

Cycling: Get Ready

Find a bike that fits you, your budget, your lifestyle

by Tech. Sgt. Orville F. Desjarlais Jr.
photo by Master Sgt. Scott Wagers

Many people may find falling off a bike easier than buying one. In the past few years, gears have been upgraded, braking systems have changed and new bikes have been developed. Buying a bike to meet your needs has become a challenge. But picking the right bicycle will help keep it on the road and out of the garage.

More than 90 million Americans, a little less than one out of every three, use a bicycle at least once a month, according to 2002 Bureau of Transportation statistics.

After the automobile, stats show that bicycling is the second most preferred form of transportation. With that in mind, bicycle manufacturers have studied buyers and learned their habits. Discovering which category you fall into will help you select a bike.

People bicycle for a variety of reasons — as a family activity, physical fitness, life-long leisure pursuit, work commute, competitions or just for the sheer excitement of barreling headlong down a mountain path. Whatever the reason, knowing how you want to use your bicycle is half the battle to picking the right one.

“Decide where most of your riding is going to be done,” said Maj. Matthew Belmonte, an enthusiast of the sport who bikes 30 miles a day to work in Naples, Italy. [See “Major Races through Naples

Assignment,” April 2004] “Hybrids are a good option, but some people feel like the bikes don’t do either job very well — they’re not great road bikes, and they’re not great mountain bikes. Mountain bikes are good off-road, but are tough to ride on the road. Road bikes are fast on the road, but not sturdy enough for off-road riding. Buy what you like and what makes you comfortable,” said the operations officer at Allied Forces Southern Europe.

Once you decide on a hybrid, mountain or road bike, saddle up and check the distance between the seat and handlebars. Are the handlebars too far away? Can you dismount without hurting yourself? When you take it for a test ride, can you adjust the seat so your knees are slightly bent? Hopefully, after visiting a few bike shops, you’ll find a bike that’s a snug fit and fits your budget. There are benefits and characteristics unique to each of the three major kinds of bicycles.

Mountain bike

By far, mountain bikes are the most popular. They were the rave in the 1970s when first introduced and remain popular today, accounting for 70 percent of the national market. During their existence, mountain bikes have matured into three main styles: Full suspension bikes that have some form of shock absorbing

equipment attached to the front and rear wheels, hard-tail bikes that only have a shock absorber on the front wheel, and rigid bikes that have no shock absorbers.

Mountain bikes are the SUVs of the cycling world, designed to be ridden in places where few humans tread. They’re built for the adventurous who like to avoid the beaten path. One option for people who like to ride both trails and pavement is to buy a second set of tires with thinner road tires, like that of a hybrid. A thinner tire also eliminates “road hum” from high speeds on pavement. On the other hand, the thick-treaded mountain bike tire can roll over thorns and small shards of road trash that would flatten the average tire. So, if you’re riding to work every day on rough roads and want the extra exercise, a mountain bike might be what you’re looking for.

Road bike

These are the cheetahs of the bike kingdom. Baby boomers probably still refer to them as 10 speeds. They’re built for speed and racing. With their light frames and skinny tires, these bikes are for serious riders who don’t mind spending money fulfilling their passion for speed.

Because they’re built for speed, road bikes don’t have lower, hill-climbing gears popular with mountain bikes. Manufac-

turers previously assumed riders were fit enough to push bigger gears up paved hills. However, a growing number of manufacturers offer road bikes with a third “granny” gear chainring to make climbing hills easy on the knees.

Because the tires are narrow and inflated to between 80 and 140 pounds per square inch, which makes them hard and unforgiving, they’re more vulnerable to flats. The payoff is speed and a heck of a workout.

Hybrid

This type of bike is adapted to most peoples’ needs. It’s a cross between a mountain bike and road bike. Bike makers have stolen ideas from both bikes and combined them to make an affordable solution for the average biker. Hybrid riders like to use their bikes for recreation and fitness. They don’t want to get to where they’re going quickly. They just want to get there in one piece.

Hybrids are not as heavy as mountain

bikes, but still retain the durability of their rugged cousin. Hybrid tires are smoother and narrower than a mountain bike’s, and thus don’t produce road hum.

Unlike road and mountain bikes, hybrids allow for a more upright and comfortable riding posture. Aerodynamics is traded for comfort. Also, because hybrids are built for streets and hard-packed trails, they usually come with gearing better suited for road bikes than the lower, cliff-climbing gears of mountain bikes.

Hybrids aren’t appropriate for competitive racing, difficult off-road conditions or extended self-contained touring, but are more suited for long-distance day tours and off-road trips on well-packed trails.

“Whether you’re riding a bike you picked up at a garage sale or a \$5,000 custom handmade chi-chi titanium wonder bike, the most important thing is to get out and enjoy yourself,” Major Belmonte said. ☺

For more info?

For more information about biking organizations near you, go to www.bikeleague.org or visit your nearest services outdoor recreation center.

Did you know?

Air Force services marketing experts say a 170-pound cyclist riding 15 mph for 40 minutes will burn nearly 420 calories.

bikes courtesy Ride Away Bicycles



Mountain Bikes
* Wide, rugged tires are a mountain bike’s trademark
* Low end: \$200
High end: \$5,000

Road Bikes
* Sleek, cheetah-like design allows for speed
* Low end: \$430
High end: \$10,000

Hybrid Bikes
* Sleeker tires and less weight make this bike different than its mountain cousin
* Low end: \$300
High end: \$7,000

What every cyclist should know

■ **Helmets:** This is the most important piece of equipment. “Helmets don’t last forever,” said Maj. Matthew Belmonte. “They should be changed every few seasons. Also, they’re made for only one crash. They absorb the impact so your skull doesn’t — therefore once you’ve crashed, it’s time for a new one.” Helmets cost from \$20 and up.

■ **Bike adjustments and fit:** Allow an inch or two between the top tube and a cyclist’s crotch when straddling the bike. Next, adjust the seat height so the knees are slightly bent. Then, adjust the handlebars so they’re an inch below the saddle.

■ **Shifting gears:** Many cyclists don’t understand the gear shift patterns. That’s like driving a five-speed car and moving the gear shifter around until the engine quits making that high pitched whining sound. The goal is to select a combination that allows the rider to maintain pedal rotations without straining.

■ **Stopping:** To brake smartly, apply the front brake more forcefully than the rear, but not enough to lock the wheels. Then, apply more pressure to the rear brake, which will shift the rider’s weight backward and avoid messing up a pretty face.

■ **Clothing:** Cycling shorts are more comfortable on long rides and are padded in strategic locations. Cycling gloves cushion the hands and protect them during falls. Synthetic jerseys provide greater comfort than cotton shirts and offer better protection from the elements. Cycling shoes have stiff soles so riders can put the “pedal to the metal.” Don’t forget sunglasses or goggles.

■ **Repairs:** Riders should know how to fix a flat tire and do simple repairs such as reworking an unhinged chain. For that, a chain tool will save you from a long walk home.

■ **Water:** Dehydration is a bigger threat to cyclists than runners because a cyclist’s sweat evaporates faster than a runner’s, which leads to quicker dehydration.

■ **Hazards:** Don’t ride in the dark without a lighting system or when it’s raining. As for dogs that are hot on your heels, yell “No” real loudly. If that doesn’t stop the persistent canine, spray it down with water from your water bottle or blast it with pepper spray. All you really want to do is get past the dog’s territory. Some experts recommend dismounting from your bike and putting it between you and the dog while walking away slowly.

■ **Riding in traffic:** Ride with the traffic, and obey all traffic laws. Cyclists must be visible, predictable and cooperate with other road users.

— Tech. Sgt. Orville F. Desjarlais Jr.