

The Bikes We Ride

There are at least as many choices in bikes as there are in skis, golf clubs and fishing rods.

This article is not a summary of all the types; instead it will describe the typical bike that you see on Club rides, and it will attempt to explain why we ride the bikes that we do. The RBC is essentially a road club, and we focus on day tours and shorter outings on two-lane blacktop, and we ride the same bikes that are ridden by road-club cyclists all over the world. There is a reason for this, or rather there are many reasons.

In today's marketplace, you will see road bikes, recumbents, tandems, fixed-gear bikes, bicycle motocross bikes (BMX), touring bikes, cyclocross bikes (CX) and many other specialized types, but the first of those -- the road bike -- is the type chosen by most members of the Rochester Bicycling Club. The modern road bike is a highly-evolved creature with well over a hundred years of pedigree, and it does many things very well. It does perfectly the things that most of us do most of the time in our club.

A new road bike adequate to the task of club cycling may seem very expensive to the beginner, however, such a bike, ridden hard and ridden far but properly cared for, will last many years. (It can last decades, if you are immune to fashion trends.) The expense is not as extreme as it first appears.

You can find out a lot about your choices by talking to knowledgeable dealers, many of whom are listed in our discount roster. (Most area dealers give discounts on seeing your RBC membership card.) You do not want to buy a bargain bike from a department store. They are not adequate to the task of club cycling: They will not last, and they are almost impossible to service and maintain, because they are not meant to be ridden. Further, the RBC has an astonishing depth of knowledge in the members who have been riding with this and other clubs for twenty, thirty or forty years. Access to this deep knowledge is one of the most-important reasons for joining a club. Politely ask and you will learn.

Because all areas of cycling, including unicycles, can involve racing, "racing bike" is not a type. A unicycle or a mountain bike can be a racing bike.

What are road bikes like? John Forester once said, paraphrased here, that a beginner thinks that we sit on the seat, push down on the pedals and steer by turning the handlebar, but what we actually do is straddle the saddle, spin the cranks and steer by leaning.

One of the first things one notices about a road bike is the skinny rims, skinny tires and skinny saddle. Since you aren't actually sitting on the saddle the same way that you sit on the seat in your car, the saddle needs to be just wide enough but not too wide. Saddles specifically designed for women tend to be wider than those for men, because women tend to have more widely-spaced sit bones. There are several keys to saddle comfort, and they include searching until you find the saddle that's right for you, making sure you are positioned correctly on the bike and toughening up your back side with lots of miles. All three take time, and the concept is probably familiar to long-distance hikers and their relationship to their shoes. Big, cushy

comfort saddles are not a good idea. No one can do long rides on them. A good saddle can last for decades and tens of thousands of miles, thus as with the cost of a good but reasonably-priced bike, the expense is amortized. At the shop, since it's hard to sell most people a bike without a saddle, the stock saddle will be a cheap and temporary component meant to be soon replaced by the cyclist. That's one reason that saddles on new bikes are so uncomfortable.

Narrow tires with smooth tread are the types that are usually supplied with new road bikes. The skinny rims are designed to support the skinny tires. When compared to the type of tires usually supplied with commuter or touring bikes, these tires are lighter, more flexible and have lower rolling resistance; somewhat coincidentally they are also skinny. They puncture more easily than the heavy tires one uses on a utility bike, and that's one reason it's important to be able to fix your own flat tires on the road. The RBC sponsors workshops teaching this very skill. On paved roads and even in the rain, a tire with a smooth tread provides better traction than the same size tire with an aggressive, knobby tread.

The potential for on-the-road tube and tire sharing is another reason for the whole group to have compatible tires and tubes. You may have something with you on your bike that will help your buddy get rolling again, and that way you won't feel compelled to come back to get him with the car.

The road-bike handlebar is the drop bar. Drop bars allow an infinite number of hand positions, and this helps avoid numbness and other hand and wrist problems. The drop bar also allows the cyclist to adjust position based on wind conditions. A significant "wind" is generated by the cyclist's moving forward. According to Jan Heine, lowering the handlebar two centimeters reduces aerodynamic drag five percent. Drop bars are normally taped to improve comfort and grip. Modern drop-bar brake levers and calipers are very powerful and easy to use, so don't be put off by memories of the bikes of yesteryear when this was not the case.

In the comments about saddles, above, the subject of bike fit was mentioned. This aspect of the bike is important, so much so that it cannot be overemphasized. A properly-fitted road bike will place the cyclist in a slightly crouched position, that is, positioned leaning forward. There are three reasons for this: (1) the rider will rock over bumps in the road, whereas with an upright position the road jars the rider directly up the spinal column, and (2) the rider is in a more aerodynamic position thus lessening the energy required to move forward, and (3) the rider is positioned over the cranks for enhanced energy transfer to drive the bike forward with less effort.

Roadworthiness

When at the bike store, be skeptical of exotic components, especially ones that the dealer will claim are more aerodynamic or lighter. Well, fine, but fragile, odd and exotic components probably only make the bike a fraction of a percent faster. Within the species, the differences are subtle. After all, you are riding with your mates, remember? With ever lighter and more streamlined components, one will reach a point of diminishing returns. Roadworthiness is a plus in a bike that will be ridden all over the Finger Lakes region and into the Southern Tier.

You don't want your exotic components self-destructing when you are far from home. Instead of "how light?" you might ask the dealer "How well with this hold up when being ridden hard on real roads over time?" Until you have personal reasons for preferring wheels with fewer than thirty-two spokes, you should probably not buy them.

Gear Shifting and Gear Selection

Modern road bikes have their gear shifters mounted on the handlebar, and that makes using the gears easier and encourages the cyclist to use the gears more effectively. As for the gear selection, road-racing gearing is fine for club rides but only if the rider is strong. Most of us opt for slightly lower gearing, even using triple cranks or compact cranks to achieve this. The big gears that the pros use, such as 53/11, are almost useless to the day tourist. It's the athletic rider who makes the bike go fast, not the gears, and as we age, we adopt the mantra: There is no gear too low.

Comfort and the Three Contact Points

It would be nice if everyone on a bike were young, fit, agile and athletic. In the real world there is some compromise in one or more of those factors. Cycling is an activity that can be pursued athletically and/or for extended periods. (Many RBC members view a hundred-mile day as perfectly normal.) As in any similar activity, discomfort or pain can occur. Discomfort or pain while riding almost always centers on one or more of the contact points: saddle, handlebar and pedals.

At the Saddle: Setting up the correct saddle position is part art and part science. An experienced coach or long-distance cyclist can help you do it. There are three important factors to consider: The correct distance above the pedals (saddle height), the correct distance behind the pedals, and the correct tilt, which is almost always level. When most of us learned to ride, our bikes had the saddle low enough to put our feet down onto the road while we were still astride the saddle. This is much too low for efficient pedaling, and when riding hard and long, a saddle set too low, even by one centimeter, can put undue stress on the knees. Correct bike fit combined with correct cycling technique means little or no knee pain.

At the Handlebar: Once the saddle position has been determined, the coach, experienced friend or dealer will help you decide how to set up the handlebar. The reach to the bar is controlled both by its height relative to the saddle and its distance forward from the saddle. Do not succumb to the temptation to move the saddle to adjust the reach to the handlebar. Aggressive young cyclists have the handlebar set below the saddle, whereas older day tourists tend to set it at the level of the saddle or higher. However, since arm and torso lengths vary among persons, there is no easy rule to follow. A handlebar set too low can result in hand, elbow and/or shoulder discomfort, and this is made worse in the early season or in the case of the occasional rider not used to his position.

At the Pedals: Historically, cycling shoes were made of leather. They were expected to stretch, and for this reason, dealers and coaches got in the habit of fitting them too small. Modern plastic shoes do not stretch, and if anything they should be bought a half size too big to allow

the foot to swell on long rides. A discomfort in the arch of the foot caused by Morton's Neuroma can sometimes be lessened by moving the cleats all the way back in the slots.

Lights

Although not part of the basic bike, NYS law requires cyclists when riding at night -- which is defined as the same time of night when motorists are required to have lights on -- to use a white front light and a red rear light. If there is a collision with injuries, and if the cyclist is not abiding by this state law, he could be cited as a contributor to the collision. You may be riding in the city in an area with bright street lights, and you may have excellent night vision, but the state still requires you to have those two lights and wisely so.

Essential Accessories

When you are shopping for your first bike, you will need some other things, like a pump, and there is a separate article about these things.