

What We Wear while Riding

Although it is certainly possible to ride a bike while wearing ordinary street clothes, and although there is a movement afoot to encourage this -- particularly in some communities on the West Coast of the U.S.A. -- what most club cyclists wear on most rides on most nice days is the standard kit that has evolved over many decades, this evolution having kept pace with the evolution of the fabrics that cycling clothes are made of and with the evolution of the bikes themselves.

The standard summer kit begins with six items, listed here in order of importance: helmet, eyewear, shorts, gloves, shoes and jersey. This kit can be easily modified for cold and inclement weather.

Helmets

In the interstice between equipment and clothing is the cycling helmet. Club cyclists are expected to wear a helmet. In New York State, helmets are required by law for anyone under the age of fourteen, and helmets are a good idea for all of us. Most models of helmets offered for sale have been tested in a lab, and most of them meet standards set by the Snell Memorial Foundation, CPSC, ANSI or more than one of these. Check the labels inside the helmet. The presence of these labels is what's meant by the expression "approved helmet." Spending more money does not guarantee you more protection, but it often will buy lighter weight, better ventilation and more style. Styles change from year to year without the helmets' safety improving much if at all.

Helmets are intended to protect the brain and face from injury in minor falls, so the argument that you are just riding around the neighborhood is not a logical one: Simply falling is by far the most-frequent cause of cycling-related injuries. (There have been at least a dozen serious falls in the RBC in recent years: One guy hit a curb, one hit a pothole, one ran over a drain grate, one hit a dog, one hit a deer, three fell in loose stone, two fell on RR tracks, and three hit other cyclists. All these cyclists were just riding along, i.e., none of them were racing. All were wearing helmets. One hit his head and his helmet was shattered.)

The helmet will not magically protect your head just by its sitting on your head. The helmet has to fit your head, which is why helmets are available in sizes, and it has to be properly positioned. The rookie mistakes are to have the straps so loose that the helmet won't stay in position, and to have the helmet sitting so far back on the head that it won't protect the face in a fall. Roll your eyes up toward the sky: You should be able to see the front edge of your helmet. If not, it's too far back to do you any good in a fall. Baseball caps don't usually fit under helmets, and when they do, they probably compromise the helmet's effectiveness.

Eyewear

Cyclists usually wear some form of wraparound sunglasses, which are often available with clear lenses for riding in dim conditions or at night. The glasses protect the eyes from wind, bugs, airborne cinders and rain. Wind-generated tears can compromise your ability to see the way ahead. Polycarbonate lenses are made to not shatter on impact, and nylon frames are less likely than metal to puncture an eye in a fall.

Shorts

Modern shorts are made of synthetic material that stretches with movement and dries quickly when saturated with perspiration or rain. They are cut to fit the cyclist when the cyclist is positioned in the traditional crouch long favored by road cyclists. Cycling shorts have a synthetic chamois pad in the crotch that makes long hours in the saddle more comfortable. They are intended to fit like a second skin so as to avoid bunching and chafing, so buy the smallest size that you can possibly get into. If your shorts are the right size, getting into them should be something of a struggle, and there should be no wrinkles visible when you are on the bike. Good shorts are expensive, and if you are on a budget, spend your money on the shorts instead of on the other clothing items, in other words, save money on your jersey instead of your shorts.

If you have never worn cycling shorts, your first outing will have you looking over your shoulder for the local police to arrest you for indecent exposure. Alternatively, you may be shy, especially if you are sure that you don't look quite as sharp as the models in the cycling catalogs or as slim as the pro racers in that movie about the Tour of Flanders. But one of the great things about riding with the RBC is that you soon learn that we have members of every conceivable body type, and as long as you can ride safely and skillfully, no one cares what you look like. It's a variation of hanging with your posse. Furthermore, as the First World enters the Twenty-First Century, most citizens are getting used to seeing us out there, both on and off the bike, even in the smallest country store in the remotest hamlet in the Southern Tier. Get over your modesty and get into a pair of real bike shorts.

Gloves

In spite of what you might hear about the glove's padding preventing numb hands on the handlebar, the main function of the half-fingered cycling glove is to protect the hand in a fall. Think of them as knee pads for your palms. Road rash on the palm is something to avoid if possible.

Shoes and Clipless Pedals

Historically, cyclists have worn shoes that are designed especially for cycling and that have special properties for cycling including stiffer soles and narrower heels. The use of Velcro and similar substitutes for shoestrings means that you don't need to worry about the shoestring going into the chain and jamming it causing a fall. Synthetic fabrics have replaced leather, and so the shoe does not stretch, and it does not suffer the way leather does when wet.

Having the shoe attached to the pedal enables the cyclist to spin a higher, more-efficient cadence. A fast cadence is one mark of a skilled, experienced cyclist. Shoe attachment also enables the cyclist to ride rougher roads and trails with reasonable assurance that the foot will not accidentally come off the pedal. This occasionally happens, and it can cause a loss of control or a fall. Over the years, various methods have been concocted to attach the shoe to the pedal. The current standard is the clipless pedal, which comes supplied with a cleat intended to be mounted to the bottom of the appropriate shoe with small bolts. Clipless pedals are relatively easy to enter and exit, but if you commit to some practice doing it in low-stress situations, you will be rewarded when you go out the first time with your new pedals and ride with the group. Your local bike shop (LBS) can help you choose the system that's best for your style of riding, and you can ask others in the club for advice. The shoe, pedal and cleat all have to be compatible with each other, so getting advice is the place to start.

Jerseys

We've listed clothing items in the order of their importance, with helmets first and jerseys last, so you might think that the cycling jersey is a relatively unimportant accessory. You would be wrong. The jersey is a technical piece of gear that can go a long way toward making your ride enjoyable. We favor plastic jerseys made of petroleum and recycled soda bottles. Like shorts, the jersey is intended to fit like a second skin, so buy the smallest one that you can get yourself into. They are stretchy. The tight fit of the clothes help make the cyclist more aerodynamic, and fighting the wind is always an energy sink. Three, large rear pockets enable you to carry a phone, an inner tube, a camera, a jacket and such things that you can't fit or do not want to fit into your seat bag. The half-zipper helps you regulate your core temperature, and the synthetic fabric dries quickly when soaked with perspiration or rain. Quick-drying fabrics are a boon to the touring cyclist who can wash out his kit at night and have it dry and ready to wear the next morning or sooner.

Wool has many of these same properties, doesn't smell bad and stays warm when wet, but wool is significantly more expensive, and it's difficult to silkscreen advertising onto it. Many cyclists consider it bad form to wear championship jerseys that you didn't earn. In this regard, plain-colored jerseys or the jersey of your club are always acceptable.

A lot has been said about the importance of wearing brightly-colored clothing for safety reasons, but research does not bear this out. If you feel safer in a neon jersey, by all means you should wear one. It can't possibly make you less safe. Being visible is important, but that has more to do with where you position yourself relative to the other traffic and little to do with color. (Night-time riding is the exception; see *The Bikes We Ride* for information about lights.)

Inclement-Weather Gear

Cycling is an active sport and anyone who skates, snowshoes or does Nordic skiing will tell you, the temptation to overdress is hard to resist. Resist you must. Because the two sports are so similar, the Nordic-ski standard, the three-layer system -- wicking layer, insulating layer and shell -- works well for cycling. The wicking layer can be your summer jersey and a pair of arm-warmers. The insulating layer can be a thin, long-sleeved wool tee shirt, and the shell can be a thin, pocketable windbreaker. With this system, one can modify the ensemble as the day heats up and cools down again. Add a lightweight balaclava, full-fingered gloves, leg warmers or tights, and a pair of medium-weight wool socks, or neoprene shoe covers and you are ready for most any of Nature's surprises down to about forty degrees F except for heavy rain. Wool is the only natural fiber that's acceptable for active sports. Everything else needs to be synthetic. Cotton is the worst. It dries slowly and does not insulate when wet.