

SARACEN

Chipps talks to the folk behind Saracen 2.0 about reinventing a legend.

Words and pictures by Chipps (unless otherwise credited).

Saracen Cycles 2.0 is a classic example of rebooting a classic, but faded, brand and turning it right round. From supermarket-level bikes to World Championship-winning head-turners in a little more than a year? And all done with a small group of passionate staff and a lot of vision.

‘What on earth are they thinking?’ That’s what everyone in the bike industry thought when Madison bought the Saracen brand from its original owners, the Stanforth brothers, in 2009. Moreover, all that Madison got in the sale was the brand name and a few lever-arch files of old brochures. That was it. The distributor would be starting from scratch with the brand.

However, this wasn’t a purchase made on impulse, or wearing rose-tinted retro-glasses – a lot of thought went into it. Dom Langan, Madison’s CEO, was the drive behind the acquisition of the brand and he saw its potential, despite the scoffs of some of his peers. To him, reinventing an established brand was a lot more straightforward (and hopefully cheaper) than trying to create a new one from scratch. He also saw where it would fit within Madison’s other house brands of Genesis and Ridgeback, both established names in their own rights.

Dom: “I already knew how hard it is to introduce a new brand into the market and felt that it may be simpler to repair a damaged brand than it is to create a new one from the ground up. You cannot invent heritage. Saracen had heritage and a huge number of consumers had experienced the brand. Despite all the industry snobbishness, most people who owned a Saracen had not had a negative experience with the brand. I also knew that many specialist retailers, just like Madison in the late ’80s and early ’90s, had enjoyed strong sales with the brand. I was certain that Saracen would still have some space in the specialist retailer’s heart, even if there was no longer any space for it on the shop floor! I also knew that there were riders out there of my generation who had fond memories of the brand in their youth. I wanted to recapture that.”





Simon Wild with a steel prototype.

Putting the team together.

In order to make a winning brand, Madison had to find an all-round bike designer/brand manager/project manager to dig deep into Saracen's past and to find the essential Saracen DNA behind those long-held affections of many riders. It wouldn't be easy though, as Madison was effectively trying to 'do a Skoda' and create a new, quality name from one that had seen better days. Not every aspiring bike designer saw it as a challenge worth taking up. Dom again: "I loved the fact that the cognoscenti thought that the acquisition of Saracen was bonkers. It made people interested and it helped create marketing buzz. It made it tough to recruit, as not all potential product designers could see past the name, but Simon Wild got it right away."

Simon was already making a name for himself in the UK bike trade, having come from Halfords (based in Asia, sourcing bikes) and ending up at Raleigh as Senior Product Manager for Raleigh and Diamondback. He knew his way around the 'design in the UK, make in the Far East' model of bike production and he had a good reputation as well as good contacts. He also had the most important qualification: endless amounts of enthusiasm and drive.

After a chance chat at Eurobike in 2008 at a SRAM party "over a bucket o' beer" with Phil Hammill of

Madison, Phil hinted to Simon that Madison would be doing something big soon that he might be interested in. A few weeks later, Wild was talking to Dom Langan and the plan was revealed. To many people, the idea of taking responsibility for Saracen's reinvention would be career suicide, but not Simon.

"When I first found out about Saracen I was beyond excited. I grew up with Saracen, so from the beginning it had a special place in my heart. I think we (Madison) were all under no illusions about the brand and its chequered history, especially the ten years before Madison bought the name. Let's face it, it had been through the mill: sold short in national retailers and spread too thin, lacking in focus and direction – suspension BMX and folding bikes, anyone? Its heritage was in the dirt and in the late '80s to early '90s, Saracen was on the first wave of mountain bike design with the likes of Pace and Orange. We wanted to recapture that and put it back on the map. It was a passion that Dom shared too, having seen the early rise of Saracen and also having sold Saracen bikes in the Freewheel shop in London. The range was all about getting the focus back in Saracen and bringing it home to the IBD [independent bike dealer]. It has great heritage and that's something that can't be bought."



Manon and Saracen got off to a flying start.

What next?

What happened next, from the outside, wasn't a whole lot. Madison had bought the marque, but then appeared to do nothing with it. The old Saracen bikes faded from the shops and 2009 saw no new (or even existing) Saracen bikes released. This was to 'clear the decks' and allow some delineation between Saracen 1.0 and Saracen 2.0 (New! Improved! Better flavour and whiter whites!). Behind the scenes there was a six-month crush of work as Simon worked all hours to try to get a range of bikes designed. The new Saracen didn't use any of the old designs, nor any of the old factories. It was a true clean slate, with the only proviso being to do the brand justice.

2010 saw the introduction of a new Saracen brand, sold only through bike shops, with 17 hardtail models in that first year. The Tufftrax was back, the Zen and the Mantra were joined by jump bike and junior models. Take up was slow, but Langan had been clear that he knew it was going to be a medium to long-term project to turn the brand around, so he didn't put undue pressure on the numbers. The 2010-2011 season was the turning point, though. Simon got renowned suspension designer Ryan Carroll on board; the pair developed the suspension system that appeared in 2011 with the Ariel 140 full suspension trail bike and the Myst downhill bike. These two bikes went down a storm with the mountain bike press and riders alike. Madison launched its junior downhill squad, racing the World Cup circuit on the new Myst, with some good up and coming racers, including a fresh-faced Manon Carpenter.

Then, as vindication to Madison's faith in the brand, at the muddy World Championships at Champéry in 2011, Manon won the Junior Downhill World Champion title. Both Simon and Dom were there to see it. Simon had just packed the booth up at Eurobike, driven six hours through the night to the race venue and slept in the van, but the following day got to see the results of a couple of hard years' work as Manon raced to victory. That bike, mud and all, is still proudly displayed at Madison's office. After that, it was game on for the new old brand. Simon says: "From 2011/12 it started to get bigger than just one man, so I've had the privilege of building a small but talented team around me, including Andy Ayers (on rhythm guitar), Ryan Carroll (on bass) and Matt Kemp (on drums)."

Ryan still does a lot of the suspension design, with Andy taking care of a lot of the dull but hugely important paperwork bits of the brand, working with spreadsheets and sales teams, warranty and forecasting. Matt has the equally important job of making sure the bikes look as good as possible, designing ads, decals and colour schemes. He's now aided by James Webber, the ex-intern, who came to experience working at the brand and who was asked to stay.



The cupboard of 'ooh'

Fitting it all in at Saracen Towers.

With an expanding staff and 52 different models (plus eight frame kits) in the 2014 range, I hoped that the Saracen offices would look as flash as some of its bikes, with a staff of hundreds to attend to all the 'can you just' jobs that bike designing needs. From visits to other bike companies, I suspected that it wouldn't quite match my expectations and the room Simon showed me into, in Madison's Milton Keynes office, proved me right. A strip-lit single office housed five desks, some overflowing cupboards and boxes of product samples, a shelf of prototype (or broken) bits here and there and some bike jewellery in the form of boxes of 2015 XTR, carbon swingarms and ex-team frames. That was all there was to it.

Simon, my high-vis-wearing tour guide showed me round the tiny office with a mix of irreverence and nonchalance. "Oh, this? It's a 3D printed rear swingarm. And this is the first sample of the hugely complex carbon rear end of the new Myst. And here's a box of rejected bits, don't look at that one... ahh, and this is our action figure collection!" In the corner, Matt and James smirked away from behind their huge design iMacs, well used to their colleague's quirks. Saracen has forged a unique path from the beginning and everyone at Madison seems used to the slightly maverick air of its staff.

The tour of the office didn't last long. You can stand in one spot, look left and right and take it all in, so we moved further down the corridor, past the neighbouring

Genesis office (a very similar set-up) and onto what was once a bike workshop, now crammed with unpainted ride-samples and old back ends of team bikes. Simon has a stock of test riders: pro riders, Madison staff and his own contacts, who do much of the product testing. With something like the Toray carbon swingarms that appeared on the Myst downhill bikes in 2012, Saracen first tried a 'light as possible' version out on the team riders for a season. With no breakages from the team, it knew it had a good design, but still upped the weight of it a little for production. A pro downhill racing every weekend can still be a lot lighter on gear than big Reg, who goes out hucking-to-flat in the woods once a month. Further down the corridor was a Quality Control and Warranty room, the staff canteen (labelled 'The Mess') and elsewhere, a dedicated photo studio.

A lot of the work that Simon and Ryan do is the fiddly, dull-but-important stuff. The big chunks, like the suspension, are usually sorted out on computer before they start to exist in reality, but what takes up much of the time between model years is little things like working out things like cable routing, replaceable dropouts and tolerances between pivots, shock shafts and bearings. And once you start working in carbon, paying £30,000 for a set of frame moulds (with a different one needed for each size of frame), you really want to make sure that you have all the details, angles and hardware worked out before you commit.

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The Saracen office shares a large building with Sportline's warehouse. This is where all the bike brands that Madison deals with are stored and shipped from. Seeing house-high racking full of Saracen-branded boxes makes you appreciate the scale of the brand and the responsibility of those behind it. Yet Simon, Ryan and the others seem casual about the undertaking and with full acceptance of their responsibilities. They're all passionate mountain bikers themselves and they don't need to be reminded what's at stake: the renewed reputation of this classic brand that they've all helped revive.

A look through Saracen's secure vault (actually a cut-and-shut shipping container out the back) revealed more prototypes that never made it: the 'too much, too soon' fillet brazed Kili Flyer steel bike that appeared briefly in 2011, as well as the original Zen frame – the first 27.5in frame that most people had seen in the UK, long before they became widespread. There's even Manon's Worlds jersey, waiting for someone to go and get it framed. Even though the brand has only been at Madison for five years, it's already gained its own history and heritage.

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I asked Simon about his plans for the brand for the future. The company has already introduced a full carbon version of the popular Kili Flyer, so it's not inconceivable that it's working on more full carbon frames. Elsewhere, the range is still expanding, with 'Hack' rugged road/gravel/cyclocross bikes, a sportive road bike line and a new full-carbon road bike with thru-axles front and rear. It seems that there are few bike categories that the brand couldn't now have a good go at. Carbon cross-country race bikes? Sure. Cyclocross? Yep. Enduro-ready 27in bikes? Already done it.

How about full suspension BMX bikes and folding shoppers? Perhaps not. Lessons have been learned. And when asked about what's in store for 2015, all Simon would promise was simply "more radness". Dom Langan, meanwhile, is less cagey: "I personally do not believe there are any limitations to the brand. I do accept that we have to continue to challenge how people perceive the brand as people love to put everything into a pigeonhole. I know Saracen can do anything it wants, but it will always be with a twist and never quite as you would expect."

With that kind of backing and enthusiasm, Simon and his small team should have no problem taking over the world. The king appears to have returned from exile. The phoenix has risen again. Your next bike may indeed be Saracen. 🐦

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