

E-bike brands grow their pedal-assist, mid-motor product ranges in the US

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It's beginning to look like Europe in the American e-bike market. Many leading brands at Interbike come from the Continent, where e-bikes are firmly established both for transportation and sport, while even homegrown companies are moving toward European standards.

Hub motors are giving way to mid-drive, or center, motors, a move popularized by Bosch and, now, Shimano.

Throttle-driven e-bikes are slowly giving way to pedal-assist only systems. Also called pedelecs, pedal-assist bikes are the only type of e-bikes allowed throughout most of the European Union. Even the U.K, where "twist-and-go" throttle bikes are popular, is banning their sale after the first of the year.

Here are highlights from Interbike exhibitors that because of their history or size could be considered trendsetters in the American e-bike market:

Accell North America, the U.S. subsidiary of Europe's leading e-bike company, already has a significant presence in the U.S. e-bike market. But for 2016, it's jumping in feet, arms and headfirst.

Its Haibike (Booth 11042) brand from Germany, which more than any other is responsible for driving the popularity of e-mountain bikes in Europe, has hopes of doing the same in the United States. Raleigh (Booth 11048), which was the first to debut a Shimano Step system in the U.S., is expanding the line. And Currie Technologies, which has been selling e-bikes in the U.S. for nearly two decades, is retiring more of its hub motor models in favor of a mid-drive system marketed under the Currie name in its iZip (Booth 10040) line.

At Eurobike, two weeks before Interbike, it was notable enough that Haibike rolled out a total of 67 e-bike models for Europe, almost all of them e-mountain bikes. What may be an even bigger surprise is that Accell is bringing 44 of those models to the much smaller U.S. market. Can you say "bullish"?

Accell North America recently created a separate division, Haibike USA, which will have a dedicated sales and marketing team.

The company sells two model lines in Europe: The more expensive Xduro line, equipped with Bosch mid-drive motors, and the less expensive, more youth-oriented Sduro line, featuring Yamaha systems.

Haibike has offered only Xduro in North America but for 2016 will bring Sduro here as well. Xduro models will retail for \$3,600 up to \$16,500 for the carbon, full-suspension FullSeven Carbon Ultimate, while Sduro models start at \$2,350 and top out at \$6,000.

"Some of the barriers to riding a bike are fitness level and affordability," said Ken Miner, Haibike USA's director of sales and marketing. "E-bikes are helping with the fitness barrier, but they are a little pricier than a pedal bike because of the motor and the inherent complexity of the system. That is one of the reasons we are bring over the Sduro line from Europe."

Haibike USA expects to have all Xduro and Sduro models available for the holidays.

Raleigh dipped its toe into e-bikes this year with the Raleigh Misceo iE, the first Shimano Steps-equipped bike available in the U.S. For 2016, Raleigh expands its line to three e-bikes, including the Misceo iE and the Raleigh Detour iE, also with a Steps drive and with a step-through frame.

Currie Technologies is one of the oldest U.S. e-bike companies. It positions its iZip line at the more affordable end of the market--"affordable," in e-bike speak, meaning a starting price point around \$2,000.

All but two of its nine iZip 2016 models will feature mid-drive motors as it lessens its reliance on hub motors. iZip is also launching a Shimano Steps-equipped bike, the Path+ pavement bike.

The iZip line will open at a \$2,100 price point with the Vibe+, a low-step, relaxed geometry bike that Currie believes will attract new customers to e-bikes.

iZip also offers a relatively affordable way for consumers to buy a speed pedelec--a growing European category of bikes that can reach motor-assisted speeds of up to 28 mph, instead of 20 mph for traditional e-bikes. Its version, the Protour, will have a Currie-branded 500W mid-drive motor and will retail for under \$3,550.

If the iZip Protour is the Swatch of speed pedelecs, Stromer (Booth 6187) is its Breitling of the category. The Swiss sister brand to BMC, Stromer helped define the high-end market for speedy e-commuters with the ST1.

Last year it introduced the ST2, which has already racked up awards and is sleek, powerful and connected. A smartphone app lets users access the bike's settings, and its anti-theft and GPS tracking features have already helped police in at least one U.S. city recover a stolen bike. The smartphone app can disable the motor on a bike that's stolen.

For 2016, the ST2 gets a sexier sibling, the ST2 S, with an optional 983 Wh battery--an enormous electron reservoir that gives the bike a range of up to 110 miles on a charge. The ST2 S will be fitted with a Shimano XTR Di2 electronic shifting system and Magura MT5 disc brakes. It also uses Supernova's new M99 Pro light system, notable because it is one of the first that meets Europe's forthcoming regulations on speed pedelec lights with a top output of 1,600 lumens. Stromer said the ST2 S should be available next spring.

Perhaps because it's based near Fort Lauderdale, Fla., far from the industry's epicenter in southern California, Prodeco Tech (Booth 6091) has always danced to a different beat. It builds its bikes in the U.S. and features unusual designs that appeal to younger buyers than the typical e-bike demographic. It recently created a "Free Trade Zone" in part of its factory to import components from Asia duty-free.

For 2016, though, Prodeco Tech is beginning to embrace the market's move to mid-drive motors. But in its idiosyncratic fashion, Prodeco Tech becomes the only American brand to spec a Panasonic 350W system, which appears on its Scorpion X10.

Panasonic, an early leader in the field of e-bike motors, has been working to reestablish itself in the mid-drive market but for now is focused primarily on Europe.

For its new Phantom X, Prodeco is using a custom 350W mid-drive motor, PTech, that it builds in-house--also uncommon.

"In part we are following the trend of the Euro market where mid-drives are becoming the standard, but we also feel it is the next wave of e-bike technology for the traditional cycling enthusiast," spokeswoman Minda Moticker said.

The Scorpion X10, available in October, will retail for \$4,000; the Phantom X, available for the holidays, for \$1,000 less.

Easy Motion (Booth 9141), the e-bike brand of the Spanish company BH, is bringing an unusual bike to the market. Instead of one motor, The Evo Bigfoot has two. It's an e-bike version of an all-wheel-drive car.

A 350W motor controls the rear wheel and a 250W motor the front wheel. A controller automatically adjusts the power levels for each motor to prevent skidding. The 26-inch Evo Bigfoot, a fat tire bike, joins the Evo Snow, an AWD 29er that came on the market this year. BH officials say the AWD Evo Snow has sold well in snowy Nordic countries.

Easy Motion's best-selling model, Evo Street, an urban bike, gets an upgrade to a 500W motor from 350W. Joining it for 2016 will be the EasyGo Street, also a step-through but with a 250W hub motor and a smaller battery to reduce the price. BRAIN

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