

# SWITCHING GEARS

## Fine-tune your skills for cyclo-cross season



**Cyclo-cross** was invented more than 50 years ago so road racers could train outdoors in the wintertime without freezing. The act of dismounting and running while carrying one's bike was all about staying warm. In modern 'cross, staying warm isn't the trick — the focus is on power and technical skills.

Races are typically 30-60 minutes long, depending on your category. Generating as much power as possible for that duration is clearly important, as it is with other types of racing. But exactly how that power gets used is what makes the difference in 'cross.

Similar to mountain-bike racing, cyclo-cross requires a fast start, and the "field sprint" is typically at the beginning, not the end, of a race. Like a road criterium, power and the ability to repeatedly sprint back up to speed are crucial as well, since cyclo-cross involves dramatic pace changes.

### DRILL YOUR SKILLS

Of course the thing that sets cyclo-cross apart is dismounting, jumping over barriers on foot, and remounting — at speed. As recently as a few years ago, the best way to learn the right technique was to find one of the old masters who would teach you on a rainy Saturday morning at some hidden location. But as professional coaching has become more popular, so have ways to learn the fundamentals of 'cross. There are camps, clinics, DVDs and books now available, all of which detail the particular skills of cyclo-cross.

If you're trying 'cross for the first time, or even if you've done a few races but still aren't sure exactly what you're doing, check out one or more of these resources. Besides the basic dismounting and mounting skills, there are also techniques for starting, negotiating off-camber corners, riding through sand, racing in the mud, taking a bike change, hopping barriers and more.

At the beginner through intermediate levels of cyclo-cross, skills proficiency is often the biggest key to success. Most 'crossers spend at least one training day per week working on skills, especially early in the season. That can be an easy

day of repeating dismount/carry/remount sequences at low speed, or a hard training day where you set up and "race" around a short 'cross circuit that includes obstacles (off-cambers, run-ups, barriers, sand pits, etc.). While every region of the U.S. has a certain style it's known for, it's likely you'll encounter nearly every type of course through a full season — so prepare ahead of time. You never want to try a new skill for the first time in competition.

### MANAGING TRAINING LOAD

Although it's important to discuss particular workouts relevant to the type of racing you're doing, it's not nearly as critical as planning how much training stress to incur, and when. A training plan can help you enjoy a consistent 'cross racing season, or allow you to put all your eggs in one basket to peak for a key race, such as nationals in December. Because 'cross demands focus, speed and execution of difficult maneuvers at full speed, coming into races fresh and well-rested is critical.

Of course, if you rest too much, then you're not training enough. So build up as much "base" as possible heading into the season, then taper for the critical races. A good example of this is Jelly Belly pro Jeremy Powers. Jeremy was sick for much

of the road season, but has been training and racing since July, building up as much fitness as possible in order to taper into the three U.S. Gran Prix race weekends in October and November, and then nationals in December. Given that Jeremy started fresh in July, he can still travel to Europe in December and perform strongly at world championships in January.

A counter-example is that of reigning national junior and U.S. Gran Prix series champion Daniel Summerhill of TIAA-CREF-Clif Bar Besides attending high school for most of the year, Daniel had a tough road season that involved two trips to Europe with the national team, and flying back for the U.S. road nationals in the middle of it all. His racing and travel schedule was enough to make anyone exhausted, never mind a 17-year-old. For Danny, while it's important to show up and be competitive in the USGP series and at nationals, it's also important to rest and recover from the summer, and then perhaps build up his fitness to peak for world championships, where last year he was fourth among first-year juniors.

For the average weekend warrior who has to balance racing with a job and family, it's a matter of prioritizing races. You're probably best off picking two to three weekends to focus on. Then, train hard or race three or four days per week this fall, but taper that down to one hard day the week(s) of your target events. To avoid race-day staleness, make sure to do a short ride that incorporates some hard efforts the day before your target event. We call this an "opening up" ride, where you're doing just that for all the systems you have not worked as hard as usual that week. As with any sort of peak, the idea of the pre-race week is reduced overall volume, but with the same or even higher intensity.

Regardless of how serious you are, racing 'cross is one of the most enjoyable types of racing for any cyclist. The short, spectator-friendly races mean you can watch other races after you've finished. And the mix of roadies, mountain-bike racers and hardcore 'crossers in a compact venue creates a unique atmosphere that is much more social than road racing. Whichever approach you choose, keep it fun. **VN**

**JOHN VERHEUL** is the team coach for the TIAA-CREF-Clif Bar cyclo-cross team, as well as Jeremy Powers and a number of other 'cross riders. Read more at [jbvcoaching.com](http://jbvcoaching.com).

## DRILL IT: 3 WAYS TO GET READY FOR 'CROSS

**CROSS TRAINING:** Spend 15–30 minutes warming up with some jogging, followed by some dismounts and remounts at low speed. Practice different ways of lifting and carrying the bike. Then, set up a 3- to 5-minute circuit that incorporates a dismount/run/remount sequence, as well as some tight cornering on challenging surfaces. Do two or three four-lap "races" around this circuit, ideally with a group. Finish off with more skills to work on weaknesses, or 20-30 minutes road riding.

**CYCLO-CROSS INTERVALS:** Here's a great workout from former national champion Tim Johnson. Warm up, then do two or three sets of 8x45 seconds "hard" with 1-minute recovery periods in between. Cool down for 5-10 minutes afterward. While you can do it outside, it's also trainer friendly.

**MOUNTAIN TRAINING:** Ride your 'cross bike on easy mountain-bike trails or jeep roads. This fun, unstructured workout will build your technical skills.