

Cyclocross: Good Fun for Everyone

By Mike F. Foley



Cyclocross racers hurdle obstacles during Bay Area Super Prestige Series

Photo Melissa Aycock

I've been a cyclist and competitive bicycle racer for close to twenty years, with the last two years including cyclocross. It's some of the most fun I've ever had on a bicycle while gasping, sweating profusely and (at times) bleeding.

What is cyclocross?

Considered 'the rugby of cycling,' cyclocross is a short-circuit (2-4k in length), multiple lap, bicycle race that becomes a one hour sprint over twisty and extremely varied terrain including grass, dirt, single-track and pavement.

Courses are designed for riders to dismount and run over obstacles at least twice per lap. There are different categories, A, B and C as well as Master's, juniors and single-speed divisions. While you can use a mountain bike to race, a cross bike is recommended. If you're just starting out you'll want to enter the Men's or Women's C category - 30 minute races - and go from there. In a pinch, a cross bike could be used for other types of road riding and they can also make good touring bikes.

This fall and winter sport has a great deal of history and fits nicely into an active Bay Area lifestyle. Cross emerged out of Europe in the early 1900s as a good off-season training regimen for 'roadies.' Many of the great Tour champions have used cyclocross for cross training in the winter. Since races never exceed one hour, riders can squeeze in enough training miles during a busy work week.

Cyclocross racing reminds me of what mountain bike racing used to be in the late '80s and early '90s: It's a great sport full of the right energy

and grit. But while cyclocross can be really fun, it can also be rough on the body and the equipment.

At the second race of the Bay Area Super Prestige Series this year, I not only broke my chain, but I blew a tire, cut my leg and threw up breakfast in the parking lot behind my car - lovely. Overall, it was some of the most fun I've had all season. After finally being lapped by the leaders and passing my car for the fifth time, I decided it was time to pull out of the race - but in the end, I had a smile on my face for the effort. It made me want to race that much harder the following Sunday.

To give you some idea of the competition, last year I finished twelfth overall in the Men's 'A' 35-plus division. With two races left in the 2007 season I still have a shot at the top ten. The riders in the top ten are very tough to beat. They don't make many mistakes, show up on a regular basis and truly earn their places on the start line each week.

So you want to check it out? Maybe enter an event?

Don't be discouraged, everyone looks fast in all of their 'race' gear. The nervous anticipation before the race can get to you, if you let it.

All races start the same way. A field of 35-55 riders line up and start to push forward. The top ten riders (in the series/overall) from that category are called to the front line - added incentive to do well each week. Good positioning is paramount for the riders jockeying for the front. Every rider on the front row wants to be the first one into the first corner. Unfortunately, there's only enough room for

one and this causes pile ups and good spectating.

The start of a cross race can be like a smash-up derby - riders get tangled up, bodies and bars collide, clicking cleats and dust, some shouting and elbows. Somehow the usual suspects emerge at the front.

For the most part, everyone is here for the same reason; to compete and to cheer on their friends and loved ones. And afterwards nobody is afraid to open a cold beer for the effort. I've found it's the best place to spend a few hours on a Sunday blowing off some steam. It's the most fun you'll have at a bicycle race - I guarantee it.

You can find some of the best cyclocross racing right here in the Bay Area: <http://www.ncnca.org/>.

Mike Foley is the author of 'Bicycling Beyond City Limits.' The Story of a 55-day, unsupported bicycle trip across the United States. For more information go to - <http://www.bicyclingbeyondcitylimits.com>.

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