



## **DOIN' YOUR 'CROSS HOMEWORK: How a little race-day studying can drastically improve your results** *By Kenneth Lundgren*

### **INTRO**

Cyclo-cross appeals to many because of the various elements involved: the training, the variety of course terrain, the skills involved to tackle this terrain. What's not discussed as much, yet is no less interesting, is the homework you do the hours before your race. This all-important pre-race investigation can make the difference between an average, a good, a great, and a *winning* ride. While each racer might approach their homework a little differently, I'd like to share how I prepare for the test on race-day.

### **TAKE A STROLL**

To begin, I get to the race at *least* two hours ahead of time. Meal-wise, I eat breakfast at least three hours ahead of my start time. I get to the race, register, and before I do anything else, I walk the course: just walk the tape as other races are going on.

Watch these riders. Look for the leaders. Watch their lines. Look at the course and try to understand how they're going so much faster through the more technical parts. Then watch the riders who are mid-pack and understand the difference between the two: maybe it's how they set up for the turns or off-cambers, or the line they take, but there definitely will be a difference between the leaders and the riders behind. If I can discern that difference, my ride will be better. When I walk the course, I can see what's causing riders trouble, too, and commit these parts of the course to memory.

Typically, I can walk a course in about 15 minutes—so if I'm there early enough, I walk the course twice. I take in every detail—try this and you'll be surprised how differently the course will appear. I make mental notes where people are bobbling, where terrain looks tricky—where there's a root or slippery dirt section, where the gnarly off-camber sections are. I can see how different riders approach and take the run-up, how they time their dismounts, how they're shouldering the bike. You can learn so much from watching these riders blow by, even riders who are slower than you. By watching others, you understand the dynamic of the course.

These keen observations as I walk the course are very important, because when I'm out there racing, or even during the pre-ride, many times I get caught just following that wheel in front of me, not thinking about alternative lines. Sometimes there's "the line," that I've seen riders take, and sometimes there's a faster line that I won't see until I ride the turn myself.

So when I pre-ride, I prefer to go alone. I get in the zone and try to burn all the course's nooks and crannies to memory. When I get to a turn that I have to brake through, I try to ride the same section three or four times to find my best line. Is it faster to stay wide all the way through a turn instead of hitting the apex? I try to find what works for me on a section of the course and maximize it. Success in cyclo-cross is about doing these million tiny things correctly and minimizing mistakes.

It often doesn't matter how others ride the fastest through tricky sections—what matters most is how *you* can get through these sections as quickly as possible. Absorb how others take these lines during your walk, then try these lines yourself. Sometimes they work, sometimes they don't—but figure all of this out an hour before you even start racing. Maybe some guys are *really* good at off-cambers, can stay loose and just let the bike go through the turn, but maybe you're faster putting a foot out and tripodding here—even if no one else is doing it. So keep tripodding and maybe, with enough confidence, in later laps you'll start railing the turn with both feet clipped in.

The more you analyze the top riders and see how they approach and tackle technical spots on the course, the more you will start to emulate what they do. If you can't do it now, that doesn't mean you won't be able to in two months. During these pre-rides, you really do start to develop that 'cross brain. Some of the best riders take lines that aren't typically "the line." By observing them as you walk, you gain an understanding of what they see that the other 90 percent didn't. You'll start to pick up on these small details—and in the end, all these small details add up to big improvements in your race.

### **ON-THE-BIKE RECON**

After I've analyzed the course from a walking perspective, I take the first lap *very* slowly: no stops, just absorbing everything the course has to offer. I see how what I observed while walking translates to my perspective on the bike. At slower speeds, you can really see what's going on.

After this first lap, I ride the course again, still slowly, but doing plenty of redos on the most challenging sections. I will try two or three different lines. Once I figure out what seems best, I'll pick up speed and try these lines out again.

This process, breaking the course down into its parts, really helps me get in tune with the terrain and ride it more effectively. Before the race starts, I already know the course better than my competition. In the race, I might be forced to take three different lines through a section—by pre-riding, I've already done them. Instead of questioning, braking, backing off, I bomb through it and pass riders and make up time that could lead to a much better result in the end—all because of diligent recon.

With each lap, I'll also go to the pump and change tire pressure, seeing what seems to hook up best. After two or three laps, I have a sense of what pressure seems to be working best for me.

### **KNOW YOUR CORNERS**

I can't stress enough how important it is to pre-ride the entire course, not just focus on technical sections. Even the straightaways are important, because you take great speed into the turn at the end, and you need to find the speed that's just right. Many times, it's better to go slower than you'd initially think into these turns, then smoothly accelerate or carve out.

These are the things that need to be established during your pre-ride. The easy sections of the course can be misleading. Just because you can pedal at 30 mph up to a corner doesn't necessarily mean that's the fastest way through it. Your recon laps are where you can find out which sections you can really rip and which ones require you to slow down.

If you can get your braking down ahead of time, you can just flow through the corner, as opposed to going, "Oh shit, I gotta hit my brakes now!" You always want to get your braking completed before you get to a corner. Ideally, you want to be accelerating through or out of the corner, and you lose that dynamic when you brake. And it's when you brake, when you try to re-adjust your line, when the bike changes speeds, that the treads potentially skid and you lose traction.

A friend of mine crashed at a USGP during the practice laps because he didn't walk the course or ride it slowly first. He started doing hot laps immediately and approached a straightaway that was fast and pan flat, but unbeknownst to him was very greasy. At speed his wheels slipped out from under him and he fell and broke his rib—season over, and during the warm-up! And he's a Cat-1 and former winner of the MAC series, a very good rider.

After my easy laps, I like to do one or two "hotter" laps, at tempo pace, opening the legs nicely. This routine makes for an ideal warm-up for the body, also. Do this, and you have your mind *and* body in a great place just before the race begins.

### **GO IT ALONE**

When I'm racing, I try to never follow wheels. I just look ahead and race my own race. In road racing, you always track your eyes ahead, no matter if it's a hilly road race or a twisty crit. Where your eyes go, you go. In 'cross, it's the same principle. You never want to stare down at the wheel in front of you and follow it—because who the hell is this guy in front of you? He might be taking a crappy line and screw you up—and if you've pre-ridden the course, you'll immediately see this guy maybe isn't on the best line, and you'll confidently know that you're doing the right thing by following your own path.

### **WHEN YOU'RE PREPARED, YOU'RE RELAXED**

The pre-ride also has another important benefit: as you get a feel for the course, your body loosens up. Staying relaxed and not tightening up often gives 'crossers the ability to tackle treacherous terrain. When you get tight, nervous, and stiff, the bike won't do what you want it to do. When you tense up, you usually hit the brakes, bouncing, slipping, losing traction, and you

lose the ability to shock-absorb with your body. That's when you make mistakes, don't see the line properly, and crash. But when you're loose and confident, you will let the bike roll smoothly, and you'll be amazed at how much traction is possible.

The best riders are using the corners and the technical sections to go faster than everyone else. Many times, they can bomb through these sections, recovering where the less-technically-savvy rider will have to hammer. And they'll still go 15 seconds faster than them per lap as the race progresses.

The pros are efficient because they know where they can back it off a peg or two. On these straights, where more "roadie-ish" riders have to hammer, the better 'cross riders can back off, knowing they're going to open gaps on all the turns in the course. And they can confidently race this way because they've pre-ridden the course and have analyzed it thoroughly and appropriately.

The pre-ride is just as important as your intervals, just as important as your diet, just as important as your recovery. The best riders do this type of homework. If you want to beat your competition, you need to do what they won't, going the extra step and really trying to understand every detail of the course and knowing why you're hitting these sections the way you do.

Your method might be slightly different from mine, but as long as you are out there looking, analyzing, trying different lines—in short, being "pro" by doing your homework—I guarantee you that you're 'cross grade will improve dramatically.



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