



# NOBILETTE CYCLOCROSS/LIGHT TOURING

BY PATRICK O'GRADY

→ MARK NOBILETTE has been building bicycle frames as long as I have been building sentences. One of us is a skilled craftsman whose work is much in demand. Guess which one of us that is? There will be a prize. (I'm not sure what that prize is yet, but I'll think of something).

Back in 1974, when I was learning my trade working as a copyboy for the *Colorado Springs Sun*, Nobilette was likewise learning his, working for the legendary California frame builder Albert Eisentraut.

After this glorious period of the 1970s was over, we both went back to school, and then dove into our respective careers. Life went on, as it will.

Our paths didn't converge until the late 1990s. I had been given a chromoly GT Edge cyclo-cross frameset from the small factory run by Forrest Yelverton in Longmont, Colorado, and some knowledgeable industry type told me that Nobilette might have built it.

I liked that Reynolds 853 frame — a lot — but at the time I was buying my racing bikes from a friend in California, Brent Steelman of Steelman Cycles, so I raced the Edge now and then, but mostly it served as a training or pit bike.

It would be a good long while before I finally bought a bike from Nobilette, when Steelman took a

### SPECIFICATIONS

NOBILETTE  
CYCLOCROSS/LIGHT TOURING  
**Price:** \$2,400 (frame & fork only)  
**Sizes available:** Custom  
**Size tested:** 55.8cm  
**Weight:** 23.1 pounds (with pedals)

### TEST BIKE MEASUREMENTS

1. **Seat tube:** 55.8cm (center to center)
2. **Top tube:** 56.5cm
3. **Head tube angle:** 73°
4. **Seat tube angle:** 74°
5. **Chainstays:** 430mm
6. **Bottom bracket drop:** 50mm
7. **Crank spindle height above ground:** 300mm
8. **Fork offset:** 45mm
9. **Wheelbase:** 1029cm
10. **Standover height:** 850.9mm
11. **Frame:** Reynolds 853 chromoly. Eyelets and braze-ons for fenders and rear rack; cantilever posts; bosses for two bottle cages; top-tube cable stops and nifty cable noodle at seat clamp for rear brake; down-tube mounts for shifters or cable stop/barrel adjusters; Columbus rear dropouts with adjusting screws; chain hanger
12. **Fork:** Sloping crown, True Temper blades; fender eyelets at crown and dropouts
13. **Rims:** Mavic Open Pro, 32-hole
14. **Hubs:** Shimano Ultegra HB-6700
15. **Tires:** Soma New Xpress, 700x32C
16. **Bottom bracket:** Unknown square-taper
17. **Crankset:** Sugino XD2, 172.5mm, 46/34/24 chainrings



**18. Cassette:** SRAM PG-950 9-speed  
11,12,13,14,16,18,21,24,28

**19. Chain:** Shimano HG-73

**20. Brake levers:** Cane Creek SCR-5

**21. Top-mounted brake levers:**  
Cane Creek Crosstop

**22. Shift levers:** Shimano Dura-Ace,  
9-speed

**23. Front derailleur:** Shimano Dura-Ace triple

**24. Rear derailleur:** Shimano Ultegra

**25. Brakes:** Paul Components Neo-Retro (front) and Touring (rear)

**26. Brake pads:** SwissStop Viking

**27. Pedals:** Shimano A520 touring

**28. Seat post:** Ritchey WCS, black,  
27.2mm

**29. Stem:** Giant, 90mm, 15° rise,  
31.8mm clamp, black

**30. Handlebar:** Torelli Bormio SS,  
black, 31.8mm clamp diameter,  
44cm (center to center)

**31. Bar tape:** Serfas Camo Grey  
synthetic cork

**32. Headset:** AheadSet C4

**33. Saddle:** Selle Italia Flite, gray

**34. Bottle cages:** Blackburn  
stainless

#### GEARING IN INCHES:

	46	34	24
<b>11</b>	112.9	105.5	58.9
<b>12</b>	103.5	96.8	54.0
<b>13</b>	95.5	89.3	49.8
<b>14</b>	88.7	82.9	46.3
<b>16</b>	7.6	72.6	40.5
<b>18</b>	69.0	64.5	36.0
<b>21</b>	59.1	55.3	30.9
<b>24</b>	51.8	48.4	27.0
<b>28</b>	44.4	41.5	23.1

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break from frame-building. And it would be my first — and to this point — only custom bike.

That word, “custom,” was a sticking point, frankly. Nobilette and I would talk about doing some business when we met at races or shows, but I was strictly a middle-of-the-packer and ordering up a custom bike felt pretentious, the sort of stunt one expects of an age-grouper with more money or connections than talent. Instead of an old bald coot driving a Ferrari, I would be an old bald coot racing a Nobilette. I already felt showy riding an off-the-rack Steelman.

But eventually I succumbed, and you should too. Not to the Ferrari dealership, but to a custom frame builder. Why settle for whatever’s for sale if you can buy the bike you really want?

I drove up to Nobilette’s shop near Longmont and we started talking bicycles. What I had in mind was some sort of all-rounder. As you may have noticed, I have a cyclocross fetish — the bikes are extraordinarily versatile and particularly well suited to the strange range of riding I enjoy — and so I wanted a Reynolds 853 ‘cross bike that could also wear fenders and carry a light load.

Nobilette took my measurements, offered some recommendations (he suggested a 1-inch steerer rather than 1 1/8-inch), asked about cable-routing preference (I chose a road-style setup, already owning a few bikes with top-tube routing for evil weather), showed me some options for chainstays, dropouts and fork — and that was pretty much that.

I also asked Mark to add eyelets for fenders and a rear rack, and he threw in a chain hanger plus a nifty widget for the rear brake cable that sits at the seatpost clamp.

“I ride essentially the same thing,” he told me in a recent phone conversation.

"It's a geometry I've used for a long time. I don't stray from it. The high bottom bracket [50mm drop] is pretty much the only real difference."

My order went in the queue — Nobilette is a busy fellow, building under his own name as well as for Rivendell Bicycle Works, Zinn Cycles, Rene Herse, and Portland's Velo Cult — and some while later I had myself a beautiful new custom frameset with a blindingly white finish from Spectrum Powder Works. Not exactly a cyclocross-friendly color, but it was a tribute to that long-gone GT Edge, which I had sold in a moment of bike-rich, cash-poor idiocy.

My Nobilette is a svelte fusion of Reynolds 853 (main triangle), Reynolds 725 (seat stays), Columbus double-bend chain stays, and True Temper fork blades. Its tubes flow in and out of one another like limbs on an aspen trunk, a subtle rolling advertisement for the 60-year-old Nobilette's fillet-brazing chops.

"When it comes to working with a torch — old-school bike making — I'm totally comfortable," Nobilette said.

And he's building more lugged frames these days.

"Pretty much all the rando' bikes I'm doing are lugged. In randoneering it's always been lugged."

In some cases, he makes his own lugs, which lets him "get really ornate — take a blank lug and get wild."

But that doesn't mean it's his preferred frame-building method. Getting that deep into the frame-building weeds "is labor intensive," says Nobilette. "It's like building two bikes when I do that."

With fillet brazing, on the other hand, "you don't have to order a lot of parts. If you have the tubing, you just go. I like the look, always have."

Me too. I don't own another bike like it, and it took me a while to get it more or less properly dressed up. I'm still not quite there — the Nobilette deserves more made-in-USA bits from Paul Component Engineering, Chris King and L.H. Thomson, but it rides so sweetly now that I'm reluctant to tinker with it.

The drivetrain is mostly 9-speed Shimano Dura-Ace and Ultegra, with a Sugino XD2 triple crankset (46/34/24) from Rivendell and an 11-28 cassette. The wheels are a reasonably lightweight Excel Sports Nimbus build lifted from another 'cross bike — 32-hole Mavic Open Pros laced to Shimano Ultegra hubs via DT 14/15g spokes.

Paul's Neo-Retro and Touring cantilevers provide the stopping power, augmented by a pair of Cane Creek Crosstop levers on the tops of the 44-centimeter Torelli Bormio handlebar, a broad, squared-off bar with scads of room for levers, computers, bells, bags, aaaooogah horns, and your hands. And there's my usual Selle Italia Flite saddle, in a fetching and understated gray. I got it from a mechanic in trade for a six-pack of local ale.

Thus tricked out, the Nobilette doesn't so much ride as glide. It gives a soothing pat to rough patches of road, making them lie down and behave (there there, now). I can still feel a rough stretch of chip-seal, but it seems very far away, like a dentist after the Novocaine kicks in. The bike is stable but never dull, fast without

being frightening, and strong without being stout — and it weighs just over 23 pounds when stripped for action.

I've ridden the Nobilette in the usual silly places I take 'cross bikes, and it never complained about the admittedly harsh treatment, even when I was bouncing the poor thing off the rocks in Palmer Park. But I quit doing that after a while, because the bike is just too damned pretty for thrashing around in the woods.

Instead, I mostly ride it on the road, and if I happen to see a stretch of dirt I like, well, off I go. With a few simple additions — a Tubus Cargo rear rack, an Arkel TailRider trunk bag, and a pair of silver SKS P45 fenders that match the Nobilette logos on the down and head tubes — I can keep right on going.

And if you like to go in style, Nobilette can even create a custom set of racks to match your frameset. If I ever ask him to build me a touring-specific model, that's the road I'll be taking.

"I'm getting a lot more interest in that," he said. "I like doing racks. It's fun. I've had to make a bunch of fixtures to do it correctly."

It's still too good of a bike for me. And yeah, it may make me look like a poser with an even fatter poser's wallet, but I don't care. The Nobilette is my Ferrari convertible, and the top is always down. **AC**

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*Patrick O'Grady has written and cartooned about cycling since 1989 for VeloNews, Bicycle Retailer and Industry News, and a variety of other publications. To read more from Patrick, visit [maddogmedia.wordpress.com](http://maddogmedia.wordpress.com).*



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