

What is cyclocross?

Cyclocross is a cross between road racing and mountain biking. Competitors race laps around a course featuring a variety of surfaces (pavement, grass, sand, gravel, dirt, etc.) while negotiating a number of obstacles that may require them to dismount and remount their bicycle. Beginning in the fall and running through the winter months, cyclocross used to be mostly popular for off-season training, but has become a very popular sport in its own right. Races are very exciting to watch because they consist of adrenalin-filled laps around short courses - typically less than two miles in length.

How long are the races?

Elite-level racers compete in hour-long races while beginning and intermediate-level racers often race for 20, 30 or 45 minutes. The first two laps are timed and an average lap time determined. From that number, the race officials determine the number of laps remaining. Each lap of the course generally takes between five and seven minutes, making it an extremely spectator-friendly sport.

Can races be cancelled due to bad weather?

Cyclocross races are run in all weather conditions. Obviously, rain can severely diminish the course conditions, but muddy races are quite common, particularly when a course is used for a number of races over a short period of time. At the 2005 national cyclocross championships in Providence, R.I., near-blizzard conditions forced two races to be postponed. Inclement weather is something many athletes enjoy about this discipline, and experienced racers know how to use certain bad-weather conditions to their advantage.

How is a cyclocross bike different from a road bike?

Cyclocross bicycles are lightweight but durable. They feature mountain bike style clip-in pedals, which allow racers to wear shoes they can run in when they are forced to dismount. Wider, knobby tires provide better traction on all surfaces and cantilevered brakes allow clearance for those wide tires when they become clogged with mud.

What is a typical course?

Cyclocross courses vary widely in terrain and difficulty, but all of them include some common elements. Rules state that 90 percent of the course must be rideable. When the terrain is too steep to ride or there are barrier or obstacle sections (either man-made or artificial), riders dismount, sling their bikes over their shoulders, and then jump back on their bikes, all of which require skill and speed. The width of the course never measures less than three meters wide and there is at least one equipment pit.

What are equipment pits?

The equipment pit is located along the circuit where riders can change wheels or bicycles. There is a race lane and a pit lane. A rider who is actively using the pit (to change bicycles or make a repair) rides into the pit lane while other competitors stay in the race lane. Each rider may have an attendant in the equipment pit to clean or repair bicycles. High-pressure water sprays allow the attendant to clean a spare bike and have it ready for an exchange on a subsequent lap.

Is starting position important?

Because of the short nature of the races and the narrow width of the course (three meters) in some sections, a good start is important. Starting position at the national championships is determined by a number of factors, including the previous year's national championship result, past performances at the National Championships and order of registration. Starters are assigned to spots in a grid that is eight lanes wide. Once the riders have settled into their starting positions, the race officials announce that start will be within the next 30 seconds. Riders do not know exactly when the whistle will be blown!

How popular is the sport?

Cyclocross is the fastest growing segment of bicycle racing in the United States, with small race series all over the country, a “Gran Prix” (USGP) series covering both coasts and the Midwest, and the US National Championships, which moves around the country every two years. The sport’s governing worldwide organization, the UCI (Union Cycliste Internationale) has targeted the U.S. for expansion of the sport. (what does this mean?) This year, Americans won three silver medals at the World Cyclocross Championships for the first time.

What is the “Tour de France” of cyclocross?

Cyclocross does not have a “signature” event like the Tour de France is to road racing. Each country’s national championships – such as the USA Cycling Cyclocross national championships – are generally considered the most prestigious on a domestic level. Belgium is the biggest hot spot on the world cyclocross stage, bringing out hundreds of thousands of spectators, and airing them on television, as well.

Did Lance Armstrong ever race cyclocross?

Yes. It is well documented that Armstrong dabbled in mountain biking during the career that saw him win seven Tour de France titles. But not as well known is that Armstrong regularly competed in some cyclocross races as training during the off-season.

Who are some of the top racers in U.S. cyclocross?

In the women’s elite division, riders to watch include: Katie Compton (Colorado Springs, Colo.), three-time U.S. Cyclocross Champion and silver medalist at the 2007 World Championship; Georgia Gould (Ketchum, Idaho), U.S. Mountain Bike Champion and second overall in the 2006 United States Grand Prix (USGP) series; Kerry Barnholt (Boulder, Colo.) third-place finisher at the national championship in 2006. On the elite men’s side, the names to know are Jonathan Page (Tilton, N.H.), three-time U.S. Cyclocross Champion and silver medalist at the 2007 World Championships; Todd Wells (Durango, Colo.), two-time U.S. Cyclocross Champion; Jesse Anthony (Beverly, Mass.), six-time U-23 U.S. Cyclocross Champion; Ryan Trebon (Ventura, Calif.), 2006 U.S. Cyclocross Champion; Tim Johnson (Middleton, Mass.), 1999 U-23 US Cyclocross Champion and bronze medalist at the 1999 World Championships; Barry Wicks (Santa Cruz, Calif.), second overall in the 2006 USGP series.

Has Kansas City ever hosted a cyclocross race of this magnitude?

In 2000, the USA Cycling national cyclocross championships were held in Stoll Park in Overland Park, Kan. Conditions were brutal, with winds gusting to more than 40 miles an hour, temperatures in the single digits and an already snow-packed course turned to ice due to the frigid conditions. Since then, Kansas City has hosted several cyclocross race series every winter.