



ASK A PRO

DEEP THOUGHTS AND UNRELIABLE
ADVICE FROM AMERICA'S
FOREMOST CYCLING SAGE

PHIL GAIMON

◦ AUTHOR OF PRO CYCLING ON \$10 A DAY ◦

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INTRODUCTION

Cycling is a puzzling sport, filled with rigid etiquette, creepy clothing, complicated equipment, and annoying rules. It's intimidating for beginners and downright impenetrable if you want to compete. How full do you pump your tires? What do you eat before a ride? Bib shorts or regular shorts?

For better or worse, I was a quick study, and once I took up cycling I figured out the basics quickly. When I turned professional with Jelly Belly at 23, my friends thought I had it made. I showed up for the group ride with a jersey covered in candy, my name on my helmet, and a bike I got for free. I let everyone notice how awesome I was, and then I dropped them. My salary was only \$2,000 that year, but I had them so fooled that doctors and lawyers asked for training advice, and racers begged to know how they could join me in the pro peloton. Quickly tired of answering the same

questions over and over, I pitched an idea for a Q&A column to *VeloNews* magazine, and “Ask a Pro” was born.

At first I sort of played a character in my monthly column: the know-it-all cocky pro. He was ironic and fun, because I knew nothing back then, and he was a loser by almost any standard. As the column progressed, and as I actually became a decent bike racer, I found that I had more stories to tell, and so the character faded out. Then I joined the WorldTour, and while I still don’t know it all, I do know most of it when it comes to this silly sport.

Reading all of those columns straight through in preparation for this book was kind of like watching myself grow up. I rolled my eyes at the sophomoric humor that made me laugh when I was 24 and noticed that the column got more sincere and introspective when I began writing my first book, *Pro Cycling on \$10 a Day*. Reflecting on my past as I worked on the manuscript gave me a sincere desire to share what I’d learned, to prevent people from making the mistakes I had made—unless I thought of a good sophomoric joke instead.

As I progressed from a young professional on a small team to a seasoned WorldTour rider, writing was my creative outlet between races, and I reliably sent in my “Ask a Pro”

column every month. But now, after eight years of racing full-time, I'm moving on from pro cycling (partly because pro cycling has moved on from me). I could probably keep the column going and continue answering your questions, but even though I've only been an amateur for a few weeks I can already feel that I'm losing my credibility. And as a retiree, I'm quickly becoming a grumpy old man.

Besides, in the last couple of years, when I asked readers what they wanted answered in the next issue, I'd get 5 questions about urine, 10 about farts, 60 about poop, and a handful of general bad jokes (I tell the bad jokes, thank you very much). I suppose a handful of bad jokes is better than a handful of poop (like I said, I tell the bad jokes), but I've answered all the questions by now, sometimes more than once, and I can't do it anymore. It's time for you people to leave me alone.

I'm grumpy, but I'm still a softie. I wish I'd had someone to answer my dumb questions over the years, and I did like being the question-answerer in the magazine. I also have a warm feeling about *VeloNews* for being the first suckers to offer me a regular writing gig, which became a big part of my life. So while I have stopped the column cold turkey, I've also put together this complete collection of your questions

and my answers. In these pages, you can find everything you need to know about cycling from a pro cyclist, in a form you can easily read while you poop. I'm telling you everything here, for one last time, with some bonus content. I've also added some footnotes, in part because some of the columns needed an update and mostly because my past self deserves to be called out and teased.

PART 1

NEO PRO

In January 2011, I turned 25. Racing for Kenda Pro Cycling on a salary of \$15,000 per year, I'd been dominating the local amateur races, but my best results as a professional were unimpressive: a stage win at the 2009 San Dimas Stage Race and second overall at the 2010 Tour of Taiwan. I started writing the column after I'd moved to Baltimore, Maryland, in a misguided effort for a climber to escape Florida's criterium scene after college.

Q I've got an old Bottecchia with a classic Team ADR paint scheme that I used to race on. I commute on a Specialized Tri Cross, and I want to have a second bike in the garage for training. Do you think it's worth trying to update it, or am I better off just selling it and getting something more modern? It seems like upgrades could be difficult because of the older Campy stuff it's equipped with, but I've got a sentimental attachment to this heavy cro-mo bike from college.

It sounds like you've got things mixed up a bit, with a fancy bike for commuting and a beat-up old one for training. Use the Bottecchia for commuting, maybe setting it up as a fixie.* It's a cool old bike, and you don't need a high-performing, smooth-shifting, fancy machine to get around town. Sell the 'cross bike and get a new road bike to train on instead.

If you can afford it, though, the best bet would be to just buy more bikes and keep them all. I don't see how anyone can get by with less than seven bikes. Remember Maslow's hierarchy

* Proof that I was into fixies before the hipsters.

of needs from college psychology class? Me neither, but it went something like food, shelter, sex, commuter bike, track bike, 'cross bike, mountain bike, race bike, time trial bike, and backup race bike. You're not even halfway there yet, and who are you to argue with the founder of modern psychology?

Q I'm 17 and a new racer. I've started shaving my legs, and my girlfriend makes fun of me for it. How can I be accepted by my friends?

I remember the first time I shaved my legs. It was hard to explain in high school, and the truth behind leg shaving is that there's really no good reason for it, other than being accepted by the racing community and looking cool. Would you rather look cool to bike racers like me or to losers at school? That's what I thought.

As far as the girlfriend, she'll get used to it, because you have nice legs and she gets to admire them. Soon she'll be reminding you when it's time to shave. That's when you break out the altitude tent and start doing other masculine bike-racer things, like counting calories and eating salad. Either way, though, you're 17, so you should break up with her.

Q Why do so many pro riders still feel the need to train with no helmet? Do they feel that their riding is so good that a traumatic head injury could never happen to them? Or is there a more complex reason?

That's a darn good question. A lot of guys are too cool for helmets, which makes them just cool enough for debilitating brain injuries. Why don't they wear them? The wind in your hair is a pleasant feeling. If the benefit of a nice breeze outweighs the perceived risk of crashing, a confident rider might leave the helmet at home.

The biggest factor for pros is probably social. At a group ride in Australia or Europe (even today),* you're the weirdo who sticks out if you wear a helmet, because most people don't. Every year, though, you hear of some big name who spent time in the hospital because a cat ran into his wheel on a training ride. As a somewhat frequent crasher, I wear my helmet everywhere—sometimes even at the dinner table or in the bathroom. You never know when a cat could come out of nowhere and take you out.

Try not to be the helmet cop, though. Right or wrong, no one likes to be told what to do. If someone shows up on

* This was years-ago-today. Helmets are more the norm today-today.

your group ride sans helmet and crashes, you're not legally obligated to peel their brains off the pavement, and you can take their wallet if nobody's looking.

Q I've been suffering from saddle sores. Do you use chamois cream? How much should I use?

Chamois cream exists for a reason. It lubricates the area to reduce chafing, and some of the fancier ones kill bacteria. I use Chamois Butt'r because they sponsor my team and the company has always been nice to me, but in my experience all the brands work pretty well.

Avoid some of the old-school cheap solutions, like Bag Balm and plain Vaseline. They'll stop the symptoms and you'll save a few bucks, but your saddle will get all slimy and disgusting, and you'll quickly find yourself tired of explaining it when someone touches your bike and then recoils in horror.* Your nether regions are important. Spend the money.

Also, be careful with quantity. Don't spread it all over your shorts like it's Country Crock. Put the shorts on, then reach in and apply directly to the sensitive areas of your skin. In

* This part was mostly directed at my teammate, David Guttenplan, who might still be a Bag Balm user. Don't touch his saddle.

most states, it's a good idea to avoid eye contact with anyone nearby while your hand is in your pants.

Q What kind of power numbers do you put out at threshold? I want to see how I stack up.

Waaaaay more than you do. You should quit.

Q Can you get me on your team or give me your director's information? I met you that one time, I placed third in the crit last week even though I had a flat tire, and I beat you in a town-line sprint on a group ride two years ago.

Okay, no one sent me that question verbatim, but I get variations of it from dozens of riders every year. Don't get me wrong: I remember when I was the young guy trying to break into the pros, but I've begun to dread these interactions. For one thing, I'm worried about my own contract 10 months out of the year, so I can't stress about yours. The real truth, though, is that no one can get you on a team but yourself. The contract comes when you have results at some bigger races and you've shown that you're good enough to contribute to a pro team. If you're good enough, you don't need my help to get on a team, and if you're not good enough, I wouldn't help you anyway.



Q **What's Ask a Pro?**

It's the answer to every question you could have about pro cycling, including all the weird and distasteful stuff people don't usually ask but can't wait to read.

Q **Is it really weird and distasteful?**

The best parts are, and there are other parts that are just plain gross or insulting. No one's ever spilled more beans on life in the pro cycling peloton than Phil Gaimon. Plus his answers are honest, fair, true, revealing, complete, and will make you laugh out loud.

Q **I thought cyclists were a bunch of humorless geeks who wear tights and run stop signs.**

That's not a question, but here's an answer anyway: Cyclists live with their heads on a swivel so they don't get run over, and they see stuff that other people don't. Phil's head is super swivelly, and you'll be amazed at what he's seen on his way to not quite superstardom.

Q **Who's the pro behind Ask a Pro?**

Phil Gaimon is a sardonic former basement gamer who worked his way to cycling's pro ranks and took notes. The *Wall Street Journal* called his first book "Wickedly funny and insightful," so you don't have to take our word on this. Look inside.

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