

# Fab 5 Framebuilders

## Soulcraft

Petaluma, California

Years in Business: 8

Number of Employees: Just the owner

**W**hen he worked at Marin Speed Machine grinding out parts for hot rods, Sean Walling was living the dream. But the oil, smell and dirt of an engine shop day after day began to tarnish the dream.

Thumbing through a *Bicycle Guide* feature on American framebuilders, Walling noticed that many shops used the same equipment he used in the engine shop. That got him thinking.

He picked up a frame he had at Bruce Gordon's shop for repainting and asked Gordon if he needed help. And as things go, Walling left hot rods for Gordon Cycles.

"I left Gordon to work with Ross at Salsa, but it was all great time. I was working with bikes and doing what I loved. There was a bit of a panic when Ross sold Salsa, but I knew framebuilding was what I wanted to do," Walling said.

Salsa founder Ross Shafer sold his company to Steve Flagg at Quality Bicycle Products in 1999, and days after Salsa closed, Walling and fellow Salsa employee Matt Nyiri founded Soulcraft. Five years later Nyiri left Soulcraft for a sales position at Camelbak.

"When Matt and I got started we had no business plan or strategy beyond figuring that there were more people like us who are willing to pay a bit more for something made by someone that really cares about what

they are making, which is so rare these days," Walling said.

Eight years later he still sees his business as one step above a garage builder, but he's making a good living and loving the business.

"I'm only one guy but I always answer the phone when I can or return calls and email quickly. Why make a big deal about your individual level of service when you don't deliver? I make sure I deliver," he said.

While liability insurance and rent checks add cost over working out of a

garage, it pales next to the cost of running the Soulcraft racing team and attending Interbike, Sea Otter and the Handmade Bike Show. But spending this extra money adds professionalism and passion to his company, and Walling said it keeps his customers coming back.

But if there is one thing that keeps Walling up at night it's the thought that his prices

might be too low.

"The last thing I want is customers that search me out because I'm cheaper than other builders. Those value customers are so much extra work. In addition to a good price, they want a whole bunch of other extras for free," he said.

"So rather than getting you more business, letting your prices lag ends up costing you business and eating up your time," he added.

Soulcraft works with about 10 dealers, but from a business standpoint, Walling said it's hardly worth it. After he figures in a dealer's 35 percent margin, little if any profit is left. For that reason, Walling said he greatly prefers doing customer-direct business.



Sean Walling