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COLUMN

Riding in the rain: Take care of yourself and bike

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Staff file photo

Bicycling through rain requires more caution but you see the scenery in a different way.

It's all anyone can talk about. The summer that wasn't. Fortunately, August is behaving nicely, but we'll always remember the summer of '09 as the Summer of Rain.

Were you one of the frustrated cyclists, eager to get on the road in May or June or July, thwarted again and again and again by rain?

I say let's not let the weather get the better of us. This is Maine, after all.

With that in mind, I asked two bike shop pros to share advice and tips on road-riding in the rain.

'MANAGE YOUR COMFORT'

Dave Palese, general manager of Gorham Bike and Ski in Portland, says the most important thing is to keep your core dry.

"Your goal," Palese says, "when riding in bad weather, is to manage your comfort. No matter what, you're going to get wet, but I've always said that it's better to be warm and wet than cold and dry. So as long as you're working and producing heat, being wet isn't bad.

"Wind is your biggest enemy with cycling. It takes away all of your warmth. So when you get wet, covering up to keep your core warm is really important."

Get a water repellent or waterproof jacket, and use the same clothing strategy as you would for all outdoor sports: layering. Choose a good base layer (remember: not cotton!), add insulation and cover with a shell.

No matter how fancy and expensive a jacket you get, water will get in from the outside. You'll also sweat and produce moisture from the inside, so be prepared for some level of discomfort. Tell yourself that it's just water. (It's just water.)

There are scores of other accessories you could consider, depending on your biking needs and goals.

Fenders keep your backside dry, and there are now some sweet clip-on lightweight fenders available for fancy road bikes as well as for hybrids and commuter bikes.

Neoprene gloves, helmet covers, shoe covers (heck, I used to just wear plastic bags over my socks, inside my shoes), and protective eyewear all can help keep you comfortable.

KEEP IT SAFE

While you're choosing that rain jacket, think "visibility." According to Davis Carver, owner of Bath Cycle and Ski in Woolwich, the No. 1 concern about riding in the rain is safety.

"Drivers just don't see as well," he says. "A driver can be sitting in a driveway, getting ready to pull out, look straight at you and just not see you."

Carver's strategy: Always assume that drivers don't see you and ride accordingly.

So put fashion concerns aside and choose a bright green or orange fluorescent jacket. Equip your bike with at least one, if not more, flashing lights.

RIDE FOR RAIN

Not only can drivers not see you, but you also can't see the road as well. Rain and wind stir up all the little thorns, bits of glass and nails on the road.

Carver says you are more likely to get a flat riding in bad weather, so be prepared for that.

Which camp are you in? Those who carry a cell phone and have a friend waiting? Or those who carry a pump, spare tube and tire levers and know how to use them?

If it hasn't rained in a while, oil builds up on the road. The first 15 minutes of rainfall are the most slippery and treacherous. According to Carver, after half an hour or so, the oils get washed away, so the start of a rain shower is the time to be at your most alert.

Wet railroad tracks and metal grates present special hazards. If possible, you should cross them at a 90-degree angle. If roads or traffic do not make this possible, says Carver, swallow your pride and get off the bike.

Also, pay special attention to painted lines and other traffic paint on the road. Did you know those sections are slicker?

If you see a section like that ahead, you'll want to brake sooner. In general, early and frequent braking is a good idea. Carver says there's always a little water build-up on the rims, so every now and then you should give the brakes a light squeeze to squeeze off the water.

Palese concurs, adding that road grit, grease and oil also get onto the rim with the water, so your braking time increases.

BE GOOD TO YOUR BIKE

Speaking of road grit and grease, you'll notice that your bike is filthy after a ride in the rain.

Palese advises, "After riding in the rain, spray your bike down from top to bottom with the garden hose and get all the stuff off. If you can do a really good drive-train cleaning, all the better."

But don't get too carried away. He cautions, "Once your bike dries and the water evaporates, don't take a rag to it to take off the remaining sand and dirt – that will take off the clear coat and dull the finish on your bike."

Palese also advises the use of wet lube for your chain and gears. "If you have long stretches of bad weather, like this spring and June, use a wet lube. Then if and when the weather clears, you can switch to a dry wax lube."

Wet lubricants, as they are called, are petroleum-based and tend to stay on longer and make your bike run smoother. They are also much messier. Dry lube is usually wax- or Teflon-based and you have to use it more frequently.

EMBRACE THE WEATHER

When all is said and done, attitude is everything. Assuming it's safe, you can be prepared to ride in any weather.

Palese turns positively lyrical when talking about riding in what some might consider bad weather.

"Sometimes the world is at its prettiest when it's overcast and cloudy. Flowers and trees are more vibrant, a stand of trees has more layers to them. You just see things in a different way on those foggy, misty days. Just be prepared for what those kinds of days can throw at you."

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