



Get Into Cyclo-Cross

Cyclo-Cross is one of the most accessible forms of cycle-sport. Where else can virtual beginners find themselves racing against national champions? As long as you are riding in your correct age category, at club level events you will be pitched in with a wide range of abilities.

Local races have a relaxed, informal atmosphere and entries are usually accepted on the day. Mountain bikes are welcome at most races and the non-technical nature of the courses means that almost anyone can take part and enjoy a race.

There are often separate races for younger riders, usually with a reduced entry fee or no entry fee at all. For older riders and women, races are often shorter. Even senior races rarely last more than an hour, so to taking part doesn't require a mammoth commitment to hours of training.



Having said that, the best riders are wonderful athletes, combining endurance and a high level of skill.



Cyclo-Cross bikes themselves often make excellent winter training or utility bikes, with their wide range of gears, so forking out for one often increases your cycling options.

Many Road and Mountain Bike competitors use Cyclo-Cross to maintain their fitness during the winter and there is considerable overlap between clubs in these disciplines.

In many areas of the country there are local races virtually every weekend through October, November and December.

Winter Fun: Cyclo-Cross (often abbreviated to 'Cross) is generally an autumn and winter sport. Massed starts make for exciting races, usually no more than an hour in length – and shorter for juniors, women and veterans. There are usually free-to-enter races for younger riders. Some organisers are now starting to run summer series, which are proving very popular.

Lapping it Up! Cyclo-Cross races are usually multi lap events, held on short (typically less than a mile and often less than half a mile), grassy courses, generally in public parks or on school playing fields. Less technically demanding than Mountain Biking, Cyclo-Cross often requires riders to dismount to clear artificial obstacles – often wooden boards. The ability to swap smoothly and quickly from riding to running and back to riding in one fluid motion is a key skill for advanced riders.





Private Battles: The short lap lengths mean that better riders often lap some of the slower competitors, but that's not the end of the race – you can still submerge yourself in the action, enjoy your own private battles and forget whether you are first or a hundred and first – that's the beauty of the sport: it's what you make of it that counts.

Bike Facts: Cyclo-Cross machines look very similar to road bikes, with dropped handlebars and thin tyres - however the latter have a knobbled-tread for grip, powerful brakes, low gears and better frame clearances to prevent clogging with mud, all of which adds up to make them easy to handle on the rough.



Cyclo-Cross Bikes

Geometry and forks: Taking a quick look at a cyclo-cross bike you'd be forgiven for thinking it was a road bike with different tyres and brakes. But the geometry of the frame is quite different to that of a road bike, mainly due to the higher bottom bracket height to allow better clearance for the pedals and allowing riders to pedal over rough ground. The frames also have to be stronger to cope with the high stresses of riding fast off road, so oversized aluminium is the preferred frame choice these days.

A clean and wide triangle is required to allow the bike to be carried over a shoulder with ease, so bottle cages and pumps tend not to be catered for, cabling also is routed to avoid interference and discomfort during carrying.

Forks are rarely anything other than rigid, although there are a few manufacturers offering short travel suspension forks for use with 700c wheels, but these tend to be kept for more leisure type bikes. A true cyclo-cross bike has 700c wheels although many mountain bikers adapt their old mountain bike with 26" wheels for this winter sport.



Tyres: In the typically wet and muddy conditions a pair of knobbly tyres with plenty of grip and mud clearance are essential, avoid tyres thicker than 1.5" as narrower tyres can cut through mud better than fat ones. 'Clincher' rims, that's standard style rims and tubes found on modern road bikes, are slowly taking over from the traditional tubular tyres on 'sprint' rims which require gluing in place. Michelin, Vredestein and Hutchinson offer a good range in knobbly cross tyres, their strengthened side wall casing allows high pressure levels to avoid pinch punctures. Wheels tend to be standard 700c road



wheels, so choose a quality build and make, you're looking for durability and strength above all else, but weight is important too. A quality hub will last much longer in the gruelling winter conditions than a cheap equivalent.

Pedals: Pedals need to be good at shedding mud, as running through the undergrowth can make clipping back in a nightmare, double sided SPD type pedals are favoured, due to their ease of use and small cleats which don't hinder running. Time and Crank Brother's make pedals that excel in muddy conditions and rarely clog, making clipping in and out quick and easy.

Riding position: Riding position is variable depending on how comfortable you feel handling a bike off road and in wet conditions, competent riders may feel safe with a low bar position but it's advisable to leave a longer steerer tube to allow for raising the bars if more height is required. Stem length tends to be slightly shorter than on comparable sized road bikes and with some degree of rise giving better handling characteristics off road.

Brakes and gears:



Due to the varied terrain and steep inclines, a wide range of gears are essential with double chainrings with 39 to 48 teeth being standard or up to 50 on flatter, faster courses. Often a 12-26 teeth block is fine as riders tend to shoulder the bike and run up steep climbs rather than push an uncomfortable gear, but cyclo-cross racers run all sorts of odd gear combinations depending on the course.

There isn't any specific cyclo-cross transmission gear so expect to find standard road bike running gear such as derailleurs and shifters. It's rare to see bar end shifters these days and the most efficient shifters are those found on road bikes with integrated brake and shifter STI levers.

Some bikes come with an additional set of brake levers positioned on the flat part of the handlebar, ideal for technical riding.