Time to 'cross over?

By Charles Howe

With the start of cyclocross season more than a month-and-a-half away, it may seem premature for any discussion of this growing sub-discipline, but the specialized skills and equipment it requires mean it's time for some "'cross-talk."

'Round and 'round you go

Praises were sung for circuit training when road cycling skills were last discussed here, since it lets you practice technique each lap while getting in a good workout. The course you choose should be varied and technically demanding, but neither too long, which limits the number of times you repeat each section and diminishes the workout's 'learning effect' (also makes it difficult to fine-tune workout duration), nor too short (excessive repetition can lead to boredom). Circuit training also allows you to pace the workout; using the split timer on your watch, regulate your effort so that each lap is about as long as, or slightly faster than the last. On the other hand, if each lap is slower, you either went out too fast, or perhaps are fatigued and need to rest a bit.

The same approach works well for cyclocross, but you need to find a suitable area for the training circuit. See if you can get permission to use a city park or a field with a decent-sized hill. Laps should take 5-10 minutes, and include portions of grass, pavement, and trail as possible. There should be a couple of dismounts (one of them just before the hill) where you get off and run; you don't have to have an actual barrier (such as a log) that forces you to get off, just a marker will do.

With each lap you will refine your technique, which can pay off big come race time: if there are 4-6 forced dismounts per lap, and an average lap time of 6-8 minutes, you will hop off and on your bike 30-60 times in a 1-hour race, so a savings of 2 seconds per dismount/remount will save you 1-2 minutes over the course of the race. This also gives you as much running as you need (contrary to occasional claims, it is not necessary to incorporate running workouts in a training program for cyclocross.)

Mountain bike trails are generally more technical than 'cross courses, so they can help you to hone your 'cross bike-handling skill further. Inch-deep mud makes a bike handle much differently than a road bike on dry pavement, and also makes the workout more challenging, while providing a change of pace.

What's so special about a cyclocross bike?

At first glance, a 'cross bike might look like nothing more than a road bike with fat tires, but upon closer examination, a number of differences become apparent in both the underlying frame and the components mounted on it.

First of all, to even mount those fatter tires requires a frame with extra clearance, not just for the tires, but for the mud they carry in extreme conditions, which also necessitates specialized cantilever brakes. They, in turn, require studs on the fork and seatstays, while derailleur cables are routed along the top tube, again to cope with muddy conditions. Slightly longer chainstays make the wheelbase longer, and handling a bit slower/more stable than a road bike.

In terms of components (other than the aforementioned cantilever brakes), wider handlebars and slightly lower gearing (typically, 38/50 chainrings instead of 39/53) are spec'd on 'cross bikes, as well as mud-shedding MTB pedals. Bar-end shifters used to be *de riguer*, but the integrated shift/brake levers that are standard on road bikes do just fine.