



## criterium Success

In many parts of the United States, criteriums (a.k.a. crits) are the main format of road races. This is due to lack of available traffic-free roads and local race-permitting issues. Learning how to race a crit is crucial to cycling success. In fact, if you enter any stage race, at least one stage will be a crit.

Crits are often thought of dreadfully, but with the right knowledge, they can be an enjoyable part of your racing program. The fun thing about crits is their predictability, shortness, and availability of many primes (pronounced *preems*) and gift prizes.

With a little knowledge of what to do before, during, and after a crit, you'll look forward to your next adventure of high-speed cornering and mad dashes to the line.

### PREDICTABILITY

Crits are highly predictable. How? (1) The courses are usually very similar (i.e., 4 rights turns on flat ground with a straightaway sprint finish), and (2) racers make the same errors (and/or correct maneuvers) time and time again.

It is important to recognize that no matter where the crit is being staged; no matter how many turns (i.e., 4 or 5 or 6 or even 8); no matter if there is a little hill in the crit; no matter if the circuit is 0.6 miles or 0.9 miles; each crit is almost exactly the same. Knowing this, a racer can begin to take advantage of the mistakes (and/or correct maneuvers) that fellow racers repeat.

“Racers repeat themselves.” Make this your mantra. Any maneuver you see happening on the

crit course is probably being done by the same person, in the same way, at the same spot, as that person did a week before, a month before, and a year before.

### Recognizing Patterns

While racing, make mental notes of:

- who is attacking and where they are attacking
- which teams are blocking
- which teams are chasing
- which racers are in the gutter
- which racers are running up the outside or up the middle
- where attacks are happening
- where attacks are being caught
- who is going for primes and who is not

Pay attention and remember. Begin to recognize patterns. Patterns can be seen in other racers and courses.

#### *RACER PATTERNS*

Patterns will emerge in racers. For example, Joe Racer is off the front again after everyone printed for a prime. Joe will do it again in the next race or within the same race. Later in the race, you may want to take advantage of this by following Joe and getting a nice gap on the group to setup a break.

#### *COURSE PATTERNS*

Patterns emerge from courses. For example, a break gets up the road after a sharp right hand corner into a small rise, which runs past the

start/finish. It occurs because racers bunch up into the turn and the racers on the front press the pace, up the rise. Slower climbers get gapped, get in the way, or get dropped, so the split occurs. On the backside of the course, as it goes downhill, the break is reabsorbed. It's hard for a few to outrun the momentum of the many on a downhill. This pattern may occur lap after lap, so it is wise to stay near the front through the turn and up the rise to not be gapped, but also wise to not be tempted to work into a break that will be caught on the downhill.

This course has many opportunities of which to take advantage. Let racers do this over and over (i.e., break-away, get caught, breakaway, get caught), while you sit in and recover. Then in the second to last lap when this occurs again, you position yourself on the front to make the one-lap break. This time when you come through the last turn, you are on the front, and while everyone sorts out the turn, you sprint to the finish!

### **CRITS ARE SHORT**

If you can race in multiple categories, you have a chance for multiple races in one day. This also instills a fast learning curve—the more chances you have to race and the shorter the overall event, the more you will learn about racing in a shorter time.

In a 50-minute crit, you will see all patterns most races have to offer in a short time: breakaways, solo fliers, sprints, bike handling, lulls, etc. You can use this 50-minutes as a time to learn for your next race on the same day.

In comparison, road races may last as long as 3 hours. During a road race, you will probably see a lot of slow riding, some eating, chatting, etc., until there is a feature, such a hill or wind that causes the peloton to break apart. Once the peloton is apart, some harder racing will occur, but usually only the lead group reaches maximum hard work.

Do a crit. Do another the same day, if you have the time—even if you're tired. Focus on one crit to practice a race-winning plan. Use the other crits for a specific (perhaps, experimental) goal—scope

out the competition, practice saving energy, practice cornering, or practice taking flyers or sprinting.

If you cannot do another crit, then go for a short aerobic training ride. You're sweaty; you've got on your kit; your bike is ready to go; then go get in some miles, and think about what you could do to improve performance in your next crit.

### **PRIMES AND PRIZES**

Most racers enter crits with intent of winning, but once you are in the thick of the race, your mentality may change. RING RING RING “Next winner of the lap gets a box of energy bars!” RING RING RING. The peloton ramps up the speed, racers take solo flyers off the front, there's a mad dash for the line, and break may go up the road.

If your overall goal is a good placing then only go for primes if you a clear shot. A clear shot means, you waste minimal energy, have a good line for the sprint, and you can reintegrate with the pack or drive a break you may find yourself in after the prime sprint.

Sometimes just racing for primes can be fun too. The best race outcomes can occur when a racer chases primes the entire race and then finds him- or herself with a solid placing in the end. All that prime hunting prepared the racer for the final push to the line, possibly.

### **ACCEPTING PRIZES**

Race prizes, no matter how small or unwanted should never be passed up. Many people worked hard to get those free prizes for what is mainly a weekend-warrior sport. Plus, many people were generous enough to donate the prizes for a racer's good time.

### **WARMING UP**

Warming up is essential for crit racing. It makes sense: for a short intense race, a long-progressive warm-up is necessary. Your warm-up should last as long, if not longer than the time you will be

racing, and it should include long easy efforts and short hard efforts. You must get your heart rate up to racing intensity a couple of times for at least a couple of minutes towards the end of the warm-up. There is no magic formula for everyone, when it comes to warming up, but the CCSD Criterium Warmup spreadsheet will give you a general guideline.

## **RACING SMART**

Racing smart is the only way you are going to see crit success. Some guys and gals can just power off the front and keep churning away to a victory, but they are rare. Those racers will eventually 'cat up' to a category in which they cannot overpower their compatriots.

Racing smart means going to the race with an adaptable plan—it will not always work out, but having a plan will be more to your advantage than not having a plan. A simple plan is to try to stay in the first third of the pack for the race. Another simple plan is practicing not getting gapped through every corner. More advanced individual plans include attacking at a certain point in the race on a certain corner or rise. Teams can execute multiple plans by teammates helping leadout or block for primes, final sprints, or breakaways.

You go to a race with a plan, and the plan works, it does not work, or you throw the plan out and let the cards fall where they may. The point is: having the plan gives you options. Remember 'crit racing is predictable,' so formulating a plan is very possible and very successful.

Racing smart also means knowing your limitations. If you know that you can only time trial at 25 mph, then taking a solo flyer from a pack riding at 26 mph does it make sense. Save your energy for the last third of the race when the pace slows to 24 mph.

Another example: if you sprint best with a short wind-up and an explosive last 100 meters, then you should not be out in the wind going for the line at 400 meters.

Learn what actions provide you with the best shot at winning.

## **COOLING DOWN**

The benefit of cooling down is it allows your body (i.e., muscles, brain, hormone levels, gastrointestinal) to slowly acclimate to a less intense pace.

After the race, finish the post-sprint lap and roll off the course to an area in which you can slow roll for a half-hour. If there is no area for a slow roll, go back to your trainer, take off all resistance on your rear wheel and spin your legs. Avoid conflict with other racers concerning the race outcome, because everyone is in a state of agitation, elation, indignation, aggression, etc.

Go over in your mind—in a positive way—how the race unfolded. For example, try not to think, "I should have gone with that winning break." Instead think, "I saw exactly who was in that break, I will remember those racers for next race and go with them, if the break looks workable." Think of where breaks worked and failed; think about who was racing and remember them for next time; analyze the sprint.

## **CONCLUSION**

Breaking a crit into 3 separate segments is a way to manage the situation on race day: (1) execute an effective warm-up; (2) pay attention to the competition, race smart, and execute a plan; and (3) perform an effective cool-down.

When all is said and done: congratulate yourself for putting in many hours of training, having the motivation and guts to go race, and coming out none-the-worse for the wear. You are among the select few who challenge themselves physically each and every week.