

Expert advice

# Q&A

YOUR TECHNICAL, LEGAL, AND HEALTH QUESTIONS ANSWERED. **THIS ISSUE:** BACK PAIN, STEERING DAMPERS, TOWING PROBLEMS, TYRES, AND MORE

## MEET THE EXPERTS



**DR MATT BROOKS**  
Cycling GP {Health}



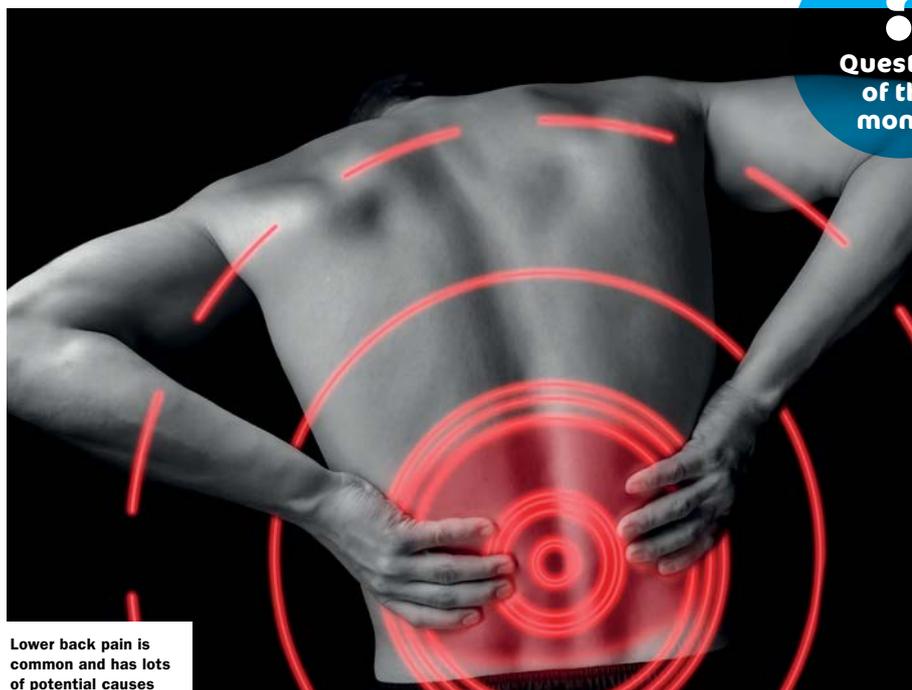
**RICHARD HALLETT**  
Cycle's Technical Editor  
{Technical}



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Principal Lawyer,  
Slater + Gordon Lawyers  
{Legal}



Question of the month



Lower back pain is common and has lots of potential causes

Left: iStockphoto.com

### Health

## LOWER BACK PAIN

**Q** Why do I feel lower back pain after I have been cycling for a while? I try to keep my lower back straight, but eventually it sags and becomes rounded, then the pain starts. Thinking that this was the reach to the handlebar, I replaced the quill stem with another that brought the handlebar about 2cm closer. I'm taking part in some long rides this year, so I'd really like to get this problem fixed. Thanks  
Alan Delaney

**A** Lower back pain is common, not just among cyclists but in the general

population too. There are many different causes, but mechanical lower back pain (arising from the joints, bones and soft tissues around the spine) is the most prevalent. It may be described as non-specific as it is not always possible (or helpful) to know the precise specific cause of mechanical back pain. Further investigation, such as an MRI scan, is often not necessary.

If the pain is brought on by cycling then the bike set-up may well be a factor. Saddle height, angle and position are important, as is handlebar height. Cleat position and frame size should also be checked. You can find advice online regarding set-up and, if necessary, your local bike shop can usually help.

Seek advice from a medical professional if the problem persists after making any adjustments, or if you have the pain at other times apart from cycling. See your GP as a matter of urgency if you have any 'red flag'

symptoms (a full list can be found online by searching for 'back pain red flags') including saddle area numbness, unexplained weight loss, difficulty passing urine, and loss of bowel or bladder control.

Mechanical lower back pain can be improved by exercises to strengthen the back, and a physiotherapist may be able to help further. Some people choose to see an osteopath or chiropractor, although these are not usually available on the NHS.

**Matt Brooks**

### Technical PROBLEM IN BAG AREA

**Q** I have attached an Ortlieb bar bag to my bike's handlebar, and I find it invaluable. Unfortunately, none of my front white bike lights will now fit on the handlebar. I want to be safe and be seen and specifically want the light on my bike rather than my helmet. What can I do?  
Germaine Walsh

**A** The Ortlieb handlebar bag and its mounting bracket do take up a lot of room on the handlebar. It's possible to avoid the issue by mounting the light elsewhere – options including siting a light (especially if dynamo-powered) on a small front rack or on a fork-blade-mounted bracket. Until recently, options to mount a light on or near the handlebar without interfering with the bar bag were somewhat ad hoc: a Minoura Space Grip or similar bar extender; or some sort of home-brewed extender. However, Ortlieb now offer a product that specifically addresses this issue: the Ultimate6 Support for Mounting Set (product code F1451). It costs about £15 in the UK. Using this, you can mount your handlebar light, and one or more other gadgets, above or below the bar bag.

**Richard Hallett**

### Technical STEERING DAMPER

**Q** My bike's front wheel is fine when I'm riding, but it tries to fold back towards the frame when parked or wheeled. I hired a very ancient bike in Sweden that had a spring either side of the front forks, which self-centred the front wheel at rest. Does such an accessory still exist? Or should I cobble something up with a bungee cord?

**Chris Begg**

**A** Forget the bungee cord. Steering dampers, or stabilisers, are available and made to do just the job you describe. Typical examples are offered by VeloOrange ([bit.ly/cyclinguk-vo-stabiliser](http://bit.ly/cyclinguk-vo-stabiliser)) and Hebie ([bit.ly/cyclinguk-hebie-stabiliser](http://bit.ly/cyclinguk-hebie-stabiliser)).

**Richard Hallett**

### Technical BRAKING BAD?

**Q** I'm looking to sort out the brakes on my son's bike. It is fitted with Tektro Oryx cantilevers. However, they seem a little poor and I'm looking to improve them. Would it be better to upgrade to a mini-V system or will I end up with problems due to the brake travel with the Sora levers?

**hjd10, via the Cycling UK Forum**

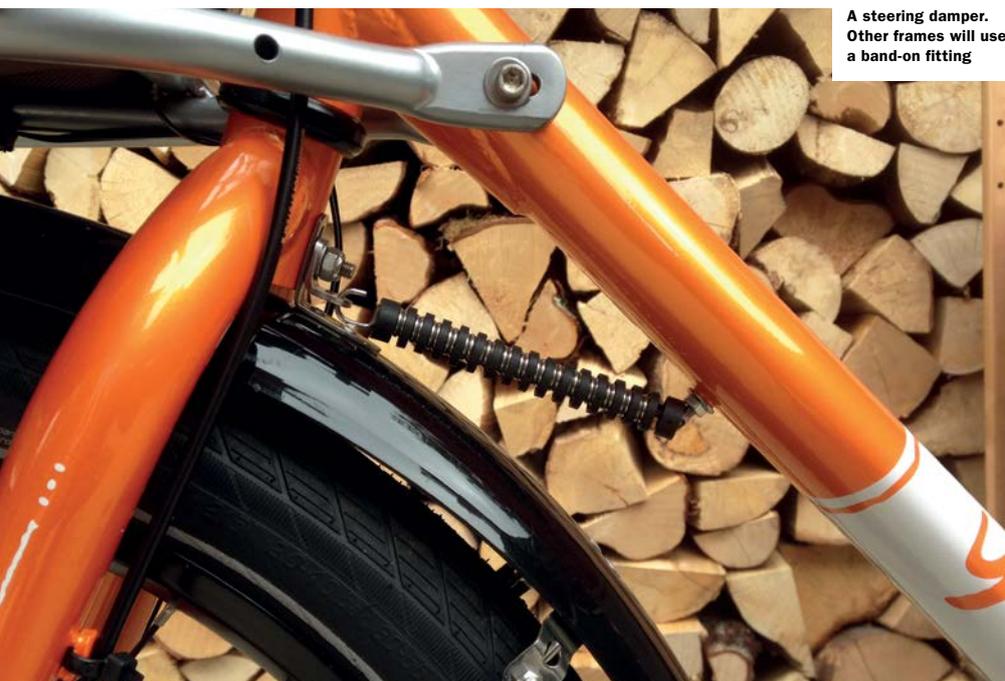
**A** Marketed as suitable for road bike levers, even the shortest (~85mm) mini-V brakes ideally require a little more cable pull. This means the brakes provide a lot of power but, unless set up with blocks close to the rim, not much spare lever travel when applied. This will also depend on the exact positioning of the brake bosses; the lower, the better. In practice, provided short-arm mini-V brakes offer sufficient tyre or mudguard clearance and are kept well-adjusted, they will work well (bearing in mind the above) with Sora brake levers.

**Richard Hallett**

### Legal TOWING – THE LINE

**Q** Are there any rules about vehicles towing other vehicles? I won't say I was nearly taken out by one car towing another, but it was a scary thing. I was about to move out into the primary position approaching a roundabout when a car passed me towing another on a long towline (around 20 feet). Neither vehicle had its hazards on. Luckily for me, I saw the tow rope before moving out between them. Should DIY towing be made illegal?

**661-Pete, via the Cycling UK Forum**



A steering damper. Other frames will use a band-on fitting

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Tow ropes should be 1.5-4.5m long, according to the RAC

**A** We take the term 'DIY towing' to mean the towing of vehicles by two private individuals using a tow rope or chain. There are a number of requirements in relation to towing. These consist of rules, regulations and legislation such as: The Road Traffic Regulations Act 1984; The Road Vehicles (Construction and Use) Regulations 1986; the Road Traffic Act 1988; the Road Traffic Act 1991; and the Highway Code, Rules 98, 124 and 160.

In relation to your question, there appear to be no laws banning or prohibiting the use of DIY towing. All those who have a full driving licence are permitted to tow as long as their licences are validly issued and not under any restrictions.

Before 1 January 1997, drivers with a full licence were permitted to drive a vehicle and trailer combination up to 8,259kg Maximum Authorised Mass (MAM). After 1 January 1997, the licensing rules changed and imposed new restrictions as to MAM. This saw a reduction in the maximum to 3,500kg for a car or van plus a trailer of up to 750kg. This is an overall combination of 4,250kg for all new licences issued on or after 1 January 1997.

The Highway Code recommends that extra care is taken when towing a vehicle; this could be seen to include all forms of towing, such as DIY towing and towing by professional organisations such as the RAC or the AA.

The RAC provides guidance on its website on how to perform safe DIY towing if the need arises. This guidance states that the car being towed should display a warning sign that it is being towed. It also states that a tow cable or tow rope should be a minimum of 1.5m and a maximum of 4.5m long. The towing cable should be made visible to other road users if it is longer



than 1.5m, for example by attaching a brightly coloured flag to the middle of the cable.

Extra care is advised by the RAC for those who perform DIY towing. In line with the Highway Code, drivers are expected to drive 10mph below whatever speed limit is applicable. As with any road vehicle, all the standard laws apply to those who drive and/or tow on the highway.

**Richard Gaffney**

### Technical MTB GEARS ON ROAD

**Q** As an older rider with some mobility issues, I prefer a straight handlebar bike and have a mountain bike frame with narrow tyres. However, I would like a modern road frame for the summer. Can I simply use a road frame and wheels with straight handlebars and mountain bike chainset, gears and shifters?

**Colin Mitchell, via the Cycling UK Forum**



Lowest gear with Shimano Tiagra is normally 30/34

**A** The simple answer is 'yes, but...' Provided you can source a suitably shaped handlebar, along with a stem compatible with the frame's fork steerer and head bearing system, the only major issues you are likely to encounter are in fitting an MTB chainset. Mountain bike bottom brackets are generally made for a wider bottom bracket shell – and then achieving a correct chain line with the narrower road rear wheel hub.

Alternatively, you could use a flat bar road bike groupset. The latest (4700 series) version of Shimano's Tiagra road groupset includes as an option a triple chainset (50-39-30), a 34t rear cassette, and flat-handlebar Rapidfire Plus shift levers. Tiagra BL4700 brake levers will work with calliper and V-brakes. If the bottom gear is low enough, this solution would fit the bill for you.

**Richard Hallett**

### Technical HEADSET CUP REMOVAL

**Q** How hard can I hit them? I've made a cup remover using a steel tube with four cuts in it, similar to the Park Tool one. I have sprayed some WD40 to lubricate the cups. But so far I've given a few whacks with a mallet and no sign of movement. I'm nervous about smacking the cups so hard I damage the frame. Any ideas?

**Mr Tom, via the Cycling UK Forum**

**A** Be brave... You may need to hit your tool 'quite hard' to get the cups out. How hard? For starters, hit the head of the tool with a hammer for maximum impact. That said, the key to your question is to support the frame correctly. The best option is to clamp the top or down tube (whichever is nearer the cup being removed) close to the head tube, in a bench vice, using a correctly-sized wooden tube-holding block. With the frame rigidly mounted and leverage on the frame tube minimised, the cups will come out without much of a struggle. With a helper, you could rest the top or down tube on a table top with the head tube hanging over the edge to ensure a solid base for your efforts.

**Richard Hallett**

### Technical FOLDING OR WIRE BEAD?

**Q** Looking at getting some Vittoria Hypers. They're available in wired and folding. Which is best and what is the difference in performance?

**Tangled Metal, via the Cycling UK Forum**

**A** Assuming there is no other difference (e.g. in carcass construction), there will be no discernible difference in rolling resistance, grip or comfort. The folding tyre will be lighter by 80g or so – and considerably more expensive.

**Richard Hallett**



Folding bead tyres are lighter. Casing and rubber compound may be different but aren't always

Top left: iStockphoto.com. Others by manufacturers

### Contact the experts

Email your technical, health, legal or policy questions to [editor@cyclinguk.org](mailto:editor@cyclinguk.org) or write to **Cycle Q&A, PO Box 313, Scarborough, YO12 6WZ**. We regret that Cycle magazine cannot answer unpublished queries. But don't forget that Cycling UK operates a free-to-members advice line for personal injury claims, tel: **0844 736 8452**.