

JPE's Guide to Buying or Building a Cyclocross Bike

While many manufacturers sell ready to ride Cyclocross Bikes, here are some of my thoughts/tips on frame/fork sizing, components, bike setup, etc. Remember, these are simply suggestions, from my 5+ years of cyclocross experience, and should not be taken as gospel.

Frame & Fork

Frame Sizing and Geometry:

- I agree with the common practice of sizing your CX rig with a 1 cm shorter top tube than your road bike. This will allow a more upright and stable riding position in varied terrain. Also, due to the varied terrain encountered in a cyclocross race a shorter stem with plenty of spacers is often required. Start with your handlebars about 4-6 cm higher and a 1-2 cm shorter reach than your road bike, and adjust from there.
- Many cyclocross bike manufacturers have adopted sloping top tubes. I am not a fan of this on cyclocross bikes as it makes it harder to get your arm through the main triangle to shoulder the bike for the climbs. Slightly Sloping Top Tubes appear to be OK.
- Cyclocross bikes make great dual purpose rigs, as many cyclocross frames come equipped with mounts for fenders, racks, etc. Consider what uses you require of your cyclocross rig when purchasing, as some "racy" cyclocross frames don't even have water bottle mounts.

Frame Material:

- It used to be easy to select a frame material: Steel or Aluminum. But now with different materials and grades/qualities of each, it may be hard to decide.
- Aluminum seems to have taken over as the most popular choice, I assume due to its low weight. Aluminum won't rust, or degrade as fast as steel, so it may be your best choice if you live in our Northern climates, but steel has an incredible dampening quality....a plus on rough terrain.
- If you are going to use the bike for light touring, too, ensure it has "sturdy" tubing.
- Titanium and Carbon Fiber are great, as they are ultra-light and strong, but can be costly.
- Remember, cyclocross can be harsh on equipment such as derailleur, chains, etc., so money invested on a good frame is worth it as you upgrade parts over time.

Forks:

- How much \$\$ you got?? That's what it usually boils down to.
- I love the ride of a steel fork off road, but many are put off by their weight.
- Aluminum forks are light, reasonably strong, not too expensive and have a decent ride quality.
- Carbon fiber forks are awesome (light and strong), but can be pricey.
- I am not a fan of suspension forks for cyclocross racing, but if your cyclocross bike will be used in singletrack often, it may be a worthwhile investment.
- If your bike comes with a low cost fork, you can always upgrade later.

Components:

Tires:

- There are lots of great brands and tread designs out there now.
- While many die-hard cyclocrossers may preach the benefits of tubulars, I prefer clinchers (32-35cm size) over tubulars for their ease of removal/installation and cost. Ritchey and Michelin are "my" favorites.
- Under normal conditions, I prefer a semi-slick rear (Michelin Jet or Ritchey Speed) and knobbier front tire (Michelin Mud).
- If you are new to cyclocross try a knobbier set of tires first and upgrade to semi-slicks later.

- Watching the pros race on nearly slick tires is proof that cyclocross teaches you bike handling skills.
- Tire Pressure: Start at 45 psi and adjust up or down from there. Most people ride Cyclocross with too much tire air pressure. A softer and flexible tire “grabs” the terrain better.

STI vs. Bar-End Shifters:

- I prefer the quick action of STI levers. It's Cross, so I do NOT worry about going Dura-Ace/Record quality.
- Tip: Don't over-tighten the STI levers to your handlebar; so they'll move instead of breaking if you take a spill.
- Bar end shifters are more durable and you can still use them in friction mode if you bend your rear derailleur. Also, if cost is a concern these work great.

Braking Setup:

- *I prefer to run my rear brake on the Left side of the handlebars, so I can easily apply the brakes from the handlebar tops, as I approach a dismount. This takes a few rides to get used to, but it's a worthwhile change.*
- Top Mount Brake Levers: As stated above: I love them. I prefer the Salsa or Tektro brands, due to cost, ease of install/removal and barrel adjusters. Some brands mount closer to the stem, which is a plus.
- Brakes: (V-Brake vs. Canti) I love the early 90's Shimano LX-XTR cantis, and I can usually find them cheap. The new Avid and Shimano Cantis are great too.
 - I've never run V-Brakes with the Noodle type adapter, so no advice there....but I've heard the Avid V-Brakes are better than the Shimano with the adapters.
 - Also, I have had NO success setting up the fancy Spooky, or Froglegs style brakes, which are expensive anyway. They may be great, but I've never had luck finding the proper setup.
- Discs: There is a big push for disc equipped bikes from Redline, Cannondale and others. I have no experience with discs, and here in the Midwest I feel they're not required. However if you were to use your CX bike to commute year round or ride in very muddy conditions, discs may be a good option. Finally, UCI sanctioned races do not allow the use of disc brakes.

Gearing:

- Remember it's a cyclocross race, and the fastest way up the hill may be running with your bike on your shoulder, so ultra low gearing is useless in my mind when it's usually faster to run, than bike up a climb
- Double Crank: 36-42 Inner & 44-48 Outer...It's all personal preference. My race bike is a 41x46 setup and I spend most of the race in the 41 tooth ring. My training rig has a 39x48 setup, as I spend more time on the road getting to the training site. Outer rings bigger than 48 are not required, unless you're a powerful rider.
- Single Ring Setup: I have not had any experience with this setup, but it seems to make sense for most races. Proper setup with a chain keeper and outer chain guard, to prevent “chain-drop,” is key.
- Triple Road Crankset: Not required for a Cyclocross bike, but if you're bike is dual purpose rig and equipped with a road triple, just run the whole race in your 42 tooth middle chainring.
- Converting an old mountain crank by ditching the granny ring, and changing to 36-38 tooth middle and 44-46 tooth outer rings is a great option, too.
- Cassette: I prefer a 12x26 SRAM 9 speed cassette, or a Shimano 12x27. Many folks love the low gearing afforded with a mountain bike cassette (12-32), but it may require a long cage derailleur.
- Crank Length: Due to the power required, run crank length 2.5 mm longer than your road bike, or the same as your mountain bike.

Derailleur:

- Rear: I prefer to run a short cage rear mountain bike derailleur (they have stiff return springs) to help prevent the chain from dropping. Standard road or mountain bike derailleurs work great, too. Run the chain as short as possible to prevent it from dropping; no matter what derailleur you use.
- Front: I run whatever I have on hand, as this is usually a non-critical part. Run the limit screws tight to prevent the chain from falling off.

Wheels:

- It used to be you laced up 36 spoke 3 cross wheels with heavy & strong rims for Cyclocross, but that's not required anymore.
- While the pros use carbon rims with ultra low spoke count, most road wheelsets work great, and their durability is nearly a direct reflection of weight. Obviously, heavier riders need beefier wheels, though.
- I weigh about 155 lbs. and my training wheelset is, 28 count, DB spokes, 3 cross with Velocity Aerohead rims, and I race on Cane Creek Aeroheads & Bontrager Race Lites.

Pedals:

- I am a fan of the new 959 Shimano mountain pedal, with its mud shedding design, and positive entry and exit "click."
- The new Egg Beaters Candy and Time Alium XS pedals are also great designs....I've been told.
- When new to cyclocross adjust the pedal entry/release spring tension to low. This will reduce the chances of crashing into a barrier with your feet and shoes still attached to your bike.
- Toe Spikes on your mountain bike shoes give you added traction on the running sections.

Seatpost and Saddle:

- You're jumping on and off these parts a lot, so durability is a requirement.
- Many people use short travel suspension seatposts for cyclocross, such as the Rock-Shox brand. Their "Comfort" factor may outweigh their "Weight" factor, in your mind.
- I never recommend ultra-light carbon fiber seatposts, or carbon fiber saddles for cyclocross, unless you are light and can jump on your saddle "gently." Even then I'd be nervous.

Handlebars and Tape:

- Run wide handlebars; about 2cm wider than your road setup. You'll need the stability and leverage they provide, off road.
- I love the Ritchey brand, because their design has a short reach and a large wide platform on the tops.
- I prefer the Salsa Gomma tape for cyclocross. It's kind of "rubbery and tacky" feeling, doesn't absorb H2O, washes easily and comes in Orange color (Orange is Cool). Deda, Profile and Off The Front have similar bar tapes available.

Spare Bike:

- As you move up the ranks, you may feel the urge, or need to get a spare cyclocross rig.
- This can be an expensive venture, or not.
- Your mountain bike, stripped of its bar ends, bottle cages, etc. and fat tires swapped for 1.85" semi slicks can make a perfect spare rig to put in the bike exchange pit.
- Don't have a spare set of clipless pedals....no worry; flat pedals will still get you to the finish line, and last place is better than DNF.

Support Your Local Bike Shop!

- While many Internet Sites claim to be the only place to purchase cyclocross specific bikes and parts, most cyclocross specific bikes and parts can be purchased through your Local Bike Shop.
- Granted they may not be in stock, but they can order most anything and have it within a few days, and I have found them to be very competitive in pricing.

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