
by Trevor Gornall

**Dublin's
FiftyOne Bikes
offers a fresh
approach to
the custom-build
option.**



Mauro Sannino shares the benefit of his experience with Aidan Duff

To be quite honest, I wasn't even looking for a new bike – at least inasmuch as any self-respecting cyclist isn't ever looking for their next purchase. I've already got seven bikes in my garage and I've managed to convince myself that I do actually need all of them. But when I discovered the full extent of what was possible with FiftyOne, a completely new approach to buying a new bike, I was immediately hooked. A handmade, custom-built, made-to-measure carbon frame with a totally unique and personalised paintjob in my own design – built to my unique specification – and a choice of not only groupset and wheels, but also bars, stem, seat post and saddle. Now that all sounds pretty special.

FiftyOne also offers not just a different approach to manufacturing – handmade in Dublin, Ireland – but also to the experience of buying a new top-end bike. This is a process that starts with a visit to Dublin, where you are treated to a state-of-the-art bike fit to determine your unique geometry. Then a sit-down together over a pint of the black stuff to talk through what kind of riding you do, establishing what you want to get out of your perfect ride. Thereafter, you work closely with a designer to define your unique look. Every FiftyOne is made to the exact specification of the customer, with expert advice on hand every step of the way. All delivered in a typically warm, friendly and welcoming Irish style. We're not talking Father Ted here by the way, although you won't go short of tea when you visit the FiftyOne office in Dublin. But there's not a "Mrs Doyle" to be seen, just an engaging and relaxed approach from beginning to end, and the reassurance that you are working with guys who know their business inside out.

Mr Fiftyone

We pick up the story when I first met Aidan Duff at Eurobike in the summer of 2015. The annual bike industry get-together takes place in Friedrichshafen by Lake Constance in Southern Germany and is a must-attend event for those active in the cycling industry. Mutual friend and Founder/CEO of Knight Composites Beverley Lucas introduced us. Aidan told me his story over a couple of beers.

After a few years trying to make it as a pro in France, Aidan had quit racing and returned to his native Dublin to sell bikes. His family had

been in the bicycle trade since the 1920s and since 2002 Aidan built up his business as the Irish distributor of brands such as Felt, Scott, Raleigh and Cervélo. But after more than a decade selling other people's bikes he had started to consider whether it was time to launch his own brand.

Aidan's experience and insight led him to believe there was a gap in the market. We talked about how the mainstream bicycle manufacturers had seemingly missed a trick. The whole "craft" revolution was in full swing. A significant proportion of consumers across all products and services were looking for something "above category" and they were willing to pay a premium to get exactly what they wanted. Whether it was a caramel soya latte with an extra shot, or a locally brewed chocolate porter with a hint of chilli, not everyone was satisfied with "vanilla". And, what's more, why should they be?

But go to buy any top-end premium brand bike, say a Pinarello or Colnago (to mention just a couple of random names) and, despite the premium price tag, you get the same off-the-shelf frame as everyone else. The development of carbon fibre technology (and UCI regulations, perhaps) ensures there is relatively little to choose between all the manufacturers at the top end, with many brands using the same Taiwanese factories to produce their stock. Frame performance is so similar across the brands that the main criterion to consider when buying a new bike often comes down to the choice of groupset – Ultegra or Dura-Ace, Chorus or Record. And you can have any colour you like – as long as it happens to be the one that they are painting all their frames that year. How can it be that you can spend the thick end of €10k on a bike and have no say whatsoever in the frame colour or other key specifications?

It's true that there are some excellent bespoke handmade frame builders out there, working in aluminium, titanium and of course steel. Few however work exclusively in carbon. And what about these rare artisans? They are almost all one-man-bands. Solo craftsmen operating out of a shed at the bottom of their garden. They make beautiful works of art, but many take their time, and they have a waiting list as long as their arm. Put your name down now and you might get your bike in a few years' time – providing your chosen frame builder doesn't fall under a bus in the meantime.



And what happened to the joy of having a made-to-measure frame? This used to be the pinnacle of bike ownership – a bike that fitted you like a glove, your bike. Mass-production techniques and pressure to cut costs have, no doubt, pushed the bigger manufacturers into a few standard frame sizes, with the fine-tuning done with seat posts, saddle position, stems and bars. It's not so many years ago that every pro in the peloton had a custom-made frame – but no longer. The brands want you to buy the thing they can most easily sell you, so that's what the pros now exclusively ride, even if it makes for some bizarre-looking stem choices.

So there was the challenge – to introduce an above-category bicycle brand that embraced the workmanship of an artisan craftsman, but was backed by the professionalism and service levels of a premium brand. Find someone to actually hand-build the custom frames, in carbon fibre, with personalised equipping of componentry and a completely bespoke hand-painted finish. And package the whole thing as a unique experience. How hard can that be?

Aidan spent the next twelve months or so searching for a solution. He knew the bike industry intimately, but he was no frame builder. However, he quickly discovered that the smaller carbon frame makers had all but disappeared. So dominant have been the bigger brands, and so successful their marketing, that it seemed the artisan craftsmen decided they could no longer compete in carbon fibre.

Aidan's travels eventually took him to the workshop of Mauro Sannino. The famous Italian frame builder was based in Raubling, Bavaria where he had been creating custom carbon one-offs for the Corratec brand. However, to Aidan's surprise, when he arrived he found the workshop shuttered and the bike-making kit all under dust covers. Even Mauro had packed up and moved on. Making carbon frames by hand was a dying art.

Made In Dublin

So what next? The exhaustive search was pretty much at an end, bringing Aidan's dreams of a custom carbon bike brand to an abrupt halt. A rethink was required. He'd never intended to actually make the frames in-house as such. But he decided if no one else was able to do it for him then he'd have to take it on himself. He made Mauro an offer for all his frame building kit. The Italian accepted and the whole lot was packed up and shipped to Dublin.

Aidan found a skilled local frame builder, who was already making premium frames in steel. He would work under the influence of Mauro, the guiding Godfather of FiftyOne. The newly-acquired kit was set up in Aidan's Dublin workshop and there began the long process of fine-tuning the art of carbon frame building. Ireland now had its very own premium carbon frame manufacturer – FiftyOne Bikes.

Why Fiftyone?

Dossard 51 has a very special meaning, especially within the context of the Tour de France, having been worn by four different race-winners within the space of just nine years. In 1969 Eddie Merckx wore it for his first victory. Luis Ocaña carried it to victory in 1973. Bernard Thévenet won in 1975 and in 1978 it was the turn of Bernard Hinault to pin on the lucky number. Since then these otherwise uninspiring digits have carried a special mystique when pinned onto a cycling jersey. Very often race organisers bestow the dossard upon a special rider, as a subtle acknowledgement of respect or honour, a way of signalling a rider apart from the others. And that's what inspired Aidan to name his brand FiftyOne – a bike that is set apart from all others.

For the in-depth history of the story around dossard 51 take a look at Suze Clementson's piece in Issue 14.

My Fiftyone

About a year after our initial conversation Aidan called me out of the blue. He gave me the update on how the business concept had moved on from the original ideas we had discussed at Eurobike. We decided to meet up and shortly after that meeting we'd agreed Aidan would build me my very own FiftyOne.

Bike Fit

I flew to Dublin and underwent an extremely thorough bike fit, conducted by FiftyOne's bike fit partner, Aidan Hammond. I found the process extraordinarily detailed and fascinating. Aidan is a qualified neuromuscular physical therapist and massage therapist, and pays close attention to your individual circumstances, not only your measurements.

We started with a review of any historical injuries and a physical assessment to see what kind of shape I was in. Next there was an examination of my feet and gait, which would help inform cleat set-up. There followed a series of core strength and reach tests, to establish flexibility and muscle firing.

Next Aidan H checked knee alignment and hip balance using laser analysis. He also took video recordings of me riding as he played around with the position on his special adjustable bike. We referred back to my current bike set-up.

"Do you suffer with neck pain when riding?" asked Aidan H. "I do a little actually." "I'm not surprised, with that steerer cut off so low and the stem slammed right down," came the reply. "Oh, I thought that was supposed to be... aero."

It turns out I am actually a great example of one of those physical freaks of nature that can benefit most from a custom frame build. I'm quite tall at 6'4" (1.93m). A lot of that height comes from my unfeasibly long thighs. My arms are not especially short, but they are not quite in proportion with my gigantic upper legs. This means I ride a very high saddle. It also means I have earned the nickname "T-Rex" from Aidan. So, a long seat tube is perfect – but this normally means a long

top tube too. A long top tube can lead to me over-reaching – a potential cause of neck and shoulder pain. There is some fine-tuning to be done with stem length of course, but it can lead to a rather odd-looking set-up. My friend Ben once remarked about my current ride – "that's not a bike, it's more like a fucking horse."

So Aidan H was able to make some recommendations to get me more comfortable on the bike. He also recommended 175mm cranks, which was a change for me. The saddle height of 837mm seemed to cause some concern back at FiftyOne. A few weeks after the bike fit had taken place, Aidan D called me at home.

"Would you do me a favour? Go and measure your current saddle height." Off I trotted to the garage and got out the tape measure. "It's just about 84cm," I eventually replied. "Jaysus, you're some freak..." came the response.

So we agreed I needed quite a long seat tube if we wanted to keep the fashion police happy and only a reasonable proportion of the seat post visible. Due to my history of neck pain we decided to lift up the stem by 25mm in comparison to my current set-up. Rather than inserting spacers on the steerer, the guys were able to make a taller head tube. This helped to keep the proportions all very pleasing to the eye.

We decided to keep the rear geometry quite tight. We wanted the bike to be responsive, but with enough room to allow a 25mm tyre – which is the current fashion. We went for a 130mm stem and 420mm bars, with short and shallow drop, all from Zipp. This was all done over the phone. FiftyOne sent me the frame drawings on email and called to discuss the implications of extending this tube, or shortening that tube, playing with the angles and how changing the geometry would influence handling and performance. You don't have to be a former pro rider to work through this process. Aidan explains in plain English how best to set up the bike to get what you want out of it.



Frame builder Aaron talks through the geometry



Frame Construction

Once we had talked through all the details the frame went into production. The carbon tubes are cut to the precise length and then mitred using a special diamond-tipped saw. They go into the jig to check fit is perfect. Once Aaron, the frame builder, is happy with the fit, all the surfaces are finely sanded and prepared for the bonding process.

Depending on the size and weight of the rider, and the kind of riding to be undertaken, different weights of carbon can be used in the lay-up process to stiffen specific areas of the frame further. In my case we added a little extra unidirectional carbon around the bottom bracket shell and head tube. All the parts are bonded with a high strength adhesive and left to cure. Once the frame has reached a solid state it can be removed from the jig. The joints are wrapped and then the whole frame is vacuum-bagged before it is put into a special oven to be cured. Jason Schiers, the man behind much of the success of ENVE Composites, helped Aidan refine this complicated process.

Once fully cured the frame is removed from the oven. It receives a light sanding to remove any excess resin and then it's ready to be handed over to the painter.

Design And Paintjob

Let's go back to New Year's Eve, December 2003. I'm sat in what is now called the Engine Inn, just outside Newcastle-upon-Tyne, with my cycling buddy Ben. Our thoughts turn to the 2004 Tour de France and the anticipated epic battle between Jan Ullrich and Lance Armstrong. We discuss what we perceive will be the decisive day of the race, a time trial up the famed climb of Alpe d'Huez on 21 July. We'd had a few beers by this stage and we somehow agreed that we would visit the race to take in this critical stage. That in itself was a pretty big step for me. I'd never been to the Tour before and the prospect of witnessing this encounter first hand was compelling to say the least. My only question at that point was: this sounds so fantastic, how come we hadn't thought of doing it before?

I'm not sure exactly what happened next, but there was some kind of wager. I can't remember if Ben bet me that I could, or I couldn't do it. It didn't really matter but I suspect he was rather more believing in my ability than I was. In any case the outcome was that we were not only going to watch the pros race – our personal quest became one of actually conquering the mountain ourselves.

I should put this into a little context. I'd not ridden a bike for about ten years. I didn't even own a bike at the time. Ben was a little ahead of me. He'd rediscovered cycling a year or two earlier and was back riding competitively. He'd researched the Tour route and all the climbs. I was pretty clueless about what I was letting myself in for. All I really knew was that the Alpe d'Huez was a fabled climb and it sounded really, really scary. I was about 18 stone (115kg) and totally unfit. I'd spent the previous decade graduating from university, starting a career and then slowly finding my pathway into sport. The business of sport that is, not the actual doing of it. My bike had been nicked from university, it wasn't insured and I couldn't afford a new one. When I started work, like many others I bought a car, not a bike. And so my "career", such as it was, became the main focus of my life. Travelling. Eating crappy airline, motorway services and train company food. And, of course, rarely exercising.

You don't really notice at first. In your twenties you seem to be fairly indestructible – the body pretty much copes with whatever you throw at it. But once I hit my thirties I started to add kilos – stealthily. I was never really body-conscious and didn't notice, until one day, looking through some photographs from the previous summer, I caught a glimpse of a picture of "a fat bloke" and didn't recognise myself.

So the challenge to ride up Alpe d'Huez was really the intervention I had been yearning for since realising I needed to do something about my unhealthy lifestyle and expanding frame. I had six months to get my shit together with one simple goal: to reach the summit of L'Alpe, riding non-stop.

I had absolutely no idea about training or nutrition. I bought a static bike and put it in my spare room, too embarrassed to even consider cycling outside. I trained in isolation for weeks, and slowly the weight began to drop off. I bought a few books on training and eventually added some structure and routine. Chris Carmichael, Lance's coach, reckoned you only needed "Seven Weeks to the Perfect Ride". I was sold.

By the time July came around I was a fair few kilos lighter and moderately trained. Still, far from pretty in Lycra, I had to hire a bike from a shop in Le Bourg-d'Oisans because I still didn't actually own one. But I remember that ride up the mountain as if it were yesterday. Thousands of others were also attempting the same feat. After the first couple of steep hairpins I was sure the mountain would defeat me. But somehow I managed to keep the legs turning, just about, even if painfully slowly and at times zigzagging across the road to try to minimise the gradient, counting down the switchbacks from 21 to 1.

Dutch corner – bend 7 – was of course a highlight, basically like riding through a carnival. But it was only as I approached the village towards the summit that it occurred to me that I was actually going to do this. People at the side of the road shouted their encouragement and it all got just a little overwhelming for a minute or so. This was the moment when I fell in love with cycling again. And that's why I had to incorporate this ride as the key feature of my bike design. Without this trip, who knows where I'd be now? Perhaps I'd be a twenty-stone type-two diabetic, never having found the motivation to get back on the bike. This trip really kick-started my cycling salvation.

My other passion in life, more an affliction of late, is my support for Liverpool Football Club. I reckon I can pretty much sum up all that entails through the tale of what happened on the evening of 25th May 2005 – and on into the early hours of the morning of 26th May 2005. The UEFA European Cup Final in Istanbul and the trip of a lifetime. Against a backdrop of starting to believe modern football was rubbish, and promising myself every season that this would be my last as a season ticket holder, I travelled to the extreme limit of Europe – and actually into Asia – to either bid farewell to, or rediscover my waning enthusiasm for, the club I loved. 0-3 down at half time and facing humiliation, I witnessed a remarkable turnaround, which I firmly believe to this day was kick-started by one man's defiance that triggered a collective belief. In the depths of half-time despair, in a shell-shocked stadium, one voice started to sing our anthem You'll Never Walk Alone. In an instant he was joined by several more. At first it was just a handful of voices here and there, but it quickly grew as people appeared to adopt the stance "Well, even if our team is crap, we are going to at least 'out-support' the opposition." We bellowed out our hymn, as we had done thousands of times before, but this time more defiantly, and we all felt a little better that we had at least done our bit to support our team.

What we didn't know at the time was that the players in the dressing room could hear us. The team manager, Rafa Benitez, apparently mentioned it in his half time team talk, telling the players, "listen to the fans, they are still with us – get one goal for the fans, get one goal and see what happens next, give yourself the chance to become heroes."

Get one goal they did, quickly followed by two more, and then, after a nerve-racking goalless extra time, they won the penalty shoot-out. I don't want to be that annoying football fan, banging on about past glories, but the events of that night served as a poignant reminder that it's never over until it's over, and that too was something I wanted to celebrate as part of my design.

Having the opportunity to design your own bike from a blank piece of paper can be daunting. Personally, I found the design process to be hugely enjoyable in the beginning, and then a little bit frustrating towards the end. Aidan encouraged me to start up a Pinterest board, I guess just a sort of online scrapbook. I was told not to worry too much about themes, just pin to the board anything that I liked. I did this for a period of 3-4 weeks. Whenever I saw something interesting I'd add it, or at times I'd sit for a quiet few minutes of an evening and go in search of things I knew I liked or thought might work well.

Aidan was confident some strong themes would emerge through this process, and so they did. I had no idea when I started out but it seems the whole "dazzle" design thing had made an impression on me. I'd spotted it on a Mersey ferry and become curious to explore where that inspiration had come from. I discovered it was the work of renowned pop artist Sir Peter Blake, who also worked on the sleeve of 'The Beatles' Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Heart's Club Band album cover, amongst many other amazing projects.

The real challenge, I found, lay in finding a way to bring all these diverse elements together. We decided that the core theme would be that day on Alpe d'Huez and my salvation from myself. That's how this project got its title. I found some cool posters online, conceptual representations of the route up the mountain. These inspired me to understand how I could use it on a bike. I wanted the famous 21 switchbacks to zigzag across the top tube, almost like wonky shark teeth. I also liked the idea of the route acting as a line of division down the middle of the frame. In cycling, as in all of life, there are good and bad moments, highs and lows. What better metaphor than a bloody big lump of a mountain to climb? For every agonising ascent, there is a wonderfully rewarding descent. There's always some yin to the yang, opposite or contrary forces that are perhaps interdependent and connected. If you never experience the bad, how do you identify the good – right?

This took me in the direction of designing the frame in two main colours, a light shade and a dark side. We went for contrasting shades of grey. From the left and right views I wanted it to almost look as if it were two different bikes. I drew it on a piece of paper, completely oblivious at the time as to just how hard this would be to resolve in three dimensions. It was quite a mission, but we got there in the end. If I wanted a two-tone bike, what happens where the two halves meet? Do the two greys fade together? I didn't like that idea much, so instead we continued the red line of the Alp route beyond the top tube, along the stem, down the head tube, under the fork, onto the down tube and under the bottom bracket, before running it back up the seat tube and then the back of the seat post too, before running it back down the front of the seat post to meet the start of the route on the top tube. This road never ends.

With the main concept of the yin and yang established, divided by the route of the mountain that brought me back to cycling, I wanted to incorporate some little features of the reason why I was drawn to the mountain in the first place. That was of course the epic battle between Armstrong and Ullrich. Some of you might know I have my own history with T-Mobile Team, working in sponsorship for T-Mobile UK for four years. The boys in magenta would later adopt the moniker "Die Mannschaft" (literally "The Team") and new team owner Bob Stapleton liked this so much he had it painted on the top tube of every rider's bike. So I wanted it somewhere on my bike too. The yang to Die Mannschaft's yin would be a yellow band, a nod to Lance's Livestrong rubber bracelet that I, like so many other fools, wore in his honour. With tongues firmly in cheek, we located these two little features towards the top of the seat tube.

How then to incorporate the “Miracle of Istanbul”? Here we opted for five gold stars, each one symbolising one of the European Cups my beloved Redmen have won – the fifth secured with the shootout victory after the three-goal comeback in 2005. The five stars are located on the back of the seat tube. There is also a concealed liver bird, the civic symbol of the City of Liverpool and the key feature of the LFC crest, placed on the underside of the down tube, which has been brilliantly created by the FiftyOne painter in a “dazzle style”. The dazzle pattern is also subtly incorporated on the inside of the front and rear forks. I love these little details and I’m glad Aidan encouraged me to add them. Even if he did describe the liver bird and five stars as “tramp stamps”. I would have been happy with just the two shades and the funky zigzag top tube, but these little details really show off the skills of the painter.

Component Selection

I’ve always been a Shimano man. I don’t remember making a conscious choice – I think I just happened to have 105 on the Trek I bought when I first got back on the bike. Now, almost all my bikes have Shimano groupsets. More recently I acquired an ex-team bike, which was equipped with SRAM Red. I have to admit I was surprised how good I found it and was delighted that it worked seamlessly with my existing Shimano cassettes. I’ve never really felt the necessity to change as Shimano has always done a great job for me. But I have to admit I have always been just a little Campag-curious.

I discussed this at length with Aidan. In fact we probably talked about this as much as anything. In the end I decided to go for a Chorus groupset, if only because, when you go all in on a bike like this, you have an opportunity to try things you would not normally do. This was my chance to see if the grass really is greener on the other side, as my Campagnolo-obsessed mates all insist it is.

The colour-matching seat post and stem are supplied by Zipp. The saddle comes from Fizik. I’ll be upfront on the wheels: they came from Campagnolo, packaged together with the Chorus groupset. I’ve never ridden Campag wheels before, but these came highly recommended and they didn’t disappoint.

Collection And Ride

Early May 2017 and I hopped on a short flight from Liverpool to Dublin once again. Having an Irish mother I’m never in much need of an excuse to visit her homeland. I popped my cycling shoes, helmet and bike kit in a backpack and Aidan collected me on the other side. I have to admit I was pretty excited to see the final product, all built-up and sparkling. Aidan was careful not to send me any images at all ahead of my visit, so there was a genuine “reveal” moment when I walked in to the workshop and saw my FiftyOne for the first time.

The bike was put into a turbo trainer and I kitted up. The guys did an amazing job setting up the bike before I’d even got there. I spun the legs and shifted the gears up and down a few times. To my amazement, there was no need to tweak anything – it was all absolutely spot-on. That bike fit data was pretty good, as it turns out.

Satisfied the set-up was good, we wanted to put the bike through its paces. We loaded the bikes into the back of the car and headed southwards out of Dublin towards the Wicklow Mountains. Aidan had told me of the rolling countryside and the “Guinness Lake”. A lake – of Guinness? This I had to see. Actually the lake has earned its nickname due to its shape (resembling a pint glass), dark water and white sands at the top. Aidan brought his own bike “Death or Glory” along too, and we had a little spin out in the late spring sunshine amid some stunning surroundings. It was a maiden voyage fit for this fine machine. We stopped by the “Guinness Lake” (Lough Tay) to drink in the view, before we had to pack away the bikes, get changed and head back to the airport for the return flight home.





Of course it will take more than just a few short kilometres one afternoon in Wicklow to really put this bike through its paces. I look forward to many happy hours in the saddle thoroughly testing this beautiful machine. I don't doubt that this process is not for everyone, but for me it has been a fascinating journey of discovery and I've thoroughly enjoyed every step of the way.

Whilst it remains to be seen whether Aidan can establish his new bike brand in the "above category" bracket, early signs are good. The order book is filling up fast and Irish rider Ronan McLaughlin will compete this year's Rás on one of Aidan's creations – proving that FiftyOne bikes are not only a thing of beauty, but also constructed to the highest standards and capable of performing in the toughest of races.

My finished project, "Salvation", including custom carbon frameset, Campagnolo wheels and groupset, and Zipp components, is valued at a shade under €8k. If you think this whole experience is something you might like to try, take a look at fiftyonebikes.com. Mention Conquista to Aidan and he'll make sure you receive a 10% discount from the end price of your own custom build.