

CULT

By Mark Riedy

Campagnolo makes the most seductive bicycle components in the world—just ask the believers.

Campagnolo components are lovely, curvaceous, sexy. No cyclist familiar with the ti, carbon and aluminum bits would doubt that; even noncyclists appreciate the inherent quality and artistry of the stuff. But Campagnolo as a business makes no sense. The company doesn't focus on inexpensive parts for the masses. It doesn't even try to make parts for mountain bikes (a full third of the U.S. market). Thus it completely concedes these customers to industry titan Shimano, which dominates all comers, both in units and dollars. And even though Campy machinery works beautifully, there's almost always a cost premium, compared to similar parts from other companies. Call it the Campy Tax, the price of cool. Frankly, anyone examining Campy from a hard-core business perspective would have trouble understanding how the 70-year-old family-owned Italian firm can survive, let alone innovate.

But consider Peter Johnson, a 47-year-old machinist from Redwood City, California, who sold a 1958 Campy Record five-pin crank on eBay for \$3,200. "Actually," says Johnson, "it wasn't even a whole crank. Just two arms." Everything became clear. We'd been trying to analyze Campy's hold on cyclists in impartial, rational terms. But Campy isn't about a profit. It's about a *prophet*, founder Tullio Campagnolo. Campy—with adherents who not only pay huge sums for the latest carbon Record *gruppo* but may own dozens, or even tens of dozens, of vintage components, and who have tattooed the company's logo

onto their bodies, and spent hard-earned cash on empty parts boxes—is not merely a company. Campagnolo is a cult.

Sound fantastic? Here are six key factors associated with cults, as identified by leading cult-research groups, each followed with evidence of Campy's cult.

1. Leaders are perceived as being chosen by God, history or some supernatural force.

Adherents of Campy believe that Tullio Campagnolo wasn't just an industrious, inspired racer-turned-parts-maker, but a mystic sent from on high. Consider the reverence attached to a grainy, sepia-tinted photo of an otherworldly landscape. A crust of snow and patches of fog dominate a mountainous background. The blurred figure of a rider, hunched under the weight of the stormy sky, cuts a sloppy brown track across the otherwise snow-covered foreground. The rider is 26-year-old Tullio Campagnolo, and to Campy fanatics this scene is not simply the inspiration for the company founder's first invention (the quick-release), it's the moment when Tullio was, like St. Paul on the road to Damascus, "struck as if by lightning from God," according to the official Campagnolo biography (see number 2, page 70).

During that 1927 race from the Veneto plain in northeastern Italy into the Dolomites, Campagnolo was riding with a small lead bunch. When the group stopped at the base of the 3,300-foot Croce d'Aune to manually switch to easier gears for the 5-mile climb ahead—with its brutish switchbacks and 10–12-percent pitches toward the summit—Tullio was left behind when his fingers proved too frosty to loosen the wing

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When it comes to showing off the logo, Campy fanatics don't stop with their bikes.

ost always a cost premium to run it. Call it the Campy Tax, the price of cool.



"When I was a kid only guys with jobs and checkbooks had Campy," says Peter Johnson, 47, with his own massive collection of vintage Campagnolo parts.

nuts on his rear wheel. As he slogged on alone, a lightning bolt of divine inspiration struck and he imagined a way to secure wheels in the dropouts that would also allow quick changes. Six years later, Campagnolo would be in business.

2. Disciples invest their leaders with unshakeable authority and refuse to question or doubt sacred doctrine and ideology. A few years ago, 100 years after the birth of Tullio (who died in 1983), Campy fanatics gathered on celebratory rides organized to commemorate their hero. A passage in a book held sacred by many disciples—*The Giant and the File*, a fawning biography of Tullio Campagnolo penned by sports journalist Gianni Brera, who was commissioned by the company—establishes the manner in which the company should be regarded: "Tullio's shop repairs humble bicycles; no pride is permissible when bread is so scarce."

Even the most objective analysis shows some startling innovations by the tiny Italian company—the first quick-release, an early derailleur, the introduction of 10-speed cassettes. Shimano, which started index shifting, integrated brake/shift levers, and has ruled the mountain bike world, is at least as impressive in terms of research and development, and unquestionably better at trickling down its product to the masses. Yet the Japanese company is savaged for practices such as not making its new technology backward-compatible and even leaving improved technology on the shelf until the competition forces its hand. Campy acolytes rarely criticize its outdated square-taper bottom brackets, blithely disregard the company's early-1990s failures in mountain-bike components (such as the Record or Euclid groups), or cite this as proof that Campy has more purity on the road.

3. The group presents its vision to neophytes as inviting and challenging. As proof of Campy's perfection, adherents

point to the saints of cycling that have ridden the components. "The Campagnolo brand has been related with all the great icons of cycling history," says Fulvio Acquati, marketing manager of Italian component maker Deda Elementi. "From Coppi to Merckx, from Pantani to Hinault, the legend is built on racing. With Campagnolo components you can [imagine] the same adventures with exactly the same weapons. People need real proof of saints and Campagnolo's components are good proof."

Such iconography is very effective at creating fealty, according to Matt Rolandson, an expert in brand strategy and identity design who is based in San Francisco. Rolandson, who has worked with firms that depend heavily on iconography, such as Apple Computer, Coca-Cola and the Walt Disney Company, says, "Icons personify a culture's most deeply held beliefs and ideals. By their mere presence, they broadcast rules to live by and provide a sort of ready-made identity that is perfectly in tune with our most essential desires and aspirations."

4. Disciples become psychologically dependent on the group for existence. On random checks of eBay we found nearly 1,000 people dealing Campagnolo parts, and more than double that number selling Shimano bits. But the difference in the way sellers characterize what they're hawking is profound. Most of the Shimano items are new, and there's zero poetry attached by the dealers to the thing they're vending.


"Campagnolo is the epitome of virtue. It's about heroism, drama, innovation, passion, suffering and tradition."

Campagnolo brokers all seem to be parting with tenderly protected foster children. And while their items command bids ranging from a few dollars to several hundred, the casual observer can see little more than passion used as the guide for setting minimum bids. Want to spend \$250 on a 30-year-old Campy Super Record rear derailleur that is dinged up and doesn't work with current drivetrains? Go to eBay. Newsgroups, chat rooms and fan sites such as campyonly.com, which bills itself as "the web's premiere source for unofficial, independent news and information about the world's best cycling components," help establish a context in which this obsession seems normal.

Or, as 60-year-old Chuck Schmidt of Pasadena, California, who owns 35 Campy-equipped bikes, says: "In the 1980s Campy came up with the perfect slogan: 'when technology becomes emotion.' That sums it up to me."

Peter Johnson, the guy who sold the cranks for \$3,200 and thinks that he may even own a Campagnolo-equipped Bianchi raced by Fausto Coppi, shares similar sentiments: "I remember seeing [a friend's Campy-equipped Cinelli] for the first time. I remember the crank and the hubs, how they shined. I borrowed it for the afternoon and it was like having a Ferrari. It threw my senses completely off."

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Chuck Schmidt, in vintage wool, says he owns 35 Campy-clad bikes because, "They don't just make tools for riding, they put art into their work and that's the mojo."

CAMPAGNOLO PAST AND PRESENT

The outbreak of WWII less than a decade after Tullio Campagnolo received his first rear-derailleur patent, and the scarcity of raw materials that ensued, forced Campagnolo and his lone employee to survive by repairing the grocery-getting bikes used by the townspeople of Vicenza, Italy.

After surviving the carnage of the war, Campagnolo's sales soared along with Europe's postwar economy and the resulting accessibility of leisure-time activities. During the 1960s, the company cemented its dominance of the high-end component market with the introduction of the stalwart Nuovo Record group, Superleggero pedals and famed Campagnolo tool kit—the latter packaged in an exquisite, lacquered wooden box. The American bike boom of the 1970s boosted the company's momentum and global appeal. With the approach of Campagnolo's 50th anniversary, the 1980s looked to be Campagnolo's biggest decade. But the death of 81-year-old Tullio in February 1983, and the emergence of Shimano as a player in the high-end road market—Shimano introduced its groundbreaking Index Shifting system in 1984—was a one-two punch that dazed Campagnolo. The sudden, overwhelming popularity of mountain biking—a market in which Campagnolo has never found success—amounted to a standing eight count for the boys from Vicenza.

In the early 1990s a limping Campagnolo rebounded by focusing on its traditional core, the performance road market, introducing new products such as complete wheelsets and new technologies such as Ergopower, lever-mounted shifting. With performance that rivaled Shimano's best drivetrains, Campagnolo picked up steam and eventually rebounded to the legend created by Tullio. According to Campagnolo USA, 2004 will go down in the books as its strongest year ever. Yet compact carbon cranks from brands such as FSA and Deda Elementi and 10-speed shifting from Shimano promise to make the world of bicycle components as competitive as ever in 2005. Fortunately, Campagnolo has a legend on its side and the most dedicated customers in the business.—M.R.

Record-C's Delta Brakes are perhaps the most visually stunning Campagnolo component ever.

5. Purity demands that an Us vs. Them mentality is developed: Brand guru Rolandson isn't surprised to hear that, in our experience, when you speak to any hard-core Campy fan, talk will turn to Shimano and the many ways that it's inferior, including the fact that Shimano riders lack loyalty; they're happy to spec SRAM, FSA, Ritchey or whatever else works well. Rolandson cites Campy's "creation myth" as one way the company inspires devotion: "No one else comes close to Tullio battling the frozen axle on the Croce d'Aune," he says. "What's Shimano's creation myth? A company in post-war Japan racing to perfect the commodification of industrial goods? You tell me which is more powerful."

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only Campagnolo can offer all of these qualities in one convenient quick-release—or brake lever, etc.

6. Dispensing of existence: There is only the group; outsiders are evil. There is only Campagnolo. Just ask CampyOnly.com creator Eric Norris of Davis, California. He's in his mid-40s and has a family and a day job, but his passion is Campagnolo hardware and his CampyOnly site. Norris was indoctrinated in the 1980s while logging lots of road miles in Orange County, California, and has the most dogmatic and, depending on your view, either affirming or deluded say: "Anyone who is buying Campagnolo could buy Shimano, but they're buying Campy because it's Campagnolo. Only a Campy-equipped bike is a Campy-equipped bike."

CAMPAGNOLO SPOKEN HERE

THE SECRET LINGUA OF FANATICS—TRANSLATED FOR THE REST OF US

50th Anniversary—Gold-encrusted Super Record groups made in 1983 to celebrate the company's half-century mark. The approximately 15,000 groups were each numbered and specially packaged. Legend has it that the Pope got group number 2.

1010 and 1010B—Campy's horizontal dropouts, prized by vintage freaks because they offer a wide range of fore-aft adjustability. The B version was lighter because it was shorter and lacked a fender/rack mount.

1034—Campagnolo's famed Record hubset. It went largely unchanged for about three decades (1950s–1980s) and won more races at all levels than any hub in history.

Cambio a Bachetta—Campagnolo's early rear-gear changer. It used a sliding hub with dual seatstay-mounted rods to move the chain and required some serious finesse to operate.

Campagnolo Spoken Here—The official Campagnolo decal featured on the front door of any discerning pro shop in the '80s.

Corkscrew—For opening the company Kool-Aid, Campagnolo has made oversized corkscrews in gold, silver and bronze finishes as well as a less expensive plastic model. What better tool could you use to pull the plug on a bottle of Campagnolo wine (the company had its own vineyards until recently)?

Delta—Ultrasexy, triangular-shaped brakes that were produced in Record-C and Croce d'Aune versions beginning in 1986; the zenith of Campy's late-'80s baroque design period.

Euclid—High-grade mountain bike group made by Campagnolo beginning in 1990. Featured Campy's Bullet twist shifters and brake levers that rivaled the size of those found on motorcycles.

Hat—You couldn't be near a bike event in the 1970s and '80s without seeing a Campagnolo cycling cap or T-shirt (see the movie *Breaking Away*). Funny thing is, Campagnolo never collected royalties from the sale of any logo merchandise.

Icarus—Not only poorly named (did they not know about the legend?), the inexpensive Campy MTB group, like the rest of its off-road kits, didn't fly.

BMX—Campy's attempt to cash in on the BMX craze of the 1980s. Its BMX cranks, hubs and pedals are prized for their gold, silver, blue and black finishes.

Peanut Butter Wrench—Campagnolo's box-end 15mm wrench, ostensibly used for tweaking crank bolts on pista hubs. It gained this nickname in the 1970s when bike bums used the flat handle of the wrench for making peanut butter sandwiches.

Pump Head—Fashioned from steel and screwed to a plastic Silca pump, a Campagnolo pump head was the preferred weapon during the 1970s and '80s for fighting off rabid dogs.

Record-C—Introduced in 1984 as a sculpted and aerodynamic replacement for Super Record. Campagnolo's first major post-Tullio group.

Super Record—The most celebrated group ever produced by Campy, it debuted in 1974 and was the first parts group to feature titanium and extensive drilling and machining.

Syncro—Campagnolo's first shot at indexed shifting, so-called because it used a series of notched, swappable inserts in the lever that were intended to make the shifters work with any drivetrain. An ambitious plan, but even today, nobody has succeeded in making shifters that speak Italian, French and Japanese.

Tool—A legend in a box, Campagnolo's complete tool kit came in a lacquered wooden case and featured everything from taps to dropout alignment tools to the oft-used peanut butter wrench (see above).

Vicenza—Mecca to Campyheads, this small town in Northern Italy's Veneto region is where Campagnolo was founded and still hums along today. Nestled in the foothills of the Dolomites, the terrain surrounding the factory is a perfect testing ground.—M.R.