of spry-looking John Browning crouched behind a World War I machine gun elicit mostly shrugs and a few vague guesses.

“We’re not involved with guns,” said Paul Browning. “We do something much more peaceful.”

But all three share the family tradition of cooperation and mechanical invention.

“It’s a family tradition to work together,” said David Browning, 52, who heads the company’s computer and drafting efforts. “We all love to work on projects and keep our hands busy.”

While no longer crafting firearms, the brothers have looked to old family markets to sell their bike-related innovations.

“We think there’s some great potential in the U.S. military,” said Marc Browning, who handles much of the company’s bike research.

“Any time (troops) are marching down the road, they’re wasting a lot of efficiency. Imagine them on bikes. The bicycle is the perfect vehicle for our human engine. Add an 80-pound pack on a long march, and nothing could be better than two wheels.”

Marc Browning also predicts expanded partnerships with police departments.

“There’s something like 4,000 police bike programs nationwide,” he said. “Multiply that by 12 or 20 bikes per program and you have quite a market.”

Initially targeted for aging baby boomers interested in a comfortable, easy-to-use bike, the Brownings crafted about 2,000 SmartShift bikes to pique interest in the bike industry. While a few smaller manufacturers, including the Utah-based Grisley Bicycle Co., have incorporated the technology, Browning has yet to find their ideal partnership.

“It’s a great idea, but I’m not sure the general public’s ready for it,” said Classic Cycle co-owner Jeff Groman. “From an engineering perspective, I like what Browning did a lot. But this industry’s about public opinion, and cost is a real factor.”

Ranging from \$1,000 to \$1,5000 per bike, the basic Browning auto-shifter falls in the price range of many high-performance bikes.

But few hard-core bikers are willing to release control to a computer, much as a sports car driver would never trade his stick-shift for an automatic.

Marc Browning said it’s also difficult to market a bike unless it gets a high-profile endorsement from the pros.

While the Brownings crafted a custom racer for U.S.A. Cycling, the bike was banned from international competition after it shaved a second off a lap from one of the country’s best bike sprinters.

“We hit a wall with that,” Marc said. “It made his time faster because he didn’t have to bother with shifting so he could go full bore all the time.”

While the pace of Browning Components has slowed, the brothers hope to pick up speed with Browning Research, a custom machining company they run along side the bike design business.

With the hands-on help of machinist Helen Maurer, the Brownings will build just about anything nobody else will. They’ve crafted mammoth keys for English cathedrals and impossible-to-find parts for unique European cars.

“Sometimes people will bring in some odd bent up thing from some strange car,” said Paul Browning. “There might be 50 of these cars left in the world, so you can imagine it’s hard to get a replacement part for it. But Helen’s amazing and whips them right out.”

Marc Browning hasn’t given up on bikes, although the downtime has allowed him to return to screenwriting, his driving passion in college and grad school.

“Inventing is a family tradition and we all love working together, but it’s a real challenge,” he said. “When I go to Las Vegas, I never gamble because every day at work is a gamble.”

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