

Bike Racing 101: Your First Race

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The hardest part of bike racing isn't cornering, climbing or pack sprints. The biggest obstacle is the anxiety that everyone feels before they pin on that first number and roll up to the starting line. You'll feel a little better once the race starts and a lot better when it's over. The next race will be easier because you'll know what to expect.

Knowing what to expect is a big part of calming those pre-race jitters. We've assembled some useful advice so that you don't have to learn it the hard way.

Weeks before the race:

- Join a club. Your clubmates will be your training partners. They'll also be there to support you when you do your first race.
- Pick a race. Don't wait until you "feel ready" to race. No one EVER feels ready for their first race. Ask your clubmates for advice, pick a race and go for it.
- Tell your clubmates that you're going. Better yet, find people to car pool with. First time racers usually feel like backing out at the last minute. If people are counting on you, you've limited your options.
- Once the chance to back out is gone, the stress levels go way down.

The night before the race:

- Pack everything the night before the race.
- Bring warm, dry clothes for after the race.
- Come prepared for all weather.
- Bring a towel.
- Resist the urge to make last minute repairs on the bike unless they are absolutely necessary (e.g. don't overhaul your bottom bracket the day before the race).
- Make sure you have:
 - Shoes
 - Helmet
 - License (if you have one)
 - Money

The day of the race:

- Plan to arrive 2 hours before the race (this allows time to get lost).
- Eat a good breakfast. (oatmeal, cold cereal, bagels, etc).
- Try to keep snacking up until race time (bagels, bananas, Clif Bars, etc). However, try this in training before you do it on race day.
- Drink lots of water if it's going to be hot. Don't overdo it in cold weather since this could cause cramping or nature may call at an inconvenient time.

- General Ulyses S. Grant once said "never miss a chance to go to the bathroom". Lots of people have missed their warmups because they had to stand in a long line waiting for a Port-o-Potty. Take a pit stop just before you arrive at the race site.
- When you arrive at the race, register & pick up your number immediately.
- If you have extra time at a criterium, ride or walk the course. Look for hazards (pot holes, sewer grates, gravel).
- Get dressed, get your bike ready, pin your number, get food for the warmup and race.
- Your number should be pinned with 6-8 pins. Pin it tightly so it doesn't flap in the breeze.
- Try to have a spare water bottle filled in the car so you can pick it up before the race.
- Start warming up 1 hour before the race.
- Warmup for criteriums should include a couple hard efforts of 15-20 seconds.
- Warmup for road races can be less intense, unless there is a climb early in the race.
- For a road race, warm up backwards on the course, so you can see the last few miles before the finish.
- Make note of landmarks in the last couple miles (unusual trees, houses, mailboxes or whatever). When you get close to the finish, you'll want to be near the front of the pack.
- Try to find a landmark at 200 meters from the finish, where you will start your sprint.
- Don't cross the start/finish line when another race is in progress. This makes the officials very angry and can get you DQ'd from your race. Go around in the grass.

Start of the race:

- Finish your warmup 15 minutes before the scheduled start. Drop off your jacket in the car, get fresh water bottles, go to the bathroom, etc.
- Get to the starting area 10 minutes before the scheduled start. Stretch to stay loose and warm.
- Drink lots of water.
- In a criterium, it is very important to have a starting position on the front line. Pay attention and get to the line as soon as any one else starts lining up.
- The chief official will give final instructions. Don't be afraid to ask questions.
- The starting instructions are generally "riders ready" then the gunshot. Most riders will start rolling on the "riders ready" and not wait for the gun. Don't get left behind. There is no penalty for a false or early start.
- Try to be second or third into the first corner.
- The start of a criterium will seem ridiculously fast. DON'T PANIC. The pace will relax after 5 or 6 laps.
- During the first few laps, people who can't handle the pace will be getting dropped off the back of the pack. It is important to stay up front, and watch out for people leaving gaps.
- If you get a 10 foot gap in a race, it is very hard to close it.

During the race:

- Drink lots of water if the race will last an hour or more.

- Try to stay on a wheel (in a draft).
- Try to stay between 5th and 10th place.
- Resist the urge to chase down attacks or take long, hard pulls.
- If you decide to attack, be decisive.
- Avoid sudden motion (e.g. swerving, hard braking).
- If you have a teammate in a breakaway with fewer than, say, 4 people, do not chase them. Give them the opportunity to stay away, and they will do the same for you. If people yell at you to pull through, ignore them.
- If you have a flat tire or crash in a criterium, you can take a free lap. If you've left a wheel in the pit area, go and get it. The officials will place you back in the race at the back of the group you are with before you flattened.
- Stay in the race, even if you get dropped from the main group. If you are about to be lapped, the chief official may ask you to withdraw from the race (they might not, too). If this happens, you must withdraw. However, don't drop out until they specifically tell you to do so.
- There may be primes (lap prizes) offered during the race. The officials will announce the prime, and the winner of the next lap will get a merchandise prize (or cash in a USCF race). Stay near the front for these, even if you are not contesting the sprint, because the field will frequently split.

Finish:

- When the lap cards show 1, a bell will ring. The lap after the bell is the finish of the race.
- Don't swerve around in the finishing sprint. Keep a good, straight line. You're a beginner, not a pro. Causing a big crash is not a good way to get started.
- If you are far back in the pack, don't bother sprinting. You're not going to place and you may go down if there's a crash ahead of you.
- Try to note the jersey or number of the people around you. The officials may ask for this while trying to determine finish order.
- If you think you placed, check back with the officials ASAP after the race to be sure they got your number.
- Don't bug the officials for results, they will be posted in 10-20 minutes.
- If you disagree with the posted results, there will be a 15 minute protest period before results become final.
- Eat and drink.

Post race analysis:

- So, how'd it go? If you got dropped, welcome to the club. That's how most riders start. Even top riders get dropped when they're having a bad day. They became top riders because they kept coming back.
- Stick around and watch the higher categories race. Think about your race and ask yourself what the top riders are doing differently.

- Listen to the experienced riders discuss their races and don't be afraid to ask questions. Most experienced riders are more than happy to help newcomers.
- Most important of all: Keep coming back no matter how the first race went. You'll gradually get stronger and wiser. You'll be a dramatically better racer next year than you are this year. Most people see major progress for at least five years. It's good to have something to look forward to.