

Getting Started

A bike, a helmet, and a license are all you need to race, and there are plenty of successful racers who started their careers with nothing more than that. It helps, though, to have some guidance.

Getting involved with a cycling club that already has members competing is a good first step to take on your way to racing 'cross. It is possible to go it alone and join your national federation as an individual, but in a club or team you will be exposed to good advice and gain other benefits that will help speed your progress. If you can find a club or team in your local area that has an interest in 'cross, then so much the better; perhaps it already promotes a race or has a team who travels together to races. Whatever the case, if you can get involved with somebody who knows about 'cross, it will save you a lot of the time you would otherwise spend learning the ropes and organizing everything on your own. If you are unsure how to find a club, contact your national cycling federation, which can provide you with a list of clubs in your area. Failing that, try your local bike shop; the owners or employees of reasonably good shops usually know what is going on locally.

If you intend to compete in any large races or hope to compete abroad, you will need a racing license. The license you need is the same as the one that is required for road racing, so if you are already competing, you should have one. If not, get one—then you can race during the summer as well as the winter.

Next on the list: Find out about the races held in your area. Knowing which races you may enter can help you set personal goals, and in some cases it is necessary to sign up early. Again, try the club or the bike shop; the latter may have posters or flyers advertising forthcoming events. The Internet is also a good source of information about races. With a quick search, you can locate calendars and race programs for your area. Local and national cycling magazines may also list upcoming events. National federations usually issue a complete calendar at the beginning of the winter season. In the United Kingdom, this comes in the form of a handbook that lists not only the races but also all the rules and regulations of racing, along with other useful information. The same is always available on federation Web sites.

Be sure to check the deadlines for entering. Not all races offer race-day registration; some, especially at the higher levels, require participants to send in their registration up to three weeks in advance. If you can't register online, you can usually download entry forms to fill out and mail in.

Converting a Bike for Cyclocross

ROAD BIKES

Let's assume you have joined a club and you know where the races are; let's say you even have a helmet—and it better be a good one (see “Headgear and Eyewear” section in Chapter 2). All you're missing is a suitable bike. In all likelihood, you will not have a specially built 'cross machine just yet. If you do, then read no further. But to be honest, until you have tried the sport and decided that you like it and want to continue, you are probably better off adapting an old road bike—maybe your training or winter bike—than you are buying more specialized equipment.

So what are the differences between a road bike and a 'cross bike? At a glance they may seem very similar; they have the same frame

shape, the same wheel size, and the same dropped handlebars and general overall appearance. But look a little harder and you will find some significant differences. Although the frame is the same shape, some of the dimensions are different. A cyclocross bike has more space between the wheels and the frame to accommodate fatter tires than those you would use on the road and to allow the wheels to keep turning in particularly muddy conditions. This becomes apparent if you look at the spaces between the front wheel and the top of the forks, between the back wheel and the back of the seat tube, and between the sides of the back wheel and the inside of the chainstays on a 'cross bike. You will see more room for the mud to escape.

At the same time, you will notice that the brakes are not the standard caliper type you have on your road bike; instead, they are cantilever-style brakes that bolt onto pivots attached to the front forks and the rear seat stays. The main reason for using this style of braking system is that the simplicity of its design provides that all-important mud clearance. Cantilever brakes used to be significantly more powerful than regular caliper brakes; nowadays, a good caliper system is just as powerful. But caliper brakes have more modulation, so that on the road you can control braking by degrees; a cantilever brake on the road tends to grab. Fine braking and control are harder to achieve with cantilever brakes, but this is less of an issue off-road.

So that's the frame, but there are other differences. The wheels on your road bike, for instance, will be the same size (diameter) as a 'cross bike wheel but will have narrower, smoother tires on them. For riding off-road you need a fatter tire to absorb the shock and give you more contact with the ground, and you also need grip. That is why on a 'cross bike you will see tires with a pattern of knobs or arrows, which bite into the surface you are riding on and reduce the amount of time you spend sliding around. Finally, the gearing on a 'cross bike is generally lower than on a road bike to allow you to continue pedaling at slower speeds. In cyclocross, you don't need those hard gears

that you use only occasionally even on your road bike—the ones you might use on those rare days when you have the opportunity to fly along a nicely surfaced, gradual downhill road with a tailwind. Lower gearing in practice means a smaller number of teeth on the front chainrings and more teeth on the sprockets on the rear wheel, compared to a road bike, so it's not something most people would notice at first glance, but it's nevertheless an important feature on a 'cross bike. And that's pretty much it—small, sometimes unnoticeable differences in equipment and design that don't change the look of a bike significantly, but certainly make each bike more specialized for the type of riding it is designed for. A cyclocross bike is, simply put, easier to ride and race off-road.

With a standard road bike, there are a few modifications you can perform to make your life off-road a little easier. But with standard road-frame clearances, you are going to be very limited in what you can do about problems caused by mud clogging everything up on bad-weather days. Only a change of frame can solve that problem.

The first thing to improve is traction. Good traction is relatively easy to achieve by fitting 'cross tires with plenty of grip. If your wheels are fitted with rims for tubulars (sew-ups), then the choices of relatively cheap rubber are not vast, but you should be able to find some 'cross tubulars online if your local shop doesn't stock them. If you have clincher tires, then the range of choices will be broader and different options will be easier to find. If you are confused by the choices, just make sure you get a size (width) that will fit into your frame and give you as much grip as possible. A 30-millimeter tire should fit; most brands offer a “dry” and a “mud” option, so go for the “mud.” These tires will suffice for any conditions you should encounter, and at this stage there is no need to change tires for different course conditions.

You will need lower gears to cope with the slower speeds, harder terrain, and other obstacles common to 'cross. Assuming you have a

double crankset, the best and cheapest way to make the alteration is to simply change the cluster of cogs on the back wheel. Most standard cranksets come fitted with 39/53 chainrings, or you might be lucky and have a compact crank with something like 34/48. These numbers relate to the number of teeth on the chainrings that are fitted onto the right-hand crank; the lower the number of teeth, the lower the gear (and the easier it is to pedal up a hill). The first number is the size of the inner chainring; the second is the size of the outer chainring. If you have the standard setup with 39/53, leave the big ring on the outside and adjust your front derailleur as close as you can to it to keep your chain on (though you will probably be using only the inner ring for racing initially). If you have the 34/48 setup, then leave it as it is and use both chainrings. For the cogset at the back, use the biggest sprocket your gear system will cope with; in this case, the higher the number of teeth on the cassette, the lower the gear. If you are running Shimano, then it will be a 25 or a 27; if it's Campagnolo, then it's likely to be a 26. Don't forget to check the chain length; better still, fit a new chain. This will give you the wide range of gears you will need, but at first, even with this gearing, anything you cannot ride you will have to run. You will be amazed by how much more you will be able to ride as your fitness and technique improve, so don't worry if at first you seem to be off the bike as much as on it.

The next thing you will have to do is change the pedals. Chances are you have some kind of clipless road setup—Look, Time, Shimano, or something similar—and road shoes to match. You know how slippery these can be just walking out of the house to go on a training ride, so racing 'cross with them would be an adventure, to say the least! If you own a mountain bike, rob the pedals off it and use the matching shoes. Otherwise, invest in a pair of off-road pedals and shoes. Make sure they are double-sided pedals, as the single-sided ones just take too much time to enter.

You will be stuck with the brake calipers you have, as they will be suited to the frame's clearances. But if you are running an economy model, then I advise upgrading the brake pads to something suited to the rims you intend to use. And make sure they are well adjusted—you will need to slow down as effectively as possible in wet and slippery conditions that affect braking distance. In addition, take it easy the first time you are out; you will need to get a feel for the differences in slowing on and off road.

Adjust your position on the bike very slightly from your normal road position to gain better control on rough ground and to help with the initially awkward mounts and dismounts. Lower the saddle very slightly, but by no more than 1 centimeter (about 0.4 in.), and raise the handlebars a similar amount. Next time you retape your handlebars, raise the brake levers a touch to allow yourself to be in a more upright position, or simply loosen the stem where it clamps the bars and swing them up a couple of centimeters. You will be riding on the brake levers a lot, so make sure you are comfortable.

Once you have replaced your tires and pedals and adjusted your position, your brakes, and your front derailleur, your old bike will be fine to get you started. If you catch the 'cross bug and go for a specially built bike, you can easily return your old bike to its original state, use it for a spare race bike, or make it an extra training machine.

MOUNTAIN BIKES

Even the most committed "roadie" is likely to have a mountain bike hidden away in the depths of the garage, and this is likely to be the machine that comes out when the urge hits to get on the start line of a 'cross. Built for off-road use, the mountain bike has all the basic requirements. And with a few refinements, you can put together a nice, fast bike.

Start with the frame. There isn't a whole lot you can do with this, but take off any surplus accessories, such as bottle cages, reflectors,

racks, mini-pump, and the like. If you have suspension front or rear, either lock it out or adjust it to make it as “hard” as possible. If you have the opportunity, you could always replace the fork with a rigid alternative, which would also lighten the bike considerably.

Now turn your attention to the wheels. Fit the narrowest tires you can find; normally, 1.5-inchers are readily available. These will provide a lower rolling resistance and increase the mud clearance. If you have a selection of cogs at your disposal, go with a standard 12–28 instead of 12–32, and drop off the inner (“granny”) chainring. You won’t need it, and it just adds weight and a place for more crud to accumulate.

The rest of the bike can pretty much stay as is. You could add a set of dropped bars, but this is a major ordeal—to do this would mean a new stem, bar, brake lever/shifters, and a change in riding position. It may be best to leave the bike with straight bars for now and replace them later, or wait, save up for a ’cross frame, transfer some components, and use dropped bars on that.

One quick word of warning: If you intend to compete in any races on the UCI calendar, you will not be allowed to start on a mountain bike (or a ’cross bike with disc brakes, for that matter). For small, local events, a converted mountain bike should not be a problem, but it may be best to check with the organizer before you show up.

Acquiring a Coach

One of the best steps you can take as a young rider, or even as a more experienced rider new to ’cross, is to get a good coach. A coach can help you learn new techniques effectively, teach you how to train specifically for ’cross, and help you design a training schedule. You will also find it enormously beneficial just to have someone to talk to who knows the sport.