

Cyclocross extends the cycling season

Late fall and winter often are times when fitness slides while the calories mount. For many cyclists, the “season” comes to a close near Labor Day. There are options to lengthen the season - like cyclocross.

Cross got its start in 1902 when Pvt. Daniel Gousseau, of the French Army, was given permission to organize the French Cyclocross Championship to provide cyclists a training option during the “dead season” known as winter.

Mud and running over things are not accidents. Race promoters design one/two-mile courses that include sections on dirt, wet areas, dry areas, real or artificial barricades, grass and wooded areas. Cyclists race for 30-75 minutes, depending on their category.

To succeed in cross, one needs to learn new techniques. Dismounting smoothly is critical. Tight turns prevent “getting a run” at the next hill. There are lots of tempo changes. It's hard to settle into a cadence/rhythm.

“Newbies” to the sport should remember that for most riders, the No. 1 goal is about having fun. You don't have to ride with special gear. Like most cross training, you don't have to be fast to have fun or to improve one's conditioning. Running up hills and over barriers pushes is guaranteed to push the heart

rate. But, remember, it only has to be as hard as you want it to be.

For those new to the sport, it may be hard to know one's limits. A race of 40 minutes or so in a state park looks easy. Newbies tend to underestimate the energy toll taken by the continual speeding up/slowing down and then accelerating again. Every race is different, based on conditions, course set up and competitors.

Cross is spectator friendly. Improvised switchbacks on grassy knolls etc., allow spectators to see most of the course.

A cross-specific bike has tires wider than a road bike (35c instead of 23c) but more narrow than a



mountain bike (up to 2.1 inches). The fork is wider on cross bikes. Cantilever or linear brakes are the norm to allow more mud clearance.

While using a cross bike is nice, it's not essential if one's main goal is to get a cardiovascular workout. I borrowed a hard tail (mountain bike with only a front shock) for a cross race while visiting in Seattle. The only drawback – awakening a group of semi-hibernating wasps burrowed into bark in a forested area of the course!