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# “If you’re racing you want to win. If you’re building a product you want it to be the best”

We talk exclusively to the winner of *WMB*'s first ever Lifetime Achievement Award, Fox Racing Shox founder Bob Fox

Words and Photos: Seb Rogers

**M**any individuals can claim to have influenced the course of mountain biking over the years, but few have had a bigger impact on the sport than Fox Factory Inc founder and boss, Bob Fox, which is why he's the first ever winner of *What Mountain Bike*'s new Lifetime Achievement Award. Fox may not have been the first company to offer rear shocks and was, by any reasonable standards, more than a bit late to the party with its suspension forks, but it has consistently delivered some of the best performing rock-swallowing products available.

Other manufacturers may be cheaper or more prolific, but you'll rarely read a poor review of a product that's left the Fox factory. And by developing its affordable and popular ProPedal compression damping system – which helps eliminate pedal-induced bob from rear suspension systems – Bob Fox's company almost single-handedly spawned the suspension revolution that's taken place in the last five years. →

## WMB LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

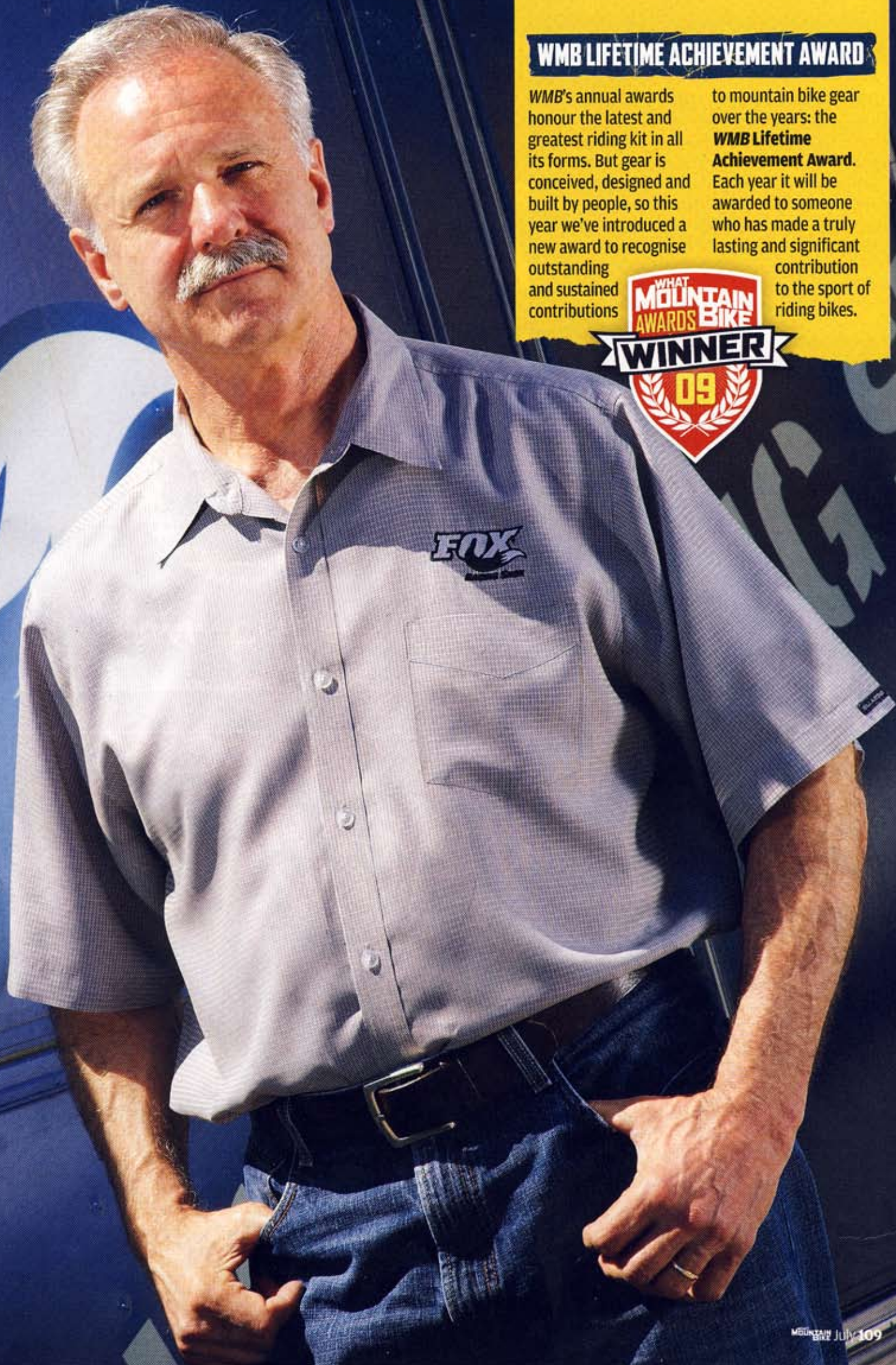
WMB's annual awards honour the latest and greatest riding kit in all its forms. But gear is conceived, designed and built by people, so this year we've introduced a new award to recognise outstanding and sustained contributions

to mountain bike gear over the years: the **WMB Lifetime Achievement Award**. Each year it will be awarded to someone who has made a truly lasting and significant contribution to the sport of riding bikes.

WHAT  
MOUNTAIN  
AWARDS BIKE

WINNER

09



KEEPIN' IT IN THE FAMILY

Which Fox is Fox?

There are two companies called Fox, set up by the two Fox brothers. Bob's brother Geoff started the first company, originally called Moto-X Fox, in the 1970s. Bob initially marketed his first shocks through Geoff's company, but then set up his own separate business (now Fox Factory Inc) in 1978.

Geoff's company is now called Fox Racing and specialises in clothing, while Fox Factory Inc - sometimes, confusingly, referred to as Fox Racing Shox - does the suspension thang. The logos can look confusingly alike, too: Fox Racing uses

a fox head logo, while the fox's tail adorns Fox Factory Inc's products.

There's no link at all between the two companies aside from some shared early history, a common involvement in off-road sports... and the family name, of course.

**Fox Factory Inc**

- set up by Bob Fox
- specialises in shocks and suspension forks
- www.foxracingshox.com

**Fox Racing**

- set up by Geoff Fox
- originally called Moto-X Fox; specialises in clothing
- www.foxracing.com

Before you've even stepped through the door of Fox's Watsonville, California factory, where all the company's shocks and forks are hand assembled, you'll notice Bob Fox's powerful presence. A large sign marks the parking space for his BMW, and his office is situated at the end of one of the open-plan offices that line one side of the factory building: an open door means Bob is in, if it's closed he's out.

In person, Bob is tall, fit, affable, avuncular... and ever so slightly embarrassed, it seems, by all the attention.

"The thing I love is not being a big manager, or the president," he explains in a slightly apologetic manner. "I'm not into that stuff at all. I'm just an engineering guy; that's what I get a kick out of. I really could retire now, but that's the one part of the business I've always liked."

Bob began developing air-sprung shocks for motocross bikes in 1974, distributing them through his brother Geoff's established Moto-X Fox business. By 1978 Bob was generating enough business to set up on his own, so he

incorporated as Fox Factory Inc. He's never looked back, despite the fact that the early advantage he established in the motocross business evaporated nearly as quickly as it appeared.

By the early 1980s, the ever-resourceful Japanese bike manufacturers took many of the Fox-developed improvements on board, removing much of the need for motocross riders to upgrade their shocks out of the box. This

setback didn't put Bob off, however. He simply looked for other markets that might benefit from the air shock technology

he'd developed, and worked his way into those instead.

Fox shocks now turn up in just about any vehicle application, from snowmobiles and bicycles to Ford's brand new, ready-to-rumble 2010 F150 Raptor 4x4 truck. The Ford tie-in is a big deal for such a relatively small company and a source of great pride, with its own custom-built assembly line.

After a hiatus of a quarter of a century, Fox is also back in the motocross game with a new and very well-received shock - the

**"I'm not into that stuff at all; I'm just an engineer"**



Fork development boss Bill Becker checks a fork as it comes off the assembly line





Racing runs through Fox's veins and feedback from sponsored riders is crucial



It's surprising how many parts go into a rear shock

Quality is checked at every stage of production, down to how well the decals fit



## "I'd want to do it anyway: It's not about business, it's about the passion"

Podium RC3. Bob's eyes light up at the mention of it. As a former motocross racer, it's a case of going back to his roots. "I think it's fantastic," he says with a twinkle in his eye. "I call it déjà vu – feels like we've been here before. I've actually said that I'd want to go back there even if we weren't going to make any money, because it's not about business, it's about the passion."

### Fox in a box

Bicycle shocks, then, are only one part of the Fox business – albeit a very important part. Is Fox's experience of other platforms important? "Yes, we think that's a really big deal," he confirms. "It's all shock absorbers, it's all suspension, but each market has a couple of things different about it. For example, what's different about the bicycle market compared with snowmobiles or motocross?"

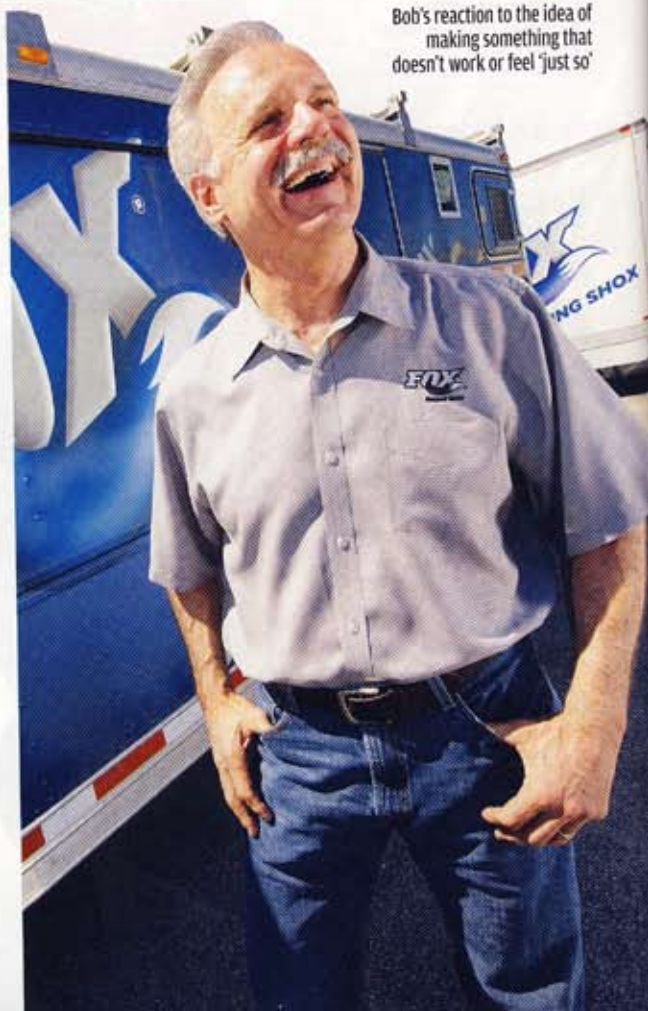
The difference is it's human power, so this whole issue with pedal bob – that doesn't exist when you've got an engine.

"So here was a unique problem for that market," he continues, warming to his theme. "We've developed technologies to deal with the specific requirements of each market, and sometimes we'll combine them. Synergy's a good word." There are definitely family resemblances between all the products in the Fox line; even the new Ford F150 Raptor shock looks, at first glance, like a bizarrely oversized bike shock. As Bob puts it: "We learned about the peculiar aspects of different markets, so now we have a broad range of technologies which we can tweak and combine."

Broad experience of other markets isn't the only thing that makes Fox products stand out in a crowded market. There's also the fact that, in an age when



Bob's reaction to the idea of making something that doesn't work or feel 'just so'





The RP23 shock gets a Boost Valve, erm, boost for 2010, making it feel more fluid

## BOX FRESH 2010 FOX

### The evolution continues

The Fox team has been very busy improving the already impressive performance of its shocks and forks. Among the changes for 2010, two key technologies stand out:

#### Boost Valve

Previously restricted to the downhill-orientated range of DHX shocks, Boost Valve will now be available on the popular

RP2 and RP23 shocks. The valve is designed to do two things: to reduce the air spring's natural tendency to rise steeply towards the end of its stroke, giving a smoother feel and more travel on big hits; and to smooth the ProPedal compression damping, so ProPedal can be left switched on all the time.

#### Fox Isolated Technology

The higher-end versions of Fox's popular 32 fork series will now feature a new cartridge damping system dubbed FIT (Fox Isolated Technology), which will reduce the chance of the oil used for damping becoming aerated over repeated hits, improving fork performance under heavy use. It also saves weight - between 67g and 71g depending on the model - and should increase the interval between services.



Chief shock development engineer Dennis Wooten keeps an eye on production

outsourcing manufacturing to the Far East is extremely common, all Fox's products are painstakingly made in-house. With the dollar under pressure and stringent Californian environmental and safety-related laws adding to costs, it's an unusual approach - but one that Bob suggests isn't likely to change anytime soon. "I've always loved having [the production] right out the back here," he explains, "because you know what? If there's a problem, rather than having a conference call [with

people] thousands of miles away, I can walk out there and have a look at it. I sleep a lot better that way."

We ask Bob what motivates him, and he thinks for a while before answering. "I think it's just my nature," he says, after digging around for a way to explain it. "Sometimes it helps to look back to when you were a little kid: before you were thinking about what you wanted to do to earn a living, what did you like to do? I look back, and I was always into mechanical stuff. I'd get some toy and take it apart... and then I lived on a farm and [that meant] keeping the tractors running, ploughing the fields."

These days, the engineering is a lot less agricultural and a lot more finely honed. When we wonder aloud which product feature Bob is most proud of developing, it doesn't take him long to come up with the answer: the inertia valve. [A 'gate' valve that filters bump forces from pedal input, used predominantly by Specialized.] "That inertia valve was the hardest thing I ever worked on," he reveals. "In the course of developing that I found out that there were patents on the idea going back to the early 1900s. But what was amazing [was] that very few worked well, and there was never a commercially successful inertia valve. When Specialized came to us with this project we thought we could probably →



Fox doesn't build down to a price, which makes its products popular with discerning riders



get it done in six months, maybe a year at most. It took us three and a half years." Perfectionism, it seems, runs through the Fox veins. Later in our conversation, Bob hints at the fastidiousness that goes into every Fox product – from the design and fit of the decals to the feel of the adjuster dials.

"We've seen new products from competitors with sloppy clicks," he tells us with a mildly disapproving tone in his voice, as though the very idea is anathema to him. "And we've literally had meetings about this stuff: it should be crisp, it should be like a German car – just perfect," he insists. "If it doesn't click right, it doesn't feel right. If you don't spend the time it's not going to get done, but we insist that it's got to be right even if it's going to take two more days [of development time]. We don't want any product going out of here that doesn't feel right – that doesn't feel elegant."

## Devilish details

We had already spotted the word 'elegant' on a list of keywords pinned to a whiteboard full of diagrams, dimensions and equations. We point the list out to Bob, and he smiles. "It's the competitive thing, I think," he

**"We want to win, we want our product to win – and we're proud of what we do"**

says. "If you're racing you want to win; if you're building a product, you want to build the best one; and if you're in a marketplace, you want to be top dog in that market. Engineering-wise, I call it pride of engineering. Clean, clever, functional, elegant – those are my design rules," he says. "We like clean designs; don't make them sloppy. Clever is always neat. They've got to be functional. And elegant... elegant is a combination of the others."

What it all boils down to, it seems, is that Bob Fox takes genuine pride in what he does. A perfectionist by nature, he wants to make the best suspension products possible and seems astonished that there might be any other way to approach things. As he puts it: "Pride" is a favourite word here: it's part of our culture. We want to win, we want our product to win and we're proud of what we do." •

Bob Fox: happy to be "just an engineer"



## TIME LINE

The history of Fox Racing Shox

### 1974

Bob Fox starts work on a prototype of the first ever Fox AirShox on a Malco motorbike.

### 1976

Kent Howerton wins the US 500cc National Championships on a factory Husqvarna with Fox AirShox.

### 1978

Fox enters the ATV market, with Roger Mear's winning the Baja 1000 several times on Fox shocks.

### 1978

Bob starts Fox Factory Inc and distributes Fox shocks through his brother's company Moto X Fox.

### 1981

Fox shocks start to be fitted on on-road motorbikes.

### 1982

Eddie Lawson wins the US AMA Superbike Championship using Fox shocks.

### 1987

Fox enters the snowmobile market, and Fox shocks start to dominate snowmobile racing.

### 1993

Fox shocks are specced by Cannondale on its first line of Delta-V full-suspension mountain bikes.

### 2001

Fox launches Fox Fork in the mountain bike market.

### 2002

Brian Lopes becomes UCI 4X World Champion using a Fox Float 100 RLC fork.

### 2007

British downhiller Marc Beaumont wins the first World Cup downhill race with a Fox 40 DH fork.