



ARNIE BAKER CYCLING

Getting Started

USCF-Style Racing

Thinking of racing? Want to know more about racing? Racing may be infectious. Most of us started by watching a bicycle race. Though the race may have been exciting, many of us never thought we'd find ourselves racing.

If you enjoy riding a bicycle, and have some competitive spirit, you may find racing is easier to start than you initially thought.



CYCLING
HANDOUT

Organization

The national governing body of bicycling racing in the United States is USA Cycling.

USA Cycling divisions include:

- The United States Cycling Federation (USCF) which governs amateur road and track racing.
- USA Pro which governs professional road and track racing.
- The National Off-Road Bicycle Association (NORBA) which governs mountain biking.

Racers are often grouped or classed by age and sex.

In the USCF system, *Seniors* are aged 19 to 29. *Juniors* are 18 years of age and under, *Masters* are 30 and over.

Women usually race separately.

A race promoter may class racing for older riders at his or her discretion. Normally Masters races are held beginning either at age 30 or 35.

Many local and a few other national bicycle-racing organizations co-exist with USA Cycling.

For example, as part of the *Senior Olympics*, riders over age 50 can find competition at many local, state, and national meets. In this context, *seniors* are over the age of 50.

The rest of the handout will discuss racing within the context of USCF-type racing.

Types of Bicycle Races

Bicycle races are held on roadways, called *Road Races*, and on specialized tracks, called *Velodromes*.

Races may be individual competitions against the clock for time, called *time trials*, or events where many riders start together, called *mass start races*.

Road Races

There are of several types: Time trials, criteriums and road races. This is a little confusing:

A road race is a specific type of road race; a criterium and a time trial are also types of a road races.

Time trials are races against the clock. You ride by yourself over a set distance. Such races are typically held for 10 miles at the local level, or 40K (a little under 25 miles) at the state or national level.

Criteriums are races on circuits up to a mile in length, often with many corners, and frequently on flat terrain. These races involve specific racing skills such as cornering and riding together in close groups (*packs*). The ability to surge and respond to differences in speed quickly is important in these events.

Road races are typically held over smaller state highways or partially closed urban routes. These are more like the rides most beginning cyclists may be familiar with, only at speed.

Track Races

There are many different types of track racing. The traditional championship events are sprints, points races, and time trial-like events over distances of 1, 3, or 4 kilometers (about 0.5 to about 2.5 miles). Weekly local velodrome racing has many more types of mass start race formats than can be listed here.

Sprint competitions are usually held over distances of about one half a mile. Two or three riders participate at a time. Because of the effect of the slipstream, the sprint often does not begin in earnest until only 200 meters (yards) are left in the race!

Continued



ABC Handout

Copyright Arnie Baker, MD, 1989-2003. Revised 8/30/2004. This training handout may be photocopied for distribution only if used in its entirety; and only with written permission. Electronic transmission is expressly prohibited. Copyright notice and permission must accompany use.

Distribution after December 2004 is unlicensed and prohibited. Please report unlicensed use.

<http://arniebakercycling.com/>

Points races are races over a number of laps, say 50 laps or 10 miles, with mini competitions every five laps. A scoring system awards points to the lead four riders of each mini competition. Final placings are determined from the overall winners of the mini races.

Kilo time trials are individual races for one-kilometer.

Pursuits are races for three or four kilometers. For most riders these competitions are events with an opponent on the opposite side of the track, performed in heats. In Masters racing, this is an individual effort for time.

Get Your Bike from a Bike Store

You have choices and considerations when selecting a bicycle. You'll need to decide price range, size, types of components as well as color. You can purchase a bicycle through mail order, department stores or at specialty bicycle stores. The better specialty stores are known as "pro shops".

There is a tremendous selection available. Although mail order is at first glance less expensive, it is a false savings. Service and competent advice is paramount. There is little point in investing upwards of \$1500 on a wonderful bicycle only to find out a few months later that it really is too large a fit.

Look for a "pro bike" shop that supports racers and racing. Such shops often advertise in local racing publications, support local bicycle racing clubs, or are found as technical support at local races.

Get Started with Time Trials

Few special skills are required to race by yourself against the clock. For this reason time trials are a good way to see how you are doing and assess your prospects for racing with others (mass start races).

If you are under age 50 and can ride 10 miles in under 30 minutes you may be ready for mass start event. If you are over 50 add up to five minutes, if you are a woman, add about three minutes to get an idea where you stand.

The fastest riders you will see in these competitions can cover this distance in about 22 minutes. Most of these champions have been riding for some time, have specialized aerodynamic equipment and are the best!

Most riders who race train at least 100 miles weekly. The norm for competitive riders is probably 150-250 miles a week. A very few ride twice that!

Once you have developed your regular riding to a level where you can ride about 30 miles on your own in under two hours, or ride a 10 mile time trial in under 30 minutes, you almost certainly will find that cycling with like-minded riders in a group will increase your abilities.

Ride with Others, Join a Club

Look for a *bicycling club* oriented toward racing. If you are a Masters rider, seek a club with a Masters interest group, Juniors should look for Juniors programs, and women should look for clubs that have a special interest in their development.

Most clubs will allow you to ride with them for several weeks at no charge. This will be a good time to assess your abilities, and the to determine whether the club is suitable for you. If you enjoy riding with the club, you can usually join for about \$35. There is no need to obtain a license to race in order to join a club.

Once you start riding with a group, you will learn many things you really did not need to know while riding on your own. Things like how to follow another rider closely—to expend less effort—yet safely at the same time. Things like how to turn a corner without a loss in speed, or how to suddenly and explosively accelerate your bicycle. These skills are required in racing, but not in solo riding.

Most clubs have training or development races, where you can ease your way into a race atmosphere without formally entering a licensed race. Such training races will give you a good idea of what is required to race. You can judge yourself against the already established racers and find out at what level you are riding.

Please don't be too intimidated by the racers and their somewhat cliquish behavior. They all wear those black shorts, fancy jerseys and *seem* to know everything. Sometimes they act a little weird. Frequently they are worried about a new rider riding in an unpredictable way, and they translate their anxieties to rude shouts and yells. Remember, those racers started out just like you, and had many skills to learn!

Still, you will find some groups more friendly than others.

Ideally the club you have selected will have a beginners' group, in which experienced racers will show you the ropes and teach racing safety and skills.

Once you learn these skills and feel more comfortable, it's time to think of your first race.

Continued

Mass-Start Racing Requires Fitness

Bicycling is a lot different from jogging or running. Whereas anyone can go out and run, bicycle racing involves considerably more skills. If you go out to run a 10K, chances are some runners will be a lot slower and some a lot faster. You can continue to train on your own and strive to improve your personal 10K time. When you start a bicycle race with others, however, a prerequisite level of ability is required, because you must be able to stay with the main group of riders (the *pack*). Without the benefit of the pack's slipstream (breaking air resistance) you are out of the race.

Beginning Mass-Start Racing

There are many popular benefit rides, but these often travel streets with stops at lights, and frequently have riders leaving in "waves". These "fun rides" are wonderful in their own way, but these are rides, not races. Racing in the United States is controlled by the governing United States Cycling Federation.

Most races require you to have a racing license, though you may occasionally see a race advertised with a public or citizen race in which no license is required. This might be a place to start, but such races are infrequent. You may obtain a license by writing to the United States Cycling Federation, One Olympic Plaza, Colorado Springs, CO, 80809. It is to your advantage to have joined a club, because if you are not affiliated with a club, a surcharge normally applies to your race entry fee.

You'll enter a beginners or Category 5 race if you are a male under age 30. Females start out as novices or Cat 4. Most races are divided by category, sex, and age. Masters racing starts at age 30, but the event promoter may choose to have a race for any age group, for example those over 35, or 40, or 45. And those under age 18 may race separately as well. If you race often enough, or do well enough, men upgrade to novices, or category 4. After that it's Sport, or Cat 3, and then Expert or Cat 2, generally the top class of racer, although there are about 400 Elite or Cat 1's altogether in the county.

You can race by age if you are a Masters racer, or by category. If you are a 37-year-old male, it is sometimes more fun and safer to race with the over 35 year olds. But you may have to race with all over 35 year olds, which may include some Cat 3 and 2 riders! Or, you may choose to race with the Cat 5's without age restriction. Or you may race both!

Women always have the prerogative to race with men, but not vice versa. Some choose to race with men in order to train at a higher level. Masters women may race with masters men up to 20 years older than they are.

Choose a course without many sharp turns, and without too challenging hills for your first races. You be more likely to be able to stay with the group and finish. As you see how you do, and judge your skills, you know better when to enter more challenging races.

Is there a velodrome in your area? Many velodromes have development or interest courses to help.

After racing a few times, you'll want even more information on specifics of training, intervals, sprint workouts, etc. Though often such information is available from books, your club will be in the best position to help you. **AB**