



How to get into Racing

So you've joined a cycling club, you've started going on the 'Club Runs', started to get the competitive bug now? Do you find yourself secretly racing to the top of hills on the club runs? So how do you start racing? Here's a step-by-step guide and the experiences of our members.....

Road and off-road racing events held in the UK are governed by British Cycling (www.britishcycling.org.uk).

Time Trial events are governed by a separate body, CTT Cycling Time Trials. (www.rttc.org.uk)

What are the different types of racing all about?

Road Racing - These are generally group races where there'll be a maximum of 80 riders, racing over a set course and distance. Normally on open roads with marshals holding traffic at junctions. Generally a mass start, however, sometimes events can be handicapped with slower riders starting first. Lots of tactics involved. Competitors use a standard road race bike.

Circuit Racing - Often referred to as a Crit, not to be confused with Track Racing. Circuit racing is often around a course running around a town centre on tight, narrow, closed roads. These events are generally held over a timed period rather than distance, for example; 50 minutes plus 5 laps. There are some specific man made circuits at limited sites around the country. Competitors use a standard road race bike.

Track Racing - There are a number of differing events held on an oval banked track, wooden surface on indoor tracks and often concrete on outdoor tracks. This is the discipline of the likes of Sir Chris Hoy or Vicky Pendleton. Competitors use a specific track bikes with no gears, no brakes and a fixed wheel system.

Time Trials - These events are held over a set course and set distance, for example; 10miles, 25miles, 50miles, 100miles or longer endurance time trials of 12 hours, 24 hours, either solo events or team events. It's simply a race against the clock, competitors are set off at 1 minute intervals, there are no real tactics simply pedal as hard as you can for the set distance for solo events and for team events look after each rider taking turns riding on the front into the wind.

Cyclo Cross Racing - Often referred to as 'Cross. Competitors race around a set course for a timed period. Laps are generally marked out on grassed fields with many varying challenges, off camber turns, drops, muddy climbs and tight technical single track. Events are open to many different age categories with competitors in each group mass starting. Competitors bikes that are extremely similar to standard road race bikes but with knobbly tires.

Off-Road Mountain bike XC racing - These events are held over a set course and race for a set period of time, often 1.5 hours to 2 hours depending on each category. Courses are generally run through woodland and offer climbs, descents and technical sections. There are many different categories depending on age and ability with riders in each category starting together for a mass start. Serious competitors will use Mountain bikes with no rear suspension and just short travel front suspension forks.

Off-Road Mountain bike Downhill racing - These events are held over a set course generally down steep courses through woodland. It may seem a simple discipline of 'race as fast as possible down the hill' but there's far more to it than that. Riders are set off from a start gate at intervals and tactical fast descents, technical turns, jumps and drop offs before crossing the finishing line. There are many different categories depending on age and ability. Serious competitors will use Mountain bikes with large amounts of suspension, both front and rear.

Ok so there are your options, how do you go about starting road racing?

Have a look at the British Cycling website's Road section; here you'll find lots of mind-boggling sections about Road Ranking System, Categories, Bands etc etc. Don't get too worried about the Bands and Categories, it is a bit of a minefield and not really too relevant for beginners. What you'll need to do is join British Cycling and add a race licence package. From here you'll be sent your racing licence, there are five different categories; Elites, 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th Cat. As a new racer you'll receive a 4th cat racing licence. This will allow you enter the various races that are open to a rider with a 4th Cat race licence, most of the Regional events are open to 2nd/3rd/4th cat licence holders, where as the National events will perhaps only open to Elites/1st/2nd cat licence holders. There are also local races that will be open to all cats but will be handicapped, in that effectively the 4th cats will be set off first, then the faster riders later in staggered intervals.

So how do you obtain a different licence?

Each event will have differing points available for the top placing. Points at most events you'll compete in will be from 1st to 10th and sometimes 1st to 15th. You'll need to score points to obtain a different licence, so to go from a 4th cat to a 3rd cat you'll need to obtain 10 points whilst holding your 3rd cat licence. To move from a 3rd to 2nd and so on different levels of points are needed for each.

When and where are the events and how can you find out what's on?

The road-racing league runs mostly from April through to September. Have a look at the British Cycling website, go to the road section then search on the racing calendar section. You'll be able to find races almost everyday of the week at different locations around the UK. Locally and probably the best place to start is the 'South Staffordshire and Shropshire Cycling Clubs Road Race League' website www.ssscrrl.co.uk This is a race league that races each Thursday night generally from April through to the beginning of August at locations not too far away. The events are classed as a Reg C+ event that means it's a road race open to Elites/1st/2nd/3rd/4th cat racers and is handicapped. They are often split into 4 groups, the first group, who'll be new racers, will start at 7pm, then the second group at 5 minutes later, third group 2.5 minutes after that and the same for the fourth group. These races are perfect to try racing, you can start in the first group, get used to it then progress, as you feel confident into the faster groups. These events are generally around 36miles long and last about 1hour and half, they run around a circuit of perhaps 6 laps of 6 miles each lap. Then there are often British Cycling events, normally on Sundays at different locations across the region and nationally, the BC races are often minimum distances of around 50 miles and start generally at 9:30am, again they'll be laps around a set course, often fewer laps of a longer distance. Everyone starts together for these events irrespective of what cat you are. So you might be thinking 'Well that sounds ok if you're 21! I'm the other side of 40? For riders over 40 years old there is a national group called the League for Veteran Racing Cyclists www.lvrc.org This is a league solely for people aged over 40. In each race there will be differing age groups, that group racers based on their age. Many club members race in this league and have had some excellent results, the league caters for riders aged up to and beyond 75 years old.

So that's road racing how do the other races run?

Circuit races, these are again run on roads, most being town centre type circuits, for example Warwick Town Centre races are held around the closed roads of the town centre, these races are very fast from the start, on narrow, tight circuits. Typically they'll be measured over time rather than distance, for example the race will be 1 hour plus 5 laps.

Track races, these locally are held at Wolverhampton, Aldersley Leisure centre, Halesowen Athletics ground, there are numerous different events racing around a banked oval circuit.

Finally there will be time trials; this is generally a one on one against the clock. Racers are set off at 1-minute intervals of each other racing against the clock over a set distance, 10 miles, 25 miles, 50 miles, 100 miles or longer endurance events. Most clubs, including us run club 10 mile time trials over the summer months. These events are again just a full on effort for the distance, there are no team tactics and generally no other tactics other than pedal as hard as you can for the distance.

So what sort of tactics are involved and what do these names I've heard on the TV mean?

Ok, if you've watched the Tour de France, this is a stage race held over three weeks, but is effectively a road race each day. You'll have heard people mention the peleton, chasing group and riding on the front. The road races you'll compete in are no different, so here's how they basically work. The group is set off for the 55mile race, there will be some riders who are keen to get going and perhaps try to break away from the rest of the riders, these riders will attack hard off the front of the group and hope to create a gap back to the main bunch, these will be called the 'breakaway' the remainder of the group, if all together is called the 'Peleton' or if the group had been split up there may be several 'chasing groups'. The breakaway will have riders sharing the pace setting on the front and riding into the wind, the riders will take turns at being on the front then moving back to sit behind the other riders in the group to save energy by effectively slipstreaming the man in front. The Peleton will often be happy for the small group to ride away from them for a while in the hope that later they can use the strength in numbers by having more riders to ride on the front into the wind to be able to catch back up later.

This will happen in local races but on a smaller scale, quite often the bunch will ride all together for the race, putting in harder efforts on climbs to shed other riders out of the back of the group to basically slim the group down towards the end of the race. Most local races across the shorter distances will stay together as a bunch, shed some riders then end in a sprint for the line.

So if the season starts in April when should I start training?

Training is a very personal thing and what suits one person may not suit another. The club offer training rides on Tuesday evenings from April onwards, Thursday nights during the winter months and Saturday and Sunday rides all year around.....what ever the weather so there's no excuses.

If you're thinking of starting racing in April it will be worth starting your training in December or January, you will need to think about what type of events you want to enter, for example; if you're thinking about competing solely in 55mile distance or above races you will need to be able to ride 60mile training rides, fairly regularly. If you're thinking of racing in the shorter Thursday evening races or circuit races you'll probably want to be completing 40 mile training rides.

Ideally you will need to be riding some long distance steady paced rides during December and January, increasing the effort during February and March, plus during March add in some interval training where you will be adding in some fast pace efforts and sprints.

By April you should be ready to go!

Are there any practice type events?

During January local clubs will begin to host events called 'reliability rides' these are set-up as testing rides for people to see how their training is progressing compared to others. The events will be around 50miles or similar and will have a set time to complete them, starting and finishing in the same place.

I don't think road racing will suit me, what about 'Cross?

'Cross racing starts properly during September and runs through to February, there are many local events, regional and national events. It's fast from the start and furious until the end; you may be lucky and have a dry day or ride in a complete mud bath! 'Cross can be fun but also extremely challenging. Most club member's race within the West Midlands Cyclo Cross League www.wmcccl.co.uk These events run most Sundays through the autumn and winter months. Again you'll either need a race licence or most events will allow you to pay a little extra to buy a 'day race' licence. British Cycling has an events calendar that is contained within the 'Cross specific part of their website.

I haven't got a road or cross bike, so how do I get into Mountain bike racing?

Mountain bike events are held all throughout the year at many locations across the UK, there are Midland XC regional series and other race leagues farther a field. British Cycling again has an Mtb section with details of the events calendar for both Downhill and XC racing. You'll need a race licence or again day licences are offered at most events. The club has a very active Mtb section meeting each Saturday at the Bonded Warehouse offering rides for the complete novice to the seasoned pro. Club runs are lead across routes that will offer challenges to most but are also monitored so riders can progress in safe learning environment.

I'm still a bit young for racing, is there any thing on offer for me?

Yes the club offers a series called Go-Ride where British Cycling trained coaches run training sessions for younger riders, to include skills training, fitness, off-road riding and Go-ride group racing, all within a safe learning environment. The Go-Ride series are held using off road type bikes and are held on school premises, fields and also venture onto safe local off-road trails.