

Cyclocross: the peculiar cycling challenge

BY CHARLES HOWE

Cyclocross originated in the early 1900s among European road racers who would race across fields and over fences to the next town as a means of maintaining fitness during the off-season. In addition to providing a fun counterpoint to road racing, with shorter race durations and higher intensities, the challenging conditions improved their road bike-handling abilities. The first French National Championship was held in 1902, and the sport soon spread to the neighboring countries of Belgium, Switzerland, Luxembourg, Spain, and Italy. The first world championship was held in Paris in 1950, and today, cyclocross has achieved such popularity in its own right that many top professional competitors are specialists who, though they train mostly on the road, never enter anything other than cyclocross races.

Cyclocross became regionally popular in America in the early 1970s, and even though the first national championship was held in 1975 at Berkeley, California, not until the 1990s did it take off on a broader national scale, such that the U.S. scene can now be considered a 'niche sport' within competitive cycling, just as in Europe.

Races typically take place in the autumn and early winter, consisting of multiple laps on a 2.5-3.5 km circuit that may include pavement, hardpack dirt trails, grass, gravel, mud, sand, ditches, and short, steep hills. In addition, there may be up to six obstacle sections of temporary barriers or terrain features that encourage, but do not require riders to dismount their bike. The total length of such sections may not exceed 10% of the course distance. Under international rules, courses must be at least 3 meters wide at all points to encourage passing at any opportunity, but sections of singletrack may be present at smaller, local races in the U.S. and Great Britain. Races are 30-60 minutes long, depending on rider categories.

Thus, riding surfaces are smoother than mountain bike events, with less emphasis on negotiating rough or rocky ground, and more on frequent changes in speed while overcoming different types of technical challenges. Long straights are broken up (except for the start/finish area), so each section of the course typically lasts no longer than a half minute, forcing constant changes in intensity; accelerating out of tight corners, then braking for the next section before speeding up once again is a constantly recurring theme. The ability to quickly dismount, pick up and carry the bike while navigating an obstruction, then put it back down again while quickly remounting in a continuous, smooth motion without loss of speed requires a high degree of conditioning and skill.

Form follows function, and although cyclocross bicycles have frame geometries and components similar and sometimes identical to road bikes, they come with wider, knobby-tread tires, specialized brakes with greater clearance to cope with muddy conditions, and special cable routing. They must be as light as possible to facilitate carrying over obstacles, and even though unrideable course sections make account for only a small portion of each race, the sight of competitors struggling up a muddy slope with bikes slung over shoulder remains a quintessential image of the sport.