

Crossing Over

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“I’m sorry,” I explained as I stumbled toward the mother and two children walking down the steep and muddy trail, “I’m trying to avoid the slippery mud on the other side.” No, I certainly was not in my usual race mode! But this was my first real cyclocross race and I was learning a lot . . . How did I get here?

I suppose it all started with a strong resolve to improve my bike handling skills. I jumped into a World Cup winter triathlon held in Canmore last winter (running, cycling, and cross-country skiing) thinking this odd combination of sports really suited me. The run portion went surprisingly well and I had the current world champion in my sights – I hadn’t anticipated a good run so I was thrilled! I jumped on my friend Leanne’s mountain bike with excitement -- but lack of specific cycling fitness (it was, after all, cross-country ski season) combined with poor skills turned the rest of the competition into more of an adventure race for me.

Back from Canmore, I got in touch with Dominique Laroque, an ex-national team mountain biker whose current exploits include mountain biking clinics and camps. “Practice builds performance!” she said. Hmmm . . . I liked that. As much as I tried, I had never enjoyed mountain biking, probably because of my fears of downhills and poor skills. I decided it was time to try to make the sport fun. With running, road cycling, swimming, and cross-country skiing I certainly didn’t need to take on another sport, but the realization that I could actually improve was alluring. A two-day beginner’s camp for women with excellent instructors boosted my confidence, so I signed up for one day of the “learn to race” camp (also women only). Dominique announced we’d start the day with a cyclocross race since cyclocross puts a premium on technique.

Cyclocross? The mountain bikers didn’t seem too happy about this – but I was intrigued. I spent every Fall since our move to Ottawa watching my husband and many friends compete at cyclocross, happy that each year I had an excuse not to join in: training for a marathon; pregnant; too busy; injured. This sport seemed to highlight everything I was not good at – why would I want to compete? Well, I survived Dominique’s race and actually had fun. I decided then to try a local race in the fall.

What is Cyclocross?

If you’re not familiar with the sport, cyclocross has been described as one part road criterium, one part mountain bike race, and one part track-and-field. Races last 1 hour on a 1 to 3 kilometre course, on surfaces that range from grass and pavement to sand and

mud. Over the climbs, descents, and flat fast sections are natural obstacles like muddy hills, fallen trees, and man-made barriers that riders must dismount and run with their bike.

As a fall sport, typical cyclocross weather is gray, rainy, and muddy – more conducive to enjoying a hot coffee and a good book than venturing outside on a bike! The sport has always enjoyed great popularity in Europe, keeping cyclists motivated throughout the offseason while working on critical cycling skills.

The Ottawa Race Scene

The Ottawa area cyclocross season begins in late September, with races every Sunday through November. Dedicated volunteers of the Ottawa Bicycle Club put on these races, creating a low-key atmosphere that welcomes participation.

Competitors use cyclocross bikes, mountain bikes, converted road bikes, and hybrids. The races attract a wide range of competitors, young and old, from novice to pro. The only thing that is terribly skewed is the ratio of male to female competitors, which was one of my incentives to race. My good friend Jen has been competing for 5 years, and my duathlon training partner Amanda got hooked last year. Both were encouraging me to race with Amanda warning “cyclocross is addictive!”

Watching the local cyclocross races had me in awe of the top racers, whose bikes seemed to be an extension of their bodies . . . they could approach any barrier at high speed, gracefully dismount from their bike, stride over the barrier, smoothly jump in the saddle, and quickly continue on their way. Their effortless motions seemed to smooth out a course full of obstacles! But the novices inspired me too. Everyone seemed to be having fun navigating the tough courses.

My First Race -- Almonte

After a summer and early Fall of bike time trials, triathlons, and duathlons, it was finally time to fulfill my objective of entering a cyclocross race -- I decided to try the race on the weekend in Almonte. According to the other racers, it was one of the toughest courses on the Ottawa area circuit. Great. Arriving at the race site I found out that there were two races that day -- a one-lap time trial, followed by a mass start race. Two races? My goal was simply to enter one cyclocross race -- so I'd already overachieved without even starting! Content with this double accomplishment, and embarrassed to exhibit my lack of skills in front of everyone, I hardly warmed up.

I realized that was a big mistake during the time trial; since I hadn't properly previewed the course I didn't know where I was going! I followed the flags off into an open field –

you're supposed to keep the pink flags to your right and yellow to the left -- but instead of a neat trail to follow, to my untrained panicky eyes it looked like pink and yellow polka dots everywhere! Oh well, I was here to learn and not in a hurry.

O.K. Time trial over, now for the race. I lined up at the back of the pack so I wouldn't get in anyone's way as I figured out this sport. I looked around and saw five other women -- great, since most races I'd watched only had two or three women competing. I wouldn't be challenging the top women but seeing more women of varying abilities race might at least encourage some other women to give the sport a try! The start was great, since my husband John went out fairly conservatively and I was able to follow and attempt to mimic him for half of the first lap. Then, I was on my own for the rest of the race.

My cautious riding style meant that I had no major wipeouts. Contrasting the smoothness of the top racers who made everything look graceful and easy, I think I made the sport look really hard! I'd clumsily dismount my bike, walked over the barriers instead of leaping, and bike parts kept jabbing my body throughout the race (pedals jamming into my legs, bike seat hitting my helmet when I tried to carry my bike) -- as if my bike was hitting me saying "stop this nonsense!" I was surprised at how difficult I found running up the hills with my bike. I am a runner and love hills! But conserving momentum is the key to cyclocross, and every mistake costs you energy. My learning experiences at every obstacle left me with little energy to carry my bike up the hills.

So, what made the race so fun? I think it was the dramatic change of pace from my usual racing, the extreme focus required, and perhaps the thought that things could only get better! I was actually learning something new every time I went around the course. Amanda was right though, the sport is addictive! Bruised and sore, I was still out on my bike on cold mornings the week after the race trying to master mounting and dismounting. Race at Mooney's Bay next weekend? Sure! My second race was a vast improvement on the first -- I actually felt like I was racing this time.

I suppose it's time for dryland training for cross-country skiing, but I can't get this cyclocross thing out of my mind. Maybe it's because at this point for me, even 30 minutes of practice leads to huge improvements; maybe it's the added motivation while I'm waiting for the snow; or is it the friendly low-key race atmosphere? Whatever it is, I'm hooked.