

You have decided to take the plunge and buy a new bicycle. Where do you go from here?

Two common questions that people ask when preparing to buy a new bike are these: "What's the best bike?" and "Where's the best shop to buy it?"

The answers to these questions are as follows, "The one that best meets your needs," and "The place where you feel most comfortable shopping."

Probably the most common mistake people make in buying a bicycle is purchasing a mountain bike when they have no intention of ever setting tread to dirt.

Buying a bicycle is a complicated task due to the large number choices available, including type, brand, and price of bicycle and component groups. To give you an idea of the choices available, a bicycling buyer's guide narrowed the choices within the market to 198 different bicycles. The comprehensive website, www.bikezone.com, has listed a virtual alphabet soup of bicycle brand names, each of whom has multiple models.

Types of Bicycles

There are basically three categories of bicycles: road, hybrid, and mountain.

For people planning on doing extensive on-road club rides, especially in the A, B, and C pace categories, road bikes are your best bet. They will allow you to most effectively translate your pedaling energy into forward motion.

People doing slower-paced D and E rides tend to gravitate toward hybrid bikes, which offer slightly wider tires and seats, lower gearing for the hills, and an upright pedaling position.

If you plan on doing much off-road riding, a mountain bike is the way to go. On-road, the wide, knobby tires will really slow you down, so do not choose a mountain bicycle if you plan to mostly ride on the road.

Frames and Components

The next decision you need to make is type of frame material. Frames need to balance two somewhat contrary purposes: stiffness so your pedaling motions move the bicycle forward and not into flexing the frame, and compliance so that you do not feel every crack in the road as major jolt.

The four frame options are cro-moly steel, aluminum, carbon fiber, and titanium. There are strong feelings and discussions in bicycling circles as to the "best" frame material. All the materials offer their advantages and disadvantages. If you can afford the price, carbon fiber and titanium offer the best blend of stiffness and rideability.

Cro-moly frames tend to be a bit heavier than aluminum, but offer a softer ride. Especially if you are a heavier rider, you may find aluminum harsh and unforgiving. For bicycles priced less than \$1,000, frame choices will tend to be limited to these two materials. As with other choices, try both and see which you prefer.

The frame is yet one part of the bicycle. The components: gearing, brakes, wheels and tires are another critically important part. If you are buying a mountain bike, a front fork is yet another option. The components often can cost more than the frame itself. The prime manufacturers for brakes, shifters and wheelhubs are Shimano, SRAM, and Campagnolo.

Each manufacturer has different component groups, as they are called. Comparing component groups is complicated. Simply put and in general terms, the more money the group costs, the smoother it will operate, the lighter it will weigh, and the longer it will last.

Narrowing Your Choices

Before you set foot in the bike shop, you first need to do some homework. Deciding the type of riding you do or plan to do is the first step. After you have a type of bicycle in mind, you can better focus your energies within the shop.

Other helpful things to do include checking out other people's bicycles on rides. You may see someone else riding the type of bicycle you might like to own. If you ask them nicely, maybe they will let you take a spin around the parking lot.

You might also plan to do some research by reading a bicycle buyers guide. *Bicycling* magazine devotes its April issue to new bicycles. Throughout the year, *Bicycling* also tests bicycles and components. Back issues are available in most libraries if you cannot find what you want in the bookstore or bike shop.

You can also educate yourself by doing online research at the manufacturer's website. Due to the large volume of information available, this may prove to be more confusing than illuminating.

I highly recommend a stop at www.bikezone.com. Hosted by *Bicycling* magazine, this shop allows you to type in a manufacturer name and pull up a complete list of the company's products with details on specifications, including the list price.

Deciding on A Price Category

The most important step is visiting at least three bicycle shops to browse and test ride models from different manufacturers at different price levels. You may not plan to purchase the more expensive bicycle, but trying out its features can put into perspective what you plan to buy.

Focus less on the manufacturer's name and more on selecting the right bicycle for your needs. If you buy from a local bicycle shop, you can be assured that the bicycles they carry come from reputable manufacturers. To make sure that you will be buying a quality bicycle, stay away from department and general sporting good stores.

Comparing prices and features of bicycles in different shops can be nearly impossible. due to the way manufacturers mix and match component groups. One option some cyclists choose is purchasing a frame and selecting the individual components to complete their dream bicycle.

When deciding on a price category, you may wish to consider "buying up," i.e., spending more than you initially planned to spend. The rationale is that if you buy the less expensive bike, you may find it lacking in certain areas. Then you will find yourself going back a year or two later for the more expensive bike.

The idea to keep in mind is the incremental price difference between what you planned to spend and what that next level of bicycle costs. This means that instead of thinking, "Wow! \$1,000 is a lot of money for a bicycle," you could instead think, "Well, it's only \$200 more than I planned to spend."

Gearing and Fit

If you are buying a road bicycle, make sure the gearing you are choosing is appropriate for both your riding style and Connecticut's hilly terrain. Many cyclists choose to purchase a bicycle with a "triple," a frame that has three gear rings in the front, which provides lower gears that makes hill climbing less strenuous.

Buying from a shop where you feel comfortable with the staff is important. The staff should be friendly, helpful, and knowledgeable. Getting the right bike is far more important than paying a low price. You will probably be living with that bicycle for five years, so make sure it is one you are comfortable riding.

Be sure that the staff fits you to the bicycle. If one component does not fit you properly, ask about a swap. The shop may or may not charge you to install a different

seat or stem, for example, depending on whether there is a cost difference between the two components.

Remember: a bicycle is not a pair of shoes. Other than the seat, there is no break-in period for fit. If the bike does not fit you in the shop, or if you feel pain on a short test ride, the problem will only worsen on an extensive ride.

There is detailed information in magazines, books and website on fit. Become familiar with what is needed for proper fit before visiting the shop.

Pedal Options

One decision you will need to make is the type of pedal you buy. At a minimum, get pedals that have toe clips. These keep your foot on the pedal and help improve your efficiency. Stiff-bottomed cycling shoes are another way to translate more of your energy into forward motion.

You will see many cyclists using clipless pedals, which have shoes that latch into the pedals. These offer optimal efficiency, and, in some cases, the ability to walk like a duck at food stops. Making the jump to clipless pedals is a decision that can be made at any time, so if you are not comfortable now, you can always change your mind at a later time.

Be sure that everything is working well before you leave the shop: the fit is correct for your height, the tires are pumped to the proper pressure, all the gears work, the wheels are true, the brakes do not rub and they can effectively stop the bicycle. Expect the bicycle to need some adjustments in the first few weeks of riding.

For two reasons, riding a your brand-new bicycle on a club ride is not advised. You may need to stop and make minor adjustments along the way. You also need time to become familiar with the bike's shifting and braking without the pressure of trying to stay up with the group.

Special Tips for Mountain Bikes

An important decision you will need to make in purchasing a mountain bicycle is the type of suspension you would like: none, front fork, or full suspension.

The answer will depend on the type of riding you do. Is all you plan to ride is flat, groomed rail trails? Then you probably do not need a suspension. For moderate off-road riding, including some rough trails, a front shock will make a significant difference in comfort and handling. If you plan to ride aggressively or race, and can afford the price, a full suspension bike is the way to go.

Finishing Touches

As you look around the shop, you will see many potential accessories you may wish to buy. Wearing a helmet is essential for safety purposes. You may wish to invest in gloves to help absorb road shock and protect your hands in case of a fall.

Most club cyclists wear bicycling clothing, which includes padded shorts for comfort and a synthetic jersey to wick away perspiration. Unless you plan to carry a hydration pack like a Camelback, have the shop install two water bottle cages.

All cyclists should have a carrier bag on their bicycle to bring along a patch kit, tire removal levers, and a spare tube. You should also purchase a frame pump to inflate your tire in case you get a flat. Even if you do not know how to repair a flat, you should carry the necessary materials so someone else can do the job. A floor pump is the better way to inflate your tires before the ride.

Many cyclists have a computer on their bicycle, allowing them to keep track of how far and how fast they have ridden. Some cyclists wear heart rate monitors to keep track

of their workout. These monitors are usually worn by faster cyclists who are interested in improving their speed.