

# FACTORY TOUR: CALFEE



*Calfee*

INTELLIGENT DESIGNER  
Craig Calfee's logo now  
adorns bamboo racing bikes.



BY FRED DREIER IN LA SELVA BEACH, CALIFORNIA  
PHOTOS BY BRAD KAMINSKI

There is no lunch ride at Calfee Bicycles. When the clock hits break time, the 15 employees of the country's oldest manufacturer of carbon bikes put down their safety glasses, lace up their cleats, grab a soccer ball and head out for a game of *fútbol*. Calfee's factory in rural La Selva Beach, California, sits nudged between rolling strawberry fields and a small airfield. The dirt landing strip, not surprisingly, makes a great soccer pitch.

"It's like this pretty much every day," a smiling Craig Calfee told *VeloNews* editors when we visited his factory in December. "The games are fun to watch."

When he is not overseeing a soccer game, Calfee patrols the floor of his factory, supervising the intricate production process of his carbon bike frames. He guides his employees in English, however his production managers act as able interpreters for his Spanish-speaking employees. Calfee's factory is in the heart of Steinbeck country, a fertile swath of agricultural fields between Santa Cruz and Salinas, bordered on the west by Monterey Bay. The nearest small city, Watsonville, boasts a population that is 75 percent Latino, mostly of Mexican descent. Calfee's work force, not surprisingly, is predominantly Mexican.

"I now rely on the current production staff to recruit new workers," said Calfee, who keeps his worker's legal employment papers on record. "We've been steady in terms of staffing for quite awhile now. We started out with American-born production workers, but we had trouble with turnover, theft and erratic attendance."

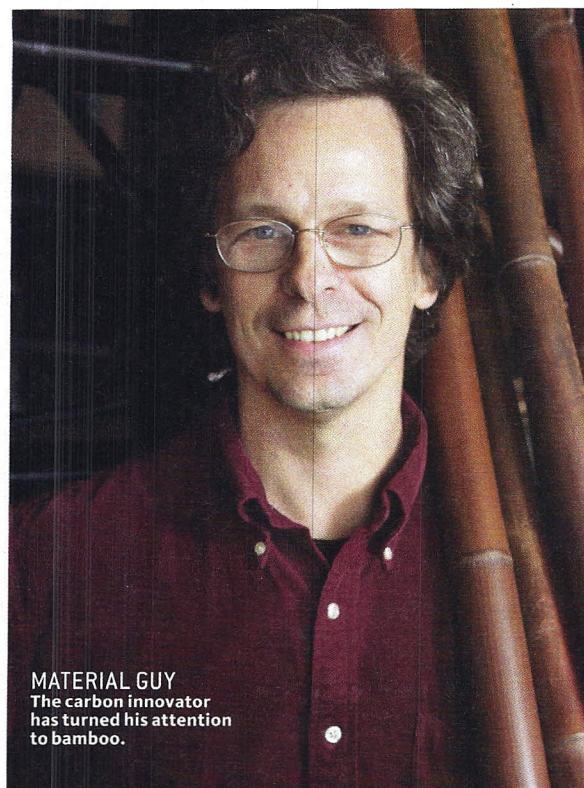
That's just another lesson learned in the two decades Calfee has spent as one of the world's leading innovators in the manufacturing of carbon fiber bicycles. In 1987, while working as a carbon and fiberglass craftsman in Boston, Calfee handcrafted a braided-carbon bike frame to replace his own bike, destroyed in a collision with an automobile. He marveled at the performance characteristics of the new material.

Two years and a \$10,000 loan later, Calfee launched Carbonframes and debuted his state-of-the-art carbon fiber bikes at Interbike. The new material — stiffer, lighter and smoother than aluminum — caught the eye of reigning Tour de France champion Greg LeMond, who contracted Calfee to produce Carbonframes alongside his own personal brand of bikes. LeMond even purchased 18 Carbonframes for his Tour squad in 1991, and Calfee and his revolutionary bikes earned some face time with from the mainstream media. After parting ways with LeMond amicably in 1993, Calfee moved his small production plant to Santa Cruz and launched the successful Tetra and Luna bike lines. He renamed the company Calfee Design in 1997, and in 2001 released the two-pound Dragonfly model, which has carried his company into its current position.

Over the last decade, Calfee has watched the mainstream bicycle industry slowly adopt and then champion carbon fiber as a building material. It is unquestionable that Calfee owned a sizable head start in the carbon game, however he has preferred to stay out of the world of mainstream manufacturing. While the industry's major manufacturers of carbon bikes now house their production facilities in Asia, Calfee is adamant about staying in the United States. His company produces roughly 300 frames a year.

"I've thought about it — we'd make a hell of a lot more money if we made our bikes [in Asia]," Calfee said. "They are good bikes, but [the production] is hard to control. Maybe I'm a control freak, but I like to know really precisely what is going on. I have a very low tolerance for craftsmanship issues. I wouldn't be able to guarantee that if I made my bikes over there."

A move to Asia might also hamper Calfee's role within the industry as an innovator and custom designer. At his California factory, Calfee creates off-the-beaten-path models such as a collapsible carbon tandem and a triple tandem. Many of his frame orders come in with custom specifications.



**MATERIAL GUY**  
The carbon innovator  
has turned his attention  
to bamboo.

He is also the only carbon maker who will perform repairs to carbon frames from any manufacturer — a service that has boosted his company's income by 15 percent.

Calfee's latest innovation, however, has nothing to do with carbon fiber. In 1996, as a publicity stunt, Calfee crafted a bike frame from bamboo. By 2005, his work with the renewable resource had progressed enough to begin manufacturing bamboo bikes on a small scale. These days, Calfee Designs pumps out around 100 bike frames a year, made with industrial-grade smoked bamboo he imports from South Asia.

"At first we didn't think it was something we could sell because of liability," Calfee said. "But it's green and it's bamboo. People want to ride the product."

Calfee's bamboo tubes are bonded together with resin-soaked hemp or carbon thread, then pressed, dried and allowed to harden. His company produces a bamboo road racing model, a bamboo tandem and even a bamboo mountain model. For 2008, the Organic Athlete elite team will race on his bamboo road model.

Calfee is grateful for the racing endorsement, however, he admits his company is not taking any steps to jump headfirst into the world of major team sponsorship. He prefers to keep his company, production and staff at a manageable size. His original carbon frame still adorns the wall next to his office.

Should bamboo catch on as the next carbon fiber, it's a safe bet that Craig Calfee will continue to make his high-end bikes at his warehouse overlooking the ocean in La Selva Beach. Perhaps one of these days he'll even join in that lunchtime soccer game. **VN**



**LUNCH BREAK**  
At Calfee Bicycles soccer  
is always on the menu.