

Cool Weather Cycling

By Maury Brown

There was a time when I, like many cyclists, rode on warm days in the spring and fall, and all through the summer. But come cool weather and winter, the bike would be mounted on the indoor trainer, which would be placed within arm's reach of the stereo, and I would settle in for a long, boring season of indoor cycling. I would sit there pedaling for up to an hour, a few times a week, trying to entertain myself with the "miles" pedaled, the calories burned, or the heart rate monitor. And I would work on my spin with the cadence monitor, and I would sweat like a horse. Try as I might, I couldn't make it fun. I would be pleased with myself for "staying in shape", however.

One warm day in the spring, I would go out for my first real ride of the year. And on that ride, I would invariably go up a hill. And I would blow up. After all that boring work on the trainer, I couldn't even climb a little hill without maxing out my heart rate. So much for staying in shape.

I think it began as procrastination of having to get out the indoor trainer. I began to acquire some cool weather cycling gear, which extended the outdoor season for me. Then I got some cold weather gear, which extended the season to any and every day the roads were clear. I haven't used the dreaded trainer in years, and I haven't gotten severely out-of-shape in years either.

The cool temperatures of spring and fall make these seasons my favorite times of the year for cycling. It's neither too hot, nor so cold that you really have to bundle up. It is nice to breathe the cool air and view the fall leaves or spring flowers. These are the perfect seasons for riding to work and not arriving all hot and sweaty. Best of all, is staying in shape throughout the year and not have to practically start all over again every spring, despite suffering the horrific boredom of an indoor trainer.

Dressing comfortably for cool or cold weather cycling is something of an art. On any given day, you won't know how well you did until after you are already out riding, and perhaps overheating or having trouble staying warm. In addition, riders often have to be prepared for temperature changes of up to 20 to 30 degrees over a few hours. The keys to success here are **layers, flexibility, and practice**.

Layering clothing allows you to add or remove garments as needed. This is very important for several reasons. When you first start out, your body is not warmed up and you are likely to be cold until you ride up a couple of good hills. The temperature is likely not to be constant throughout your ride. On evening rides, the temperature will be falling as you ride. On early morning rides, you may experience a dramatic increase in temperature by mid-day. Also, you might have miscalculated and need to add or shed a layer. No one layer should be too heavy. You will need a bike bag or ample pockets to hold layers you are not currently wearing.

Some very useful items of clothing are those that are designed around the need for **flexibility**. The ability to don and strip small clothing items that cover only small parts of the body (arm warmers, knee warmers, toe covers) and fit them into a jersey pocket or small bike bag when not needed, greatly increases convenience. With large temperature changes during your ride, this is important. Owning many different clothing options gives you increased flexibility for dressing for various temperatures and changes in temperature during your rides. There are many cool weather clothing products. Start with the most important ones and gradually accumulate more.

Dressing for summer rides is easy – you wear shorts, jersey, sunscreen, and gloves, every time you ride. Dressing for cool weather riding is more complicated and it takes **practice** and experience to get it right. Don't give up on cool weather riding just because you dress wrong the first few times you try it. Besides, if you layer your clothing, you will have some latitude for mistakes. I find it very helpful to look at a weather forecast before riding so I can have an idea of what temperatures and wind conditions (not to mention likelihood of precipitation) to expect on my ride.

Be prepared for changes in temperature during your ride. In warmer weather, this can mean applying sunscreen under layers that you anticipate stripping. Make sure you have adequate pockets or bags to accommodate layers that you will not be wearing at some point during the ride. Bring extra layers when you expect the temperature to fall.

While cross-training in the off-season can be beneficial for overall fitness, if you're primarily interested in staying in shape for cycling, nothing beats actually riding the bicycle—outdoors, in the wind, and up the hills. The best part: once you're properly dressed for cool weather riding, it's as fun, or more so, than riding in the summer.