



# Star spangled spanner

From a repair shop in Minnesota, USA, two friends grew the biggest bike tool business in the world. And kept it in the family

Words **JAMES SPENDER** Photography **FRED MACGREGOR**



Opposite: Don 'Doc' Schoff attaches end caps to the RT-1 head cup remover. 'I'm a CNC operator, which means I pretty much like anything the CNC makes!'



October 2007 was a landmark time for American bike tool company Park Tool.

After years of petitioning it had finally been granted US trademark protection. But it wasn't for a name, a sign or a tagline but, rather unusually, for a colour: 0% red, 36.86% green, 76.86% blue at 211.22 degree hue, 100% saturation and 38.43% lightness. Otherwise known as Pantone 2935 – Park Tool's iconic blue.

'If you have a delivery company in the US you can't have brown trucks, or if you make tractors you can't paint them green,' says Park Tool's president and owner Eric Hawkins, his voice just audible over the whines and clunks of the machinery packed into Park Tool's shop floor.

'Companies like UPS and John Deere are recognisable by their colour, and that's what we wanted to prove for Park Tool. It took us three years to gather all the background material – we had to present ads, letters, quotes and so on. We presented magazine articles where they called us "Big Blue" or the "Blue Tool Company". We even showed examples of other tools that were blue being sent back to us for warranty that we hadn't made. At the time, fewer than one hundred colour trademarks had been granted. But we

proved our case, that the company is recognisable by our colour.'

However, contrary to popular belief, Park Tool hasn't always been entirely blue. Nor, for that matter, has there ever been a Mr Park.

### Small beginnings

Last year saw Park Tool celebrate its 50th anniversary, and as if to mark that occasion, the company upped sticks from its previous home of 16 years, down the road in the city of Mahtomedi, to a new 23-acre plot in Oakdale, Minnesota. This new facility, some 70,000 square feet and packed out with state-of-the-art machinery, stands in stark contrast to Park Tool's humble origins – a 15 feet by 40 feet bicycle and hobby shop in the small neighbourhood of Hazel Park in St Paul, Minnesota, owned and run by Eric's father, Howard, and his business partner, Art Engstrom.

'We bought this little bike shop back in 1956. It was just a store front really,' says Hawkins senior, who despite having handed the reins of the company over to son Eric in 1991 has

**Portraits, left to right, top to bottom: President Eric Hawkins; export sales director Roger Olson; founder Howard Hawkins; shop worker Mark Warren; lead welder Bradley Reid; CNC operator Doc Schoff; shop worker Mark Cunningham; 'technical guy' Calvin Jones; shipping controller Ron Kubis**

just dropped in to say hello on one of his 'two or three' weekly visits.

'We were boyhood friends and at the time Art was working at the Great Northern Railways as a mechanic and I was selling welding supplies. One day this friend of ours from church said he had this shop for sale. I said, "Art, Ed Olson wants to sell a bike shop, let's buy it!" And he said "OK". We had no idea. We had no money – we had to borrow it all. That was the Hazel Park Cycle Center.

'In a cold climate like Minnesota you don't sell bicycles year round, so during the winter we sharpened ice skates and sold hockey sticks and everything to go along with skating. Then in the summer as well as bicycles we also cut keys, sharpened lawnmower blades, sold hobby kits, fixed radios and TVs. But as time went on we eventually started seeing that the bicycles were taking over.'

As the bicycle's popularity increased in America, so did the technology, and with it, the complications with repair. 'In those days bikes were very crude. Someone

***'It all started when a friend of ours said he had this bike shop for sale. I said, "Let's buy it!" We had no idea'***



would come in and what did they want done? Flat tyre fix or coaster brake overhaul. Something that was very simple. So all we did was turn the bike over on the floor. But then eight-speeds came along and you had to turn the pedals whilst shifting them to do repairs. We came up with this idea to raise them off the floor, so we made this thing that you could clamp the bike in, rotate it any way you wanted, and turn the pedals freely to simulate riding.'

'This thing', at which Howard senior is now pointing, is perhaps the earliest bicycle repair stand in the industry. Compared to the host of tools the company now offers, Hawkins and Engstrom's original bike stand might seem out of place. And here, sat defiantly in the corner of Park Tool's private workshop – a room where every tool imaginable hangs neatly on peg boards in a







► manner more befitting a laboratory – it almost does. And yet, somehow, as the 81-year-old bends down to demonstrate the stand's functions, its presence makes total sense.

Constructed from a dining room table leg, a large metal tube ('I can't remember what that's from, someone once told me it was an artillery shell, but then someone else said it was an old printer roller'), an industrial bike hub and a custom fabricated clamp, Hazel Park Cycle Center's original bike stand epitomises the philosophy behind Park Tool's success. It sees a problem and invents a tool to solve it.

#### Growing up

The ingenuity of the guys at Hazel Park Cycle Center didn't go unnoticed. As a dealer for Schwinn bicycles they had gone from selling 56 bikes in their first year to consistently hitting top-ten Schwinn dealership status and topping those charts in 1977. So with the Cycle Center very much on its radar, it wasn't long before the US bicycle giant had Hawkins and Engstrom fabricating tools to sell under the Schwinn name.

'Schwinn's colour was red, so all the tools my dad produced for them were red, and the ones for Hazel Park Cycle Center were blue,' says Hawkins. 'But then there was a big change at Schwinn, where it took on its own distribution, meaning the Schwinn distributors could no longer buy the tools under the Schwinn

#### Future, past and present

Despite Park Tool's current advanced set up – where robotic arms weld wheel truing stands and CNC machines fabricate everything from single prototypes through to the thousands of end caps needed for headset cup removers – there still exists, much like the original bike stand, a heart to the company that has beaten since day one: people, and their loyalty to the cause.

As father and son make their way around the shop floor they greet their employees like friends, stopping to chat about sports teams, families or the weather (which Minnesotans seem almost as obsessed about as the Brits). But then again, with a vast number of the staff either related or having been with the company for 10 years or more, it's no surprise.

'This is Bradley,' says Hawkins,

***'This is Bradley. If you go to any shop and see their professional bike stand, chances are he made it'***

name. So we changed the colour of all the tools we made to blue, and we've stuck with it ever since.'

During this time the partners moved premises to accommodate increased bike sales along with the tool making operation, eventually opening two other bike shops in the late 1960s and arriving as they did so at the name the company has today.

'We moved out of St Paul to Maplewood, so we dropped the "Hazel" from the Hazel Park Cycle Center and that's the reason for the Park Tool name. We used to get calls for Mr Park, but there's no Mr Park,' says Hawkins senior with a wry smile.

Expansion led to further expansion. Not only did the demand for the tools increase dramatically, but as bicycles became ever more complex and elaborate, so too did the number of jobs those tools needed to perform.

In 1974 Park Tool had a range of around 30 products predominantly sold for professional shop use. Today, that number has risen to over 400, with the boys in blue equipping everyone from pro teams such as Sky and BMC to home mechanics.

introducing a big guy in an old-school leather welding jacket. 'He's been here longer than I have, so he's been our main welder for 36 years now. Really, if you go to any shop and see their professional bike stand and it was bought from 1977 onwards, chances are he made it. We do give him a new jacket once in a while.'

Elsewhere, assembling crank pullers is Mark, a veteran of more than 16 years; operating a CNC machine is Doc, an employee for 13 years; Roger, in charge of export, has been here for 15 years; Sara, Eric's sister and CFO is enjoying her 21st year; Alex, Eric's son, is filling in again for his umpteenth shift in packing; and then there's Calvin, 17 years in and arguably Park Tool's most famous employee, or at least his hands are.

'I run Calvin's Corner,' explains Calvin, alluding to the portion of Park Tool's website that he writes and stars in, dedicated to instructional repair walkthroughs and video tutorials. 'My informal role is kind of technical guy, so I'm the link between the engineering here and the industry. ►

**Above: Park Tool president Eric Hawkins is very into bikes. Above the shop floor hangs just part of his collection**

**Right: Bradley Reid, doing what he's done at Park Tool for the past 36 years**







There are times when a product is of service to the industry, then other times where you have to ask yourself, “French threaded bottom bracket taps? Are there really French threaded bikes out there?” It can be a headache trying to keep up with and accommodate things like all the bottom bracket and headset standards. But that’s what we do. We’re tool people.’

#### Made in America

Alongside the colour, the name and people, there is one last thing that makes Park Tool unique in today’s mainstream cycling market. From its 400+ tool catalogue comprising over 3,200 individual parts, it still manages to make or source 80% of its product from the United States.

‘It took a long time before we had

## Park life

The stats and figures behind Park Tool

# 1 million

Number of Park Tool hex wrenches sold in 2013

# 125,000

Number of PZT-2 pizza cutters sold in 2013

# 10,000

Number of SPK-1 spoons (spoon and fork) sold in 2013

# 1965

Oldest on-going product: “J” storage hook for hanging bikes, circa 1965

# 100

Number of TS-2.2 wheel truing stands made per day

# 365lbs

Current president’s bench press record (166kg)

# 1.3

Millions of individual blister packs sold in 2013

## ‘I keep thinking that at some point everyone will have all the tools they need. But it doesn’t happen’




Top: Sales director Roger Olson takes the fast way around the Park Tool factory

Right: Founder Howard Hawkins demonstrates the original bike stand that helped build his company’s success

the first part imported,’ says Hawkins senior. ‘We used to insist everything was made here, but at times it’s not practical. That was a hard decision – to import, and something we keep our thumb on, especially with strict quality control. If it’s not right, we send it back. But I sure don’t ever want us to move overseas. You look back on how Park Tool started; we started out with nothing and now look at it. I’d say it’s like the American Dream. Not only the American Dream, but a dream in any country.

‘Like Eric says, we hope we can be here for another 50 years. I keep thinking that at some point everyone will have all the tools they need and they’ll stop buying from us. But it doesn’t happen, it’s amazing! But that’s cycling. It’s growing and it’s a great sport. It has everything going for it. Economy, ecology, health. We’re in the right business.’

‘That’s right,’ says Hawkins, ‘and here we have the capacity to keep growing with it. But yeah, somebody else can do that, not me. But then that’s what I said last time.’  James Spender is staff writer with Cyclist and can fix anything with just duct tape and a pair of pliers