

Cycling's rite of spring in Northeast Ohio: the Races at the Lake

BY CHARLES HOWE

On four consecutive Saturdays in April and May, Munroe Falls MetroPark plays host to the Races at the Lake (RATL), a series of criterium bicycle races. The longevity of the event – this is the twenty-second year of its running – hints there is something special about it, and indeed, all the elements of a classic are in place: a lovely woodland parkway course, closed to auto traffic, with just enough technical difficulty to keep things interesting for experienced riders, but not too much for beginners; typically delightful springtime weather; categories for all levels of riders; and expert staging by a well-established club, the Summit Freewheelers. For cyclists throughout the region, RATL is as much a rite of spring as the season opener is for Indians fans.

From the French word for “circuit,” a criterium by definition takes place on a closed course between 800 and 5,000 meters (½ – 3 miles) in length. This usually means a loop around the town square of a half-mile or so, with four, six, or even eight corners, which puts a premium on sprinting ability and bike-handling skills. In Europe, they serve as a means of showcasing top riders after grand tours such as the Tour de France, more in the mode of exhibitions where the stars are paid appearance fees and the win is often ceded to a local favorite. In America, by contrast, they tend to form the backbone of state and national racing calendars due to their logistical convenience and spectator-friendly nature, as well as the compatibility of more robust American physiques to their typically flat course profile.

At first blush, RATL may seem tame in comparison to the average crit, with only four corners spread out over 1.2 miles, but it actually offers a subtle, deceptive challenge. Let's take a quick tour of the key features:

- 1 If you've been gapped in the preceding succession of four 90° turns, this mild downhill section gives you a chance to get on a wheel and catch back on.
- 2 Good racers don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind is blowing, and on this, the more significant of two flat/open sections, it's important to use such information to position yourself correctly and conserve energy.
- 3 Just after you round the left-hand bend and cross the bridge, the road steepens abruptly. If you anticipate this and select the correct gear at the right time, you can stay seated rather than having to stand up and push a larger gear. This “sit and spin” strategy conserves energy for the mild 210 yard, 4.7% rise that follows. The finish line was relocated at the top of the hill a few years back for safety reasons.

The grade is not selective, but small gaps may appear, making this a good place to move up and improve your position. Staying out of the wind isn't as important here, since the area is heavily wooded, and air resistance is much less of a factor than on the flat.

- 4 Over the crest of the climb, you should consolidate any gains and be firmly on a “good wheel.”
- 5 Right about here, you'll want to make any last-moment adjustments to your position before the right-hand, downhill turn across the earthen dam.
- 6 As you pass the restrooms/concession stand on your left, you'll still be carrying speed as you encounter a mild chicane through which positioning is critical. If you can be near, but not directly at the front, you'll be more able to take the best line possible to maintain your speed and avoid being gapped out of the corner which follows immediately. If you're at the back, you won't be able to correct any position loss until you're halfway around the course again – and the energy cost in doing so will be very high.

For complete event information, visit <http://summitfreewheelers.org>.

