

Muddy Spokes

Cyclo-crossers run, ride, jump to slick victory

By HARRY ESTEVE
Of the Emerald

It's no glamour sport.

Winter cyclo-cross competitors walk away looking like World War I trench soldiers. Few congratulation kisses are offered, even to the winners.

In most latitudes, bicycle racing season ends in September. Cyclists take a needed break, hang their expensive bikes where they won't get wet, and let the hair grow back on their legs.

But some keep riding. They race cyclo-cross to stay in shape, to practice bicycle handling, or to pacify a constant urge for competition.

"I preach it because it helps riders learn to ride their bicycles," says Russell Morton, the recognized cyclo-cross "coach" for most local racers.

Cyclo-cross "eases a lot of fear" many first or second-year bike racers have about hurting themselves in a race, Morton says.

"The stiffness that comes with fear limits their ability."

Summer bicycle racing takes place on asphalt roads at speeds hovering around 30 mph, and crashes can be painful if not disabling.

A typical cyclo-cross race however, is held on an unpaved course, and the average speed is considerably slower. Spills, although more frequent due to the nature of the race, generally are less destructive.

The ability to control a bicycle under extreme conditions becomes crucial, as most races entail cycling down steep, muddied embankments, turning against the camber of the embankment, and sprinting up hills with the bicycle slung over one shoulder.

In some races, a rider will spend as

much time running as riding.

"It's real demanding," Morton says, and good practice for serious bicyclists. "They can overstep their means without much physical damage," he says.

"Overstepping" means trying to leap barriers while still on the bike — a feat expert cyclists accomplish by pulling the bicycle into the air by the toe clips as they ride. Or it means trying to take a 90-degree turn at 25 mph.

Veteran cyclo-crossers normally bring at least two bicycles and a pit crew along. As the first bike becomes caked with mud, or a tire suffers a puncture, the rider simply switches bikes. Immediately after the switch, the pit crew hoses off the mud, or replaces the punctured tire, and the first bike is set to go again.

Often the competition seems to pit the individual riders against the course itself, rather than against each other, Morton says. Some beginners have an easier time of it because they are not as self-conscious about being beaten.

That doesn't mean the competitive aspect is not taken seriously; it is.

In Europe, where cyclo-cross enjoys its biggest popularity, it is a professional sport, with big purses for the winners. Riders there are subjected to some of the harshest weather conditions known in athletic competition.

They wade across rivers, pedal through snow fields, crowd up outdoor

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Photos courtesy of Russel Morton

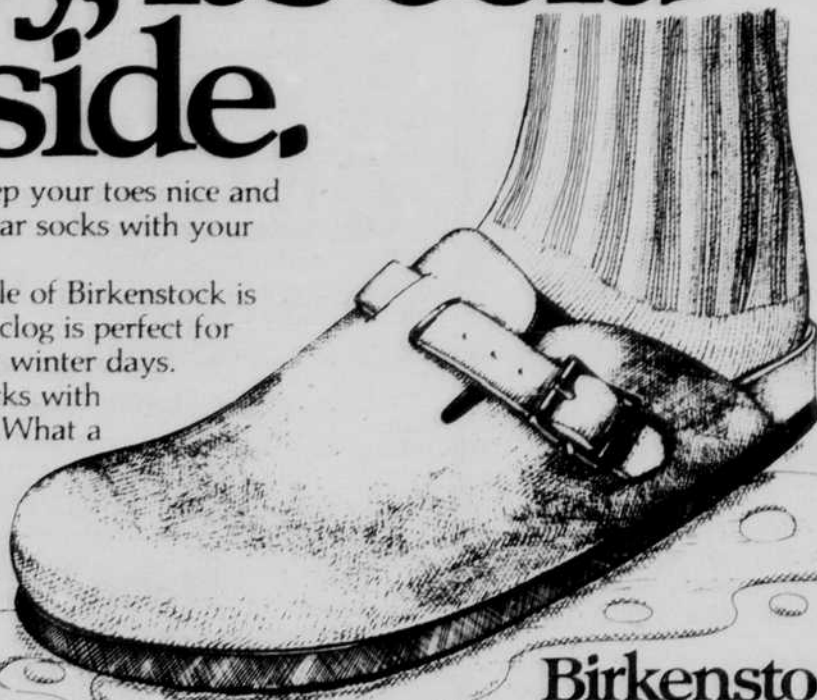
Cyclo-cross racers can expect spills like this, but softer falls and slower speed make the sport safer than its summer counterpart. Yet racers in this sport are subjected to worse weather conditions than almost any other athletes.

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