

CRITERIUM RACING

criterium or crit racing as it is commonly referred to tends to be raced over the summer season. The format is laps of a short circuit. They usually have no set distance but instead the race is run over a set time and then a number of laps.

WHAT YOU NEED

- A racing license (check your local requirements)
- A bike (no aero bars)
- Standard wheels (no disk wheels)
- A helmet

You could take a water bottle on your bike but as the race is short there's rarely a need for more than one bottle and also there is no need to eat during a crit. Also you often leave your kit or saddle bag and pump in the car as a puncture will either eliminate you or you will get a lap out and you change your wheel.

ENTRY FEE

This is usually only a nominal amount depending on the club and the cost of the venue. Generally race organisers won't accept coins or \$50 notes.

HOW DO I START

Firstly be on time. Try to be at the criterium course around 30-45 minutes early. As soon as you get there find the registration table and tell them it's your first race and that you'd like to enter. It is important though no matter how strong you think you are or how strong you actually are you need to learn how to race and that means starting in a grade that will enable you to learn without being too tired to concentrate.

Often you also wear a different colour race number so that other riders in the group know you are new. You may not be eligible for prize money on the first race - again this depends on the club. This is partially due to safety reasons and partly due to ensuring that you have been placed you in the right grade.

Once you've entered you'll get a number. This is usually a square bit of fabric that is pinned on to the back of your jersey with safety pins that are supplied. Pin the number low down so that the bottom of the number is a few cm above the bottom of your jersey. Either in the centre or off slightly to the left. Have a look at how the other riders have positioned their numbers and remember that it's there so people standing by the road can see it. You may also get a head band that is to be placed around your helmet, these are colour-coded by grade. Make note of what colour yours is so you can identify who else is in your grade.

Then go for a warm-up. Ride around the criterium course taking note of the best lines through the corners where the finish line is and if there's any tricky bits. Make sure that you have warmed up well and ready to race the criterium. At around 5 minutes before racetime as you will be called up to the start line. Criteriums take off pretty quickly sometimes and if you're not warm you'll get dropped within the first 10 minutes.

RACE TIME

There'll be a start area where all the riders for your grade will be near the start line. Get into the bunch and try to be reasonably close to the front. Being near the front of a crit (or any race) is good tactically. It allows you to stay clear of most crashes and see what's going on and if there's a surge you can let the bunch slip by a bit to absorb the surge saving your energy. When the officials start the race make sure you start your timer on your computer.

Sometimes criterium races start with a period of riding "under control". This means that the field will ride around the course a bit slower than racing speed and no-one will try and attack (ride away off the front). This is to let the field have a look at the course and in the case of lower grade races let the field get used to each other and being in a racing bunch. The officials will determine for how long this controlled period will be for. If you're not certain be sure to ask the start line official. Don't be shy. If you didn't hear it chances are the others didn't as well.

Once the criterium race starts you'll need to understand a bit about how criterium racing works. Generally riders will race to their strengths which means that people who can ride at high speeds for a long time but can't sprint well, will want to break away from the bunch. Riders who can't ride fast and long but who can sprint will want a bunch finish so that they can sprint clear after drafting the bunch. If you remember this you'll see what different things different riders will try and do to set the race up for their win.

And then there's bunch fodder riders who don't really have a plan and who do things for no reason other than they were bored or just felt like it. They're the ones who take off in very early attacks and get reeled in over and over again. Sometimes there's reasons for this but in lower grades it's not so likely.

RACING ETIQUETTE AND TACTICS

Racing is not like a training bunch ride where everyone's doing turns and riding smoothly together but it is raced as a bunch ride. So you'll need to remember a few basics:

- Always ride safely is the biggest one of all
- Don't make any sudden sideways moves
- Don't chop other riders into corners
- Don't pass underneath another rider on a corner
- Ride in straight lines and treat your competitors with respect and courtesy
- There's no prizes for who does the biggest turn on the front but sometimes you may have to do a turn to help chase down a break unless you just want to race for 10th place!
- Sometimes other riders won't help sometimes riders will shout at others to help in the chase
- Always think before acting in a criterium race. If someone shouts at you to chase down a break ask yourself if it will benefit your race or the shouters
- Criterium race tactics is the subject of whole books and experience is invaluable
- Try not to let gaps open up, stay near the front and stay out of the wind

Treat the race officials with respect. They're usually volunteers and without them you're not racing. Thank them after the race too if you get a chance.

RACE RULES

Criterium racing pretty simple but in criteriums there's some interesting rules, for example if you have a mechanical problem or a puncture etc you can usually take a lap out to fix it and then rejoin the main bunch in your grade. You have to ride around to the race officials and inform them. You can't do this in the last few laps; the officials should tell you that at the start. If you have been dropped by your bunch and lapped you have to withdraw and stay out of the way for the rest of the time. It is illegal to ride with another grade. If you're riding D grade and C grade comes past overtaking your bunch you are not permitted to join in with the C grade bunch or use them to break away from your group. You have to ride outside their slipstream. Usually your bunch will be neutralised when being overtaken and if you think that's a good time for a surge or an attack be prepared to be disqualified!

As you get closer to the finish the pace usually increases and riders will try late attacks and so on don't panic at this point. If you have a plan, stick to it (at least for your first race!). And you do have a plan right? If you're in a sprint for the finish ride in a straight line do not try and weave over the road to stop anyone overtaking you. It's illegal and very dangerous. Once you cross the finish line ease off and roll around the course or follow the instructions of the officials. There's usually other grades racing at the same time and you don't want to get in their way especially close to a finish! If you think you got a place or won see the finish line officials and tell them (it's called "claiming"). Also keep both hands on the handlebars when crossing the line - It is generally illegal with most clubs to do a victory salute because you run the risk of not only crashing but being disqualified!

Always take note of the specific rules for the club running the race as they may vary from state to state and country to country.

And that's it your first criterium! Get out and do it!