

Choosing a Bike

What's the Most Important Thing to Consider

When you're buying a bike, the absolutely most important thing to consider is fit. If a bike doesn't fit you, it doesn't matter how light or expensive it is or whether it's a road bike or a mountain bike, you can't be efficient and you can't be comfortable – which means that you'll be miserable. The flip side of that is that if you find an inexpensive bike that fits you, you'll be faster and happier than someone with an ill-fitting but more expensive, "better" bike. (And also richer.)

To understand the elements of fit, ask someone in a bike shop to talk you through it, or go to a bike club meeting and ask almost anyone. The person you ask should have as much in common with you as possible: size, gender, age, starting fitness level, etc. That way you start out sharing some perspective. Many elements of bike fit are almost religious in nature, with much controversy about them – but the fundamentals are pretty much agreed to, so any knowledgeable person will be able to get you on the road to truth.

Alternately, if you do an internet search for "bike fit" you'll get lots of hits. If you identify the common elements of each approach, you'll have a good foundation. If you take a look at the places that each approach differs, then consider the background of the person who generated the information (triathlete, mountain biker, racer, tourist, etc), it may help you decide who has the most in common with your values. That is, people who buy bikes to do short, fast races with them value different things in a bike than people who do multi-day, leisurely tours on their bikes.

Finally, on average, getting proper fit for a woman is more difficult than for a man, simply because there are fewer women who ride than men so there are fewer small bikes to choose from, and fewer still that are specifically designed for a woman's physiology. That said, there are way, way, way more small/compact bikes out there now than there used to be, so I'm confident that most women can find something that fits them.

Once I Know How a Bike Should Fit, What Kind of Bike Should I Buy?

There are about a zillion different kinds of bikes, but the ends of the continuum are the mountain bike and the road bike. I'll describe those end points and why you might prefer one to the other. And all this is my opinion, so your mileage may vary.

Mountain bikes are the ones with the fat tires, flat handlebars, sloped top tubes (the bar straddle when you stand over the bike), and lots of gears – usually 27 "speeds". At this point, most mid level mountain bikes come with a front shock, and high end mountain bikes frequently feature a rear suspension of some sort, as well.

Road bikes are the ones with the skinny tires, the dropped handlebars, and they usually have a flat top tube.

What Kind Should I Buy?

Did I mention that this was going to be my opinion? If I didn't, I'm doing it now – but it's based on riding about 20,000 miles on a bike as a middle-aged woman – probably much like you, if you're reading this article. So here it is: for about 95% of the people I know, a road bike is the right choice, but it's not immediately obvious. Here's the story:

Many adults returning to cycling after a long break feel more comfortable on a mountain bike. The reasons are clear: the fat tires give the inexperienced cyclist a comparatively stable feel and a cushy ride. You can sit almost straight up on a mountain bike, so you don't have lean over in the uncomfortable appearing posture that roadies (people who ride road bikes) have. Another attraction is the sloped top tube – it's not nearly as threatening as that flat top tube on a road bike. And finally, the gearing is usually set up so you feel like you can climb walls on the bike.

The problem is that if you're going to ride primarily on the road (and that's where the Cinderella training rides are done), most of these apparent advantages turn into disadvantages as soon as you start getting comfortable and confident on a bike again. Let's take the issues one at a time.

First, the fat tires. The reason that they give the soft ride is that they usually run at much lower tire pressure than road tires. The lower tire pressure causes more friction on the road, so it takes more energy to move than the road tires do. The weight of the tire also comes into play. When you ride a bike on the flats, the frame of the bike is supporting your weight; the only weight you have to move up and down is the weight of the tires, so the heavier the tire, the more work you do, and those heavy mountain bike tires weigh lots more than those tiny road tires. Finally, a pet peeve: offroad tires usually have large lugs on them, for gripping slippery, loose dirt trails. Unfortunately, when lugged tires are run on the road, they make a horrible whining noise as they rotate on the road. Part of the charm of bike riding is the silence (except for the wind and chatty riding companions), and tire whine is really annoying.

Next, the riding position. There's no way around it, sitting straight up is really attractive at first. However, after awhile it gets less attractive. The problem is that when you do a ride of 62 miles (like the Cinderella Century), you'll be on your bike quite awhile. If you're sitting straight up with your hands on those flat bars, that's the way you'll have to sit for the entire ride – several hours. Sooo, the place on your seat that you sit on in the first mile is the same place you'll be sitting on in the sixtieth mile and that can get really painful. Another reason to avoid the upright position is that wind resistance is the cyclist's main enemy; when you're sitting straight up, you're acting like a parachute dragging you and your bike to a stop.

The drop bars of a road bike avoid both these concerns. The drop bars allow you to put your hands and arms in several different positions, positioning yourself slightly differently for each. Also, you can support some of your weight on your arms, reducing the point pressure on your bottom. Accomplished cyclists change position every ten minutes or so, to avoid excessive pressure. And, since you're sort of sprawled over your bike, you're also out of the wind, reducing wind resistance.

The gearing issue is still alive – you can definitely get much lower gears in stock mountain bikes than on stock road bikes. And the sloped top tube is still a feature found primarily in mountain bikes.

A final reason for choosing the road bike is overall weight. You shouldn't make a choice of bikes totally on weight (although being a bike weight-weinie is great sport), but if all other things are equal, choose the lighter bike. When you're hill climbing, you have to haul your bike's weight up the hill as well as your own, so it's in your best interest to have the lightest bike. That said, road bikes have co-opted some of the more attractive characteristics of mountain bikes, and after-market equipment can get move many of the road bike advantages to the mountain bikes. Specifically, you can buy high pressure, slick tires for use on your mountain bike and handlebar extensions so you can get down out of the wind. Some road bikes are now being designed with a "compact" frame, that is, they have a sloped top tube. And many road bikes come with a triple chain ring, supporting a wide gear range similar to that of mountain bikes.

At this point, you have to be asking yourself, if I'm telling the truth, why any mountain bikes are sold at all. There are lots of reasons to buy and ride a mountain bike, even on the road – I ride a mountain bike with slicks for the first several Cinderella training rides. My main reason is that mountain bike equipment is definitely beefier than road equipment, so during the wet months, it's a lot less sensitive to grit in the gears.

The other reason to buy a mountain bike is to ride it offroad, which is serious fun. The issue there is that to enjoy offroad riding, you have to be much fitter than you have to be to ride the road (consider the "mountain" in "mountain bike", and there a lot of mountains around here!) and a much better bike handler. If you didn't develop these skills as a child, the place to get fundamental fitness and beginning bike handling skills is in the relatively benign environment of the road.

There are definitely reasons for choosing to ride a mountain bike, but it's a bad call to select a bike based on how and where you *think* you'll ride, rather than discovering what you enjoy. If you're returning to cycling after a long absence, borrow a bike from someone for a week or a month and use it to get comfortable with the whole idea of riding again. You'll have much different values after you've ridden 50 or 75 miles – the amount you'll ride with the Cinderellas during the first month of the training series.

How Much Will I have to Spend?

You can spend a virtually unlimited amount of money on a bike, but you definitely don't have to. If you're just starting cycling, you need something reliable, with a large gear range, that can be easily maintained. That means you need quick release wheels, for easy tire changing. You may need a triple chain ring (three gears in front), although modern deraileurs can handle large enough gear ranges so that some double chain ring set ups will fill the bill.

"Maintainable", in this context, means that on-the-road repairs on the bike can be done using using only a few Allen wrenches and/or a screw driver.

Reliability in a bike comes from meeting minimum equipment quality standards and, much more importantly, proper assembly. This means that you **SHOULDN'T** buy a bike from a department store, you should buy one from a bike shop, where cycling enthusiasts will put your bike together. To meet the minimum quality standards, you should expect to pay at least \$400.

How About Buying a Used Bike?

Good call if you can find one. There's the obvious warning that you should know what to look for to make sure you aren't buying trouble: worn parts, bad tires, bent frames, etc. This can be overcome when you're shopping by taking along someone who knows something about bikes. The bigger problem is fit. It's been my experience that there are very few non-department store bikes for sale in the small sizes that most women require. That said, if you can find something that fits you, go for it.

What Do I Need to Buy Besides a Bike?

Before you go out to ride your bike, you'll need a couple of things. First, you need a frame pump – that's a tire pump that's small enough to fit on the frame of your bike that you use when you repair a flat on the road. The previous sentence correctly implies that you'll also need a spare tube and tools to remove a tire. You can carry the tube and the tire tools in your jersey pocket, but it's more reliable to buy a seat pack and always keep it on your bike so you're never caught without the necessities. And as long as you're carrying the pack, add a "bike tool." These are Swiss Army Knife-type tools specifically for bikes that have all the Allen wrenches and screw drivers to do most roadside repairs.

How Do I Start Riding?

Left foot. Right foot. Left foot. Right foot. No sarcasm intended – you get better at riding by riding. Riding alone is good, and riding with a group will make the miles go by and also allow knowledge sharing - riding the Cinderellas is a perfect way to start. See you on the road.