

Buying your first road bike

by Carol Waaser

So you walk into a bike shop and you say, “I want to buy a road bike.” What do you expect to happen next?

I would expect the shop clerk to start asking you questions. If he or she doesn't ask you a few basic questions, but just starts showing you bikes, you're probably in the wrong shop.

So the first thing you want to do is answer some of those questions for yourself, before you even go to a shop.

What do you want to do on your bike? How do you want to use it? How would you describe what kind of riding you want to do? Because that's the first question the shop should ask you.

What's your budget and what can you get for it? When you first talk to the shop, you'll want to start a little lower than you're really willing to go so there's room for the shop to nudge you up a step. And remember, there are always extras that don't come included with the bike: clipless pedals, the right seat, seat bag, spare tubes, tools, pump, bottle cages, helmet, shoes (if you don't already have them).

Appendix A is an outline of the questions you need to answer before you start shopping for a bike. You may not know the answers to all these questions, but you should think about them.

Should you go to a bike shop, or is it okay to buy online? I strongly suggest that for your first bike you go to a local bike shop. You want to make sure the bike fits you properly, and you want to establish a relationship with a local shop that can take care of your maintenance and repair needs.

Find a shop you're comfortable with. They should be willing to spend time with you, answer your questions, and make recommendations without pushing an expensive product.

The shop should be willing to swap out certain parts at little or no cost to make the bike work for you – handlebar (width), stem (length) seat post (setback).

How do you find a good shop? You should go to several different shops early in the process. You want to find a shop you're comfortable with, that you think will always give you good service and that's convenient enough for you to get to if something goes wrong with the bike.

- a) Ask if you can speak with someone about buying a new bike. If the shop is very busy, ask if you can make an appointment when someone can spend a little time with you.
- b) Ask what brands the store sells
- c) Discuss what type of riding you want to do and what type of bike you think you want to buy. Also discuss your budget. Name a figure that's "in the neighborhood" of what you're willing to spend, but keep that figure several hundred below your absolute top.
- d) The salesperson should ask you some questions to determine what's the right bike for you.
- e) Be honest and say you're looking around, but that you're going to buy when you find the right bike.
- f) Ask if the shop will let you test ride various bikes. Ask how they do their fittings. Ask if they're willing to switch out some parts (such as stem and seatpost) to make a bike fit you perfectly. Ask what their maintenance, tune-up and repair policy is. (Many shops offer a first year free tune-up.)

As you go to different shops, find the one or two where you feel most comfortable. Are they willing to spend a little time with you? Do they seem to understand what kind of rider you are (as opposed to trying to sell you a bike they have in stock)? Are they willing to work with you?

Do a little research before you start to shop. Here are some things to think about:

There are several different types of **frames**, specific to different types of riding:

- g) Racer – lighter weight, aggressive geometry, stiff. For racing.
- h) Road Bike (Plush, Recreational) – less aggressive geometry, less harsh. For club rides. Can be used for light credit card touring.
- i) Women's Specific Design (WSD) – shorter cockpit, better geometry for most women.
- j) Touring – more relaxed geometry, longer wheel base, braze-ons for racks & fenders and possibly an extra bottle cage. More solidly built, so heavier; wheels are heavier with more spokes, wider tires; and frame made of steel or titanium – never carbon or aluminum. For touring, can be used on club rides, but likely to be slower on the climbs.
- k) Tri bike – very aggressive geometry, not good for club rides (and you can't use tri bars on a club ride).

What about **frame materials**?

- a) Carbon – light weight, "cool" factor; but in a crash it's toast. Probably not right for your first road bike, but plan for it down the road.

- b) Aluminum – lightweight, less expensive frames can be stiff & harsh (but less so now than a few years ago); if damaged (bent or seriously dinged) in a crash it's toast. However, this is probably what you'll get for your first bike – it's the most common material for less expensive road bikes.
- c) Steel – a little heavier, but more compliant, a comfortable ride, can be repaired. It's actually harder to find a steel bike these days unless you go custom but Bianchi and Jamis and a few other companies still make stock steel road and touring frames. If you want a touring bike, go for steel.
- d) Titanium – very similar to steel in terms of comfort and ride feel, but doesn't corrode. It can be repaired but it's harder to weld than steel. If you ride in all kinds of weather or on roads that are salted in winter or you live right by the ocean where your bike might be subjected to salt spray, titanium might be your perfect frame material...if you can afford it.
- e) Bamboo – no comment
- f) Butted tubes – this refers to variable thickness of the wall of the frame tubes. A butted tube has walls that are thinner in the middle and thicker where it joins with another tube. The thicker wall provides necessary strength at the stress point, but thinning the walls along the length of the tube shaves weight off the frame and allows the ride feel to be “tuned” (stiffer or more compliant).
- g) Stiffness – many bikes are touted as being stiff; they jump when you stomp on the pedals; power transfer is good. These bikes are primarily for racing. They aren't necessarily comfortable for long club rides.

What are **components** and what type should you get? Components are all the things that get attached to the frame: the drivetrain (bottom bracket, crankset, chain rings, front derailleur, rear derailleur, cogset, chain, and brake/shift levers), the brakes, cables, hubs, wheels, headset and stem. On high-end bikes, often the components (at least the drivetrain) are matched from one company and known as a “grupo.” On low end bikes, the components usually are mix-and-match with some of the drive train being low-end brand name and the rest of the components being no-name. The more expensive the components, the lighter they are and the smoother they feel shifting and braking.

The three major component brands are:

- a) Shimano – widest gear choices; now have women's specific hoods. At the top end, electronic shifting. In order from least expensive to most expensive: 2200, 2300, Sora, Tiagra, 105, Ultegra, DuraAce.
- b) Campagnolo – “cool” factor, easy to trim front derailleur, smaller hoods, narrower choice of gears. Also has electronic shifting at the top end. More expensive than Shimano or SRAM. In order from least expensive to most expensive: Veloce, Centaur, Athena, Chorus, Record, Super Record.

- c) SRAM – newer system, double tap shifting, double chain ring paired with a mountain cassette to provide wider gear range, option for smaller hands. In order from least expensive to most expensive: Apex, Rival, Force, Red.

Wheels are pretty stock items. You take what comes on the bike. Later, you may decide to upgrade. The lighter the wheel, the faster it accelerates. Deep rim wheels are more aerodynamic but may not handle as well in a cross wind.

- a) Spoke count – road: 24, 32; touring: 36.
- b) Fancy spokes (e.g., flat blade) – not always easy to replace if one breaks.
- c) Box rim – sturdy; medium aero rim – good for club rides; deep rim – maybe for racing.
- d) Rim size: standard road wheels have 700c rims. Small frames (46cm & under) often come with 650c rims, but this has far fewer tire choices. Hybrid bikes sometimes come with 700c, sometimes with 27 inch. Make sure you get the right tire for your wheel size. Although a 700c tube is interchangeable with a 27” tube, a 700c tire is not interchangeable with a 27 inch tire.
- e) Tire width: 23cm or 25cm for road bikes; 25, 28 or 32cm for touring.
- f) Valve type: road bikes come fitted for Presta valves. Schrader valves generally come on mountain bikes and some hybrid or city bikes. They are not interchangeable. Make sure you buy spare tubes with the correct valve type.
- g) Get tubes that fit your tire & rim. Make sure the valve stem is long enough for your rim. They come in 36mm, 48mm, and 60mm. The 36mm usually fit box rims; the 48mm fit medium aero rims (but can also be used with a box rim); the 60mm fit deep rims and can be used with a medium aero rim.

Pedals and shoes. If you’re serious about cycling, you will get a clipless pedal system. Do not be intimidated by this. Ask the bike shop if they’ll let you put the bike on a trainer for 15 minutes so you can practice clipping in and out before you take the bike out of the shop. A clipless system gives you a major advantage, particularly in climbing, because you can apply power throughout the entire pedal stroke. If you absolutely can’t go with clipless, then at least get pedals with a good pair of toe clips.

- a) Road shoes vs. mountain shoes. Mountain shoes are easier to walk in, even with cleats on the bottom; road shoes require cleat covers. Road shoes are generally lighter. In either case, you want a good stiff sole that transfers power directly to the pedal. Less expensive shoes come with a hard rubber (or compound) sole or plastic. Expensive shoes have a carbon sole. Get shoes that fit, with a little room to allow your feet to expand, which they will as you ride. Modern shoes have fastening systems that can be adjusted on the fly, so you can loosen the shoe a bit if your feet swell. Let the shop put the cleats on the

shoes for you and do a fitting. Cleat position can be adjusted and it may take a while for you to determine the best cleat position for you.

- b) Float – This refers to how far your foot can swivel while clipped in; this is important for aligning knees while pedaling. If your knees don't track in a straight line, it will be important for you to have more float.
- c) Shims can be placed under the cleat to help knees track better.

Fit is most important thing about buying a new bike

- a) The shop should do thorough fit (for free) if you're buying the bike there.
- b) Fit specialists will do a thorough fit, but charge you \$150-400.
- c) Good position is important, but you have to be comfortable. Don't let a shop tell you that you'll adapt to the fit as you get more flexible. Bike should fit you now but be able to be tweaked as you get more flexible. If you're not comfortable on the bike, you won't enjoy riding.

Gearing is the second most important thing

- a) Several factors determine the appropriate gearing for you: age, fitness level, knees, terrain, type of riding you want to do. You want low enough gears to get you up long and/or steep hills without strain. If you're young and strong and willing to train, you can suffer without really low gears for a couple of months until you build strength and form. In that case a compact double chainring (34-50) with an 11-25 or 12-26 cassette will keep you very happy. But if you're just starting out and you think you'll be doing B or C rides, you want a compact double with a cassette that goes up to at least a 28 tooth large cog, but preferably a 32 tooth cog, or you may want to get a triple chainring (harder to find these days, but can be done).
- b) The bigger chainring = harder pedaling, faster speed. The smaller chainring = easier pedaling, slower speed. It's the opposite in back. The smaller cogs = harder pedaling, faster speed. The bigger cog = easier pedaling, slower speed.

Bling or cool factor – down the list of importance, but not to be overlooked. Get a bike that you love, that you'll want to ride, that other people will look at and say "Nice bike." Because, after all, you want to want to ride the bike and a cool bike begs to be ridden!

Appendix A

Questions to ask yourself before you start to shop for a bike.

1. What do I want to do on my bike?
 - a. Do easy club rides, enjoying the scenery and good company
 - b. Do club rides, building my strength so I can do longer, faster rides
 - c. Race my bike or do triathlons
 - d. Do club rides and also do some light touring, a few days at a time, staying in motels & inns
 - e. Do serious touring, ten days or longer at a time, camping
 - f. I don't know

2. What's my realistic budget?
 - a. Under \$1,000 – aluminum, inexpensive non-brand components, not ideal gearing.
 - b. \$1,000-1,500 – aluminum, lower-end brand components, appropriate gearing is possible
 - c. \$1,500-2,000 – aluminum (possibly lower-end carbon), low to mid-level brand components, wider choice of gearing
 - d. \$2,000-\$3,500 – aluminum, carbon or titanium, mid to upper-level brand components, wider choice of gearing

3. Am I particular about the frame material? Do I really need/want a very light weight bike or a stiff bike or do I care more about durability, comfort?

4. What kind of gearing do I think I need?
 - a. How strong am I now?
 - b. How much am I planning to (willing to) train?
 - c. How hilly is the terrain I'll be riding?
 - d. Am I willing to struggle some while I learn how to climb and build a better power to weight ratio?
 - e. Do I need high gears and narrow range? (Am I planning to do A rides where I have to keep a pace of 20-23 on flat terrain and always have the right gear for a fast cadence?)
 - f. Do I need a wider range of gears because I'm more interested in being comfortable and not straining while I ride, and I'm not intending to train for speed.

5. How important is it for me to build a relationship with a shop that's geographically accessible? Can I do my own maintenance or will I always want a shop to do it?

6. When you're well into discussions with a shop, ask them these questions:
 - a. What's your first year maintenance package? Do you make necessary adjustments free of charge? Do you have a discount on tune-ups for bikes purchased here?
 - b. Are you willing to switch out parts at no charge (for comparable parts) at the time of purchase to make the bike fit right? (May not be necessary, but just in case...)
 - c. Do you have test saddles you loan out for people to try?
 - d. [If this is your first time with clipless pedals and/or road shifters] when the bike arrives, will you put it on a trainer and let me work on it for 20 or 30 minutes so I can get used to the pedals and/or shifters? (The shop should put it on a trainer first, in any case, to check the fit and your position on the bike.)

Appendix B

Bikes to look at if you're not racing. (These were the 2012 model names. Some model names may have changed, but each manufacturer will have an equivalent model.)

- a) Trek Sport models (2 & 1 Series) Aluminum, compact double or triple crank, 10-speed wide range cassette; price range: \$1,200 - \$1,750.
- b) Trek Lexa Series (Women's Specific Design) Aluminum, compact triple crank, 9 or 10-speed wide range cassette; price range: \$960 - \$1,380.
- c) Trek Madone Series: Carbon, compact double, 10-speed wide range cassette; price range around \$2,000.
- d) Specialized Secteur Series. Aluminum, compact double or triple crank, 9 or 10-speed, slightly wider tires, zertz inserts, adjustable stem; price range \$1,100 - \$1,800.
- e) Specialized Dolce Series (WSD). Aluminum, various double/triple, 9/10-speed combinations, slightly wider tires, zertz inserts, adjustable stem; price range \$1,100 - \$1,800.
- f) Specialized Roubaix Series & Ruby Series (WSD). Carbon, compact double, 10-speed wide range cassette, zertz inserts; price range \$2,000 and up. (some Ruby have compact triple)
- g) Cannondale CAAD8 Series. Aluminum, compact double or triple, 9 or 10-speed (not so wide range); price range \$940 - \$1,440.
- h) Cannondale CAAD10 Series. Aluminum, double or compact double, 10-speed (but not wide range); price range \$1,670 - \$3,650. (also WSD series)
- i) Cannondale SuperSix Series. Carbon, compact crank, 10-speed (not wide range, but might be able to change out); price range \$2,220 - \$5,000 (also WSD series)
- j) Felt ZW (Women's) Series. Aluminum or Carbon, compact double, 10-speed (mostly to 28, one to 30); price range \$900 - \$5,000.
- k) Felt Z Series. Aluminum or Carbon, compact double, 10-speed cassette (some up to 30); price range \$1,250 - \$3,200.
- l) Fuji Sport Road Series. Aluminum, compact triple, 9 or 10-speed cassette, wider tires; price range \$980 - \$1,180.