

Sacred grounds prove fertile for British ex-pat Steve Fenton

By Doug McClellan

Many Westerners in the industry call Taichung home, and some even have built factories here. It's safe to say, however, that Steve Fenton is the only Westerner whose bike factory sits on the grounds of a Taiwan temple. The temple, in the foothills on the Taichung city limits, honors the Chinese monkey god.

"He's a very cheeky god. He's a good fighter," Fenton explained. "He's very mischievous. He gets rid of all the bad things."



Pro-Lite owners Jasper Chen (left) and Steve Fenton before a statue of the monkey god.

Fenton owns Pro-Lite, a wheel and frame manufacturer, with business partner Jasper Chen, a Taichung native who also oversees the temple. While Pro-Lite is a relatively small brand, many in the industry know Fenton as a volunteer organizer of Taichung Bike Week.

Sharing space with a temple requires making some unusual accommodations. Three times a year, the temple hosts huge events for its followers, who come by the busload. Pro-Lite empties its warehouse to make room for tents and dozens of tables.

The rest of the time, the warehouse appears to be nothing special, until Fenton shows a visitor to a door at the rear of the big open room on the ground floor.

The door opens onto a long, unlit corridor. Along one wall, a procession of narrow doors march into the darkness.

"There are 84 toilets in a row here," Fenton said.

Left For Dead. Fenton, who grew up near Manchester, England, appreciates the absurdity of building bicycle wheels on the grounds of a temple. And like the monkey god, he knows something about mischievousness—and about fighting off the bad things.

On the surface, his approach to life can border on the irreverent. But Fenton, 50, earned his cheeky outlook the hard way. A horrific crash left the former bicycle racer on the edge of death, unsure if he would ever walk again—much less ride a bike.

It was the early 1990s, and Fenton, who had been racing since he was 13, was training with his cycling

team on the Spanish island of Majorca. He had been invited to participate in a mountain bike stage race in Kenya. While his teammates stayed at the hotel to play water polo, Fenton went out for a training ride in the hills.

"I was hit head-on by a car on the wrong side of the road," he said. "I bounced off the windshield and went over the roof, missing the crash barriers, and slid 130 feet down a rock face."

The police soon notified his wife that he was dead. They were wrong, but not by much.

"I woke up in a local hospital where they were trying to plug two large holes in my stomach," said Fenton, who still has trouble discussing the accident. "I had also broken all my ribs and five vertebrae and lost a section of my right elbow. I spent the next 11 months in and out of the hospital—mainly in."

The local hospital sent him to a larger one because of the severity of his injuries and the loss of blood. Doctors began operating on him in the corridor because both operating rooms were in use, and his injuries couldn't wait.

Fenton ended up with his elbows and collarbone "full of screws," and had to wear a spinal brace for a year. But he was determined to stay out of a wheelchair.

"It was about nine years before I could ride again. I went to 112 kg [247 pounds] and was bloody huge," Fenton said.

Saying Bye-Bye. Fenton said the crash and its aftermath have shaped his approach to life.

"I live each day of my life the best I can, and hence that's why I 'do it now' rather than wait. I have zero fear of just about everything and everyone," he said.

"Over the years I have done a lot with disabled athletes who I can relate to," he added. "I feel blessed for every day I am alive."

But Fenton, a Taichung resident for 10 years, seems to be a magnet for mishaps. Within the past two years, he's broken a wrist after taking a spill on his bike and busted two ribs in an accident at home. Late last year, while speeding down a Taichung road in a light rain, Fenton's bike slipped on some oil that had oozed onto the road from the tropical vegetation. That spill left him with a fractured glenoid—the socket of the collarbone—along with other injuries.

It's been such a bad stretch that Fenton recently visited a temple to perform a "bye-bye" ceremony, where people cast off the bad things in their lives.

"When you live here long enough, it doesn't matter what religion you are or what you believe," Fenton said. "They don't have religious problems in Taiwan. They believe that what goes around comes around, and to do right by other people."



Steve Fenton in his early racing days before a career-ending crash.



Pro-Lite has created a successful niche with road racing bikes for kids in a 650C size. This year it's expanded the line to include a 'cross and track model. The size is popular among women riders as well.

The Hard Way. Pro-Lite sells most of its wheels and framesets in Europe. For the U.S. market, Pro-Lite distributes directly to consumers (and retailers) through the controversial mail-order powerhouse Chain Reaction Cycles.

"We make our own products," Fenton said. "The spokes we make ourselves. A lot of the carbon rims we make ourselves. Some we outsource, but most of what you see in the Pro-Lite range we make ourselves."

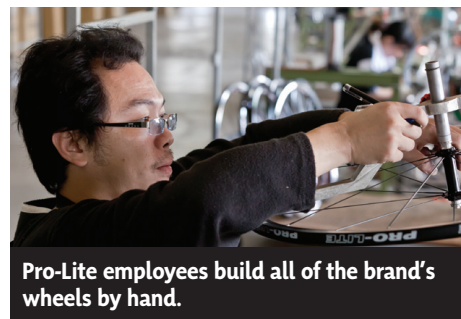
Pro-Lite owns another factory near Taichung where it makes carbon fiber frames. Unlike most carbon suppliers, it does not source frames in China. It also owns a paint shop, and a workshop with CNC machines that crank out high quality bike components along with such unrelated products as laser levels (sold at Home Depot) and housings for security cameras.

"We do things the hard way—by hand," Fenton said. "We're not a bullshit and mirrors company. We are a real, live company."

Pro-Lite makes products for other brands, but its Pro-Lite brand is growing quickly, Fenton said. From 70,000 wheels in 2010, Pro-Lite expects to manufacture 75,000 this year—with the growth coming from the Pro-Lite brand.

With little marketing, Pro-Lite grows by word-of-mouth, as cyclists and retailers discover the qualities of its hand-built product line.

"Other people make Swatches. We make Breitlings, mate," Fenton says with a laugh. **BRAIN**



Pro-Lite employees build all of the brand's wheels by hand.