

Beginning Mountain Bike Racing in the TriCities TN/VA: Sweat and Gear without Fear

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Author Natasha Snyder and her beloved racing steed on a 35 mile training ride.

Alvarado Station Store, Creeper Trail, Abingdon, VA.

Natasha is a retired mountain bike racer from Bristol TN who specialized in cross country and cyclocross, with several trophy finishes.

The world of mountain bike racing is exciting, exhausting, varied—and accessible. If you are a competent mountain biking enthusiast who has mastered basic riding skills and built a decent level of fitness, you may be ready to explore the next step: the local racing circuit. With some readily available equipment and determination, you could begin collecting trophies in no time.

Most adults who purchase a mountain bikes are simply recreational riders, looking to enjoy a comfortable, ecologically-sound, human-powered ride around their neighborhood or perhaps a quick ride to the beach during vacations. After all, mountain bikes are stylistically diverse, slower and safer than motorcycles, and more comfortable than skinny road bicycles. However, sometimes a casual rider becomes a true “enthusiast,” which is what people involved in bicycle racing call those who are more than recreational riders, but not quite elite athletes. Once the desire to go fast surpasses the desire to arrive home clean and comfortable, the time may have arrived for you to consider preparing to enter a local or amateur mountain bike race here in the Tri Cities and surrounding region.

Race Formats

There are many different types of mountain bike racing, from the spectator-friendly drama of the cyclocross to the exhausting twelve or twenty four-hour cross country races. Each of these kinds of races has differing rules, uses a different type of bike, and tests a specific skill set. Here is a rundown of the most popular types of mountain bike races and a bit of information about each:

Cross country

racing

- Objective** can be either a short format, usually a single lap of six to twelve miles for the fastest finishing time, or a marathon endurance format to complete the highest number of laps of a loop course in a certain period of time, usually six, twelve, or twenty four hours.
- Terrain/Course description** Courses for both types are varied terrain and usually consist of some combination of fire roads and single track, with extended stretches of both up and downhill riding. These race courses may include some bike handling challenges such as slick rock, stream bed crossings, or extremely steep and taxing climbs.
- Skill set/fitness** Competitors must have exceptional high endurance fitness and sufficient skill to deal with natural obstacles as well as pack riding situations.
- Local race example** for long course cross country racing in the Tri-cities area nothing beats the *Bay's Mountain Challenge XC* Tsali mountain bike trails, location of the 12 hours of Tsali race, scheduled to take place on Sun July 8, 2012. The East Tennessee Bicycle Club and Larry's Cycles are sponsoring this race, which has been held at Bay's Mountain Park in Kingsport Tennessee for about 20 years.

For endurance length cross country racing, the local standard has been set at the *12 Hours of Tsali*, a race that takes place on a 10 mile loop on the beautiful mountain single track near Franklin Cove, North Carolina. This year's 12 hours of Tsali is scheduled for Saturday, May 19, 2012 from 10 A.M. until 10 P.M.





Windrock Mountain

Downhill

Objective In downhill mountain biking, the objective is exactly what it sounds like—get to the bottom first and (hopefully) in one piece.

- **Terrain/ course description** Race courses are steep downhill runs, and races are often held during the warmer weather seasons on snow skiing slopes that would

otherwise be closed, or ATV runs that are designated for shared usage.

- **Skill set/fitness** Participants only pedal to launch off of the start line, so downhill does not require the level of cardiovascular fitness cross country racers need. However, holding the bike in the best line of travel and controlling it over bumps and through any curves takes significant upper body strength, and riders must have a high level of skill and courage to face the dangers of downhill.
- **Local race example** *Windrock Mountain* in Oliver Springs is Tennessee's, and the South's, premier downhill venue. However, interested participants should definitely make sure that their insurance is paid up and their skills are honed, because this trail system is considered suitable for advanced, expert, or professional riders only at this time. Races here tend to be unadvertised, to lessen the chance of intermediate and beginner riders attempting to outride their skillset and sustaining injury. However, there are lots of blogs and list-serves on the internet where an experienced rider could hunt

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down other like-minded downhillers for the inside scoop. However, *the USA Cycling Mountain Bike Gravity National Championships* are scheduled for nearby Beech Mountain ski resort for 2012.

Cyclocross

- **Objective** Races last from thirty to sixty minutes with riders vying to complete the most laps in the time allotted. Since Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas all fall within the cyclocross racing season, don't be too surprised to see a few riders sporting costumes!
- **Terrain/ course description**
Cyclocross racing takes place on a short loop course, usually between one and three kilometers, covering varying terrain that may include ditch or small stream crossings, paved segments, grass or short steep segments—possibly including steps or stairs. There are generally between one and four barrier crossings that are twelve to eighteen inches high that racers must negotiate by either hopping the bike over, or more commonly by dismounting and lifting the bike to the shoulder then running across.
- **Skill set/fitness** Racers must have excellent aerobic fitness for both extended hard pedaling and running with the bike, strength for repeatedly lifting the bike over barriers, and good handling and pack riding skills- think riding down a flight of stairs with several other racers.
- **Local race example** The principal cyclocross series in the Tri Cities area is called *Mud, Sweat, and Gears*. This series of about 8 races (exact number varies by year) starts in September and lasts into December, with venues being added or discarded from year to



year. Many races take place in local parks, and have previously included Winged Deer in Johnson City, Steele Creek in Bristol Tennessee, Sugar Hollow in Bristol Virginia. However, The Farmhouse in Unicoi has also served as a venue, as have several other locations around the area.

Freeriding or Trials



- **Objective** Trials is not so much a race as a skills competition that takes place on a specially designed obstacle course. The objective is to complete each obstacle without falling or putting a foot down. Sometimes, but not always, there is a time restriction for the rider to complete the obstacles.
- **Terrain/ course description** The terrain is the main concern for this type of competition. Many differing types of challenges make up the course, which may consist of elevated riding tracks, stairs or rails, ramps, or other hindrances. The big keyword for this type of course is man-made.
- **Skill set/fitness** Racers must have some level of fitness and significant strength to compete in this kind of event, but the most important attributes are excellent balance and advanced bike handling skills.
- **Local race example** Snowshoe Mountain ski resort offers a modified free-riding area, and several other ski resorts are building or planning them in the wake of a popularity explosion fueled by Mountain Dew extreme sports tours and others like it. However, this type of competition is still fairly new to the region. Given the inherent expense of building, maintaining, and insuring a freeride park, riders can cross their fingers but expect progress to be slow. Most opportunities for this type of competition are further west, in Colorado, California, and Washington.

Racer categories

Until the 2009 racing season, USA cycling, the main national governing body for bike racing, and NORBA, the National Off-Road Bicycle Association, organized mountain bike racers into Beginner, Sport, Expert, Semi-Pro and Pro categories, with separate classes for women and juniors. However, in an effort to create more inter-disciplinary athletes and align mountain bike racing rules more closely to other forms of cycle racing, the new licensure categories are Category 3, 2, 1 and Pro with separate men's and women's divisions and age groups in each category. Beginning racers are Category 3, but it is possible for a dedicated racer to move up fairly quickly.

The following chart gives the rules at-a-glance for categories and upgrades according to governing body USA Cycling < <http://www.usacycling.org/>>

<i>Category</i>	<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Advancement</i>
Category 3	Designed for the entry-level rider. Category 3 races help the rider understand the subtleties of the sport allowing one to experience the thrill of mountain biking.	Riders may advance as quickly as they wish up to Category 2. However, once a rider has upgraded, he or she will not be permitted to downgrade to a less difficult category without making a formal request to USA Cycling. Category 3 racers must move to Category 2 after placing in the top five in five races. Failure to do so may result in license suspension
Category 2	Reflects improved skills and developed strength and stamina.	Category 2 riders may move up to Category 1 after two top-five finishes by presenting an upgrade request and a resume to USA Cycling. Category 2 riders must advance to Category 1 after placing in the top five in five races. Failure to do so may result in license suspension.
Category 1	Racing skills, strength and stamina have reached an exceptional level; racing is very competitive. Riders must have a racing age of at least 15 to race as a category 1 in an endurance discipline.	You have arrived. This is the highest possible amateur racing category.

Riding/racing clubs

The best source of information about races in any specific area is the local mountain bike riding or racing club. In the Tri Cities,

- the NTMBA, the Northeast Tennessee Mountain Bike Association, organizes races, skills clinics, group rides, and work days to maintain riding trails.
- In spite of the name TCRC, Tri Cities Road Club, also takes an active role in much of Northeast Tennessee's mountain biking activities, in addition to spearheading the local cyclocross racing series, called Blood, Sweat, and Gears.
- ETSU Mountain Bike Team is another active locally based mountain biking group, and there are many others in this area, which is known for having excellent trails and superior athletes.
- On a national level, USA cycling is the sanctioning body responsible for setting up general rules for all racing formats and events, as well as insuring races and promoting the sport.
- The IMBA, International Mountain Bicycling Association is the international group that takes responsibility for promoting excellence and ecologically sound practices in mountain biking.

Equipment

The Bicycle

Obviously, the most important equipment for any aspiring mountain bike racer is the correct bike. The best way to make sure that the bike you buy is the best bike for your intended use is to visit a local bicycle specialty shop. The experts there can help a new racer to sort through the numerous stylistic devices to get the features that matter most to the individual rider and discipline, while ensuring the perfect fit for your body. Various mountain bikes will have a range of features, including different suspension configurations and a choice of disk or caliper

brakes. Which racing bike you choose should be based on what kind of races you plan to participate in. After all, fit and function are the only features that are non-negotiable.

Internet sales do not allow the purchaser to “test- drive” what may be a pricey investment before purchasing, nor do they come with service after the sale

Vendor and Price

Big Box It is possible to buy a mountain bike from one of the “big box” retailers for less than \$200; however, to do so with plans to race is a waste of money. These cheap, heavy bikes are

simply larger size versions of a child’s sidewalk bike.

EXAMPLES: Walmart Target Kmart

Internet There are also internet retailers who sell real mountain bikes that are set up for racing for fairly low prices. This may be an answer for someone who needs to save a little money. However, these . Remember that a mountain bike, like all vehicles, has a lot of moving parts and needs a mechanic’s expertise from time to time. Also, a bike purchased from the internet may very well eat up in delivery and set-up costs whatever was saved up front.

EXAMPLES: Ebay Amazon.com Performance bike.com

Bicycle Specialty Shop Generally, the best way to purchase a mountain bike for racing is to visit your local bicycle specialty shop. Not only will you be supporting a local business, most bike shops have experienced qualified bike mechanics who will keep your bike in working condition for free or nearly free for as long as the original owner has the bike. These bike shops are also a fount of information on the local mountain biking scene, and can put new racers in touch with local riders or groups.

EXAMPLES: Piney Flats Bicycle and fitness Larry’s Cycle Shop Boyd’s Bike Shop

Price- and a warning Shoppers should expect to spend anywhere from about \$800 for the most basic entry level bike that can be used for racing to about \$3500 for a really good machine that

will be serviceable to any but the most well-sponsored professional racer. \$1200 is a common price point. While shopping for a bike it is important to remember that used bikes may be a good deal, or they may be stolen from someone else—so be careful and only buy used from reputable sources or bike shops. As with anything, a “too good to be true” price probably is too good to be true.

Cross country racing



Downhill racing bike



Cyclocross racing bike



Trials racing bike

Accessories

There are a few accessories every mountain bike racer will need. However, most recreational riders will likely already have some of these things, such as an approved helmet, eye protection such as sunglasses (those with interchangeable lenses are nice since they generally have yellow or clear lenses for overcast or dark rides, and shaded lenses for sun). A tire pump with a dual Schrader and Presta valve fitting to work on any bike tire, and several washable plastic water bottles are other items many casual riders are likely to have already; although, if a new bike does not come with a water bottle cage the owner will have to decide whether to install one or purchase a hydration backpack. Other necessities are a good mini

repair kit and tube, along with a seat bag to carry them, and lights if races will be deep in a gloomy forest, late in the evening, or before full daylight.

The other piece of equipment a new mountain bike racer needs to consider is clipless pedals, which, contrary to the name, one actually clips into. Clipless pedals require the rider to wear a special shoe with a cleat attached to the inflexible sole for the pedal to clamp onto mechanically. This enables the rider to pedal more efficiently and quickly by allowing the muscles of one leg to pull the pedal up as the other leg pushes down. While these pedals may sound scary for the inexperienced user, they are standard for most racers. However, there are always a few die-hard fans of the more old-fashioned cage, or clip pedal. Occasional racers even use the flat pedals that come as original equipment on bikes, but this is rare except for trials riders.

MUST-HAVE CHECKLIST

Helmet	Eye protection w/shatterproof lenses
Tire pump with correct valve fitting	Water Pedal and shoe in action.
Hydration backpack	Mini repair kit
Tube sized to fit tires	Seat bag to carry necessities
Lights if needed	Pedals and cleats

Clothing

As one prepares for a first race, there are several items of clothing that are needed. The first and many riders might say the most important piece of clothing is the padded cycling shorts to protect the tailbone and “sit” bones from the punishment of narrow, barely padded



racing saddles. These are often covered by baggie cargo shorts in mountain bike racing to protect them from being snagged by briars and other road hazards, and presumably to make them less awkward for shy types.

Clipless mountain bike pedals and cleats on a cycling shoe

The next piece of sport-specific clothing is the cycling jersey, a shirt with a zipper at the neckline in front and several pockets along the back waist to carry small items such as water, a super compact rain jacket, or a nutritive supplement. Jerseys are often brightly colored to increase visibility and safety, and may incorporate a team logo. As mentioned in the last section, special cycling shoes are absolutely required to make use of clipless pedals.

Gloves are also a good idea, and some race organizers. They are available with or without fingers to suit the temperature, but all have padded palms to protect the rider from nerve damage caused by holding the weight of one's upper body on handlebars for long periods. Various sorts of cold weather gear such as tights, arm and leg warmers, shoe covers, and facemasks are also available for those racing in the winter.

Fitness

Of course, one of the most important aspects of preparing to race mountain bikes is getting fit enough to compete. There are many ways of doing this, including attending riding clinics sponsored by local riding clubs, or just taking to the trails. One very effective method of getting into racing fitness for those who may not have the time to ride during the day, or when the weather outdoors is not cooperating is to attend spin classes at a gym. These group fitness classes build most of the necessary aspects of mountain bike racing fitness in the comfort of the indoors with an encouraging instructor. Another time-saving method is the use of the home trainers that fit onto the back wheel of a bike and provide friction and resistance so that it is possible to train at home in front of the television. Group rides with a local club are probably the best way to both build fitness and to discover where a given rider is in terms of fitness and skills compared to other racers in the area. Of course, there are a thousand short cuts advertised, but the truth is that nothing takes the place of just getting out and riding. Almost anyone can build the fitness necessary to safely race mountain bikes. It is a great incentive to get into shape, and a lot of fun.



Racers at Bays Mountain.

For riders who want to step up to the challenge of riding competitively, stopping at a local bike shop and asking the employees about the mountain bike racing scene in the area might be the first step to a shelf full of trophies and a lifetime of fun and memories.

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