

Subject: 2010 BP MS150 Training Series - Focus Note 1 - Winter Wear

From: "Moskowitz, Steve E." <Steve.E.Moskowitz@conocophillips.com>

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CC: Apache - Lisa Nutting <lisa.nutting@apachecorp.com>, "Band Against MS - Aaron Jacks" <aaronjacks@gmail.com>, Band Against MS - Hilary Trammell <Hilary.Trammell@mustangeng.com>, BP - Critz Cullen <critz.cullen@gmail.com>, BP - Eric Cioti <eric.cioti@bp.com>, BP - Todd Hauser <todd.hauser@bp.com>, CGGVeritas - Jesse Rivera <Jesse.Rivera@cggveritas.com>, "CGGVeritas - Machel Warrick-Brazile" <Machelle.Warrick-Brazile@cggveritas.com>, CGGVeritas - Pamela Ray <Pamela.Ray@cggveritas.com>, "ConocoPhillips - Steve Moskowitz" <moskose@swbell.net>, Consolidated Graphics - Kelly Butts <kbutts@groverprinting.com>, El Paso - Greg Schindler <Gregory.Schindler@elpaso.com>, Granite - Mary Butler <MButler@graniteprop.com>, Houstonian - Lisa Rainey <rainey.lisa@corp.sysco.com>, HP - Cara Baez <cara.baez@hp.com>, "HP - Jacob Hernandez" <jbenh@hotmail.com>, HP - Kenneth Berntsen <kenneth.berntsen@hp.com>, IBM - David Olson <david.olson@us.ibm.com>, "ION - Erin King" <erin.king@iongeo.com>, Kroger - Craig Winkler <craig.winkler@kroger.com>, Lime Rock - Lori Jordan <ljordan@limerockresources.com>, Marathon - Alison McCaslin <almccaslin@MarathonOil.com>, National Oilwell Varco - Jason Bozic <Jason.Bozic@nov.com>, National Oilwell Varco - Thomas Downey <Thomas.Downey@nov.com>, Shell - Afif Halal <A.Halal@shell.com>, "Shell - Chris Holan" <chris.holan@shell.com>, "St Catherine's Montessori - Chuck D'Angelo" <cdangelo@ix.netcom.com>, Sun & Ski Sports - Natalie Moreno <nmoreno@retailconcepts.cc>, Susman Godfrey - Trey Peacock <tpeacock@susmangodfrey.com>, Team DODI - Evan Jones <ej4311@gmail.com>, "Team DODI - Neil Hall" <nhall@dodi.com>, "Texas Children's Hospital - Jill Simon" <jksimon@texaschildrenshospital.org>, WellFit Group - Mark LeBlanc <mleblanc@thewellfitgroup.com>

Good evening! Here comes the first of the Focus Notes I promised...

We have seen some pretty cold weather the last few days and there are some other events coming up real soon that mean that it's time for the Winter Wear note. This was our third focus note last year but the current cold weather brought this subject to the top of the hot topics list!

OK, I know that I've already piqued your curiosity so I'll answer the question: "What are those events that are coming up?" The answer is two big events, right here in town where you can find a lot of good winter wear at great prices. These events are:

- Jan 15/16 - Marathon Expo - Geo R. Brown Convention Center - This is for a running event but many of the base layers, top layers, tights, etc that are mentioned below are available at the expo. You won't find all the cycling clothes you need but you will find some good buys on some so, after you read the note below, you may want to head down this Friday or Saturday. The other appeal at the expo is the free samples of red beans & rice, energy bars, sports drinks, etc. This is a good chance to try some of the new products and note which ones you may want to try as you ride.

- Jan 22/23 - Sun & Ski BIG Sale & Bike University - The sale is at all locations but the university classes are at the 6100 Westheimer location - approx 2.5 miles west of the Galleria. There is a big sale associated with the Bike U and remember, the store is named Sun & **SKI** so they have quite a bit of great cold weather wear in areas besides the bike shop... I will be making presentations about training for the MS150 at the Westheimer store on Friday, Jan 22 - more details will be coming on the timing. Please feel free to drop by and I'll even have some time to answer questions or consult on critical color matters - more on that later!-)

OK, now let me share a bit of personal experience tempered with feedback many of you have shared about how to stay warm while riding on cold days...

2010 Winter Wear

Two years ago, I pointed out a significant life milestone that had occurred - **I hit the big five-oh**. That is to say, I was working in my closet and counted 50 cycling jerseys! Of course, when I reported this milestone to my wife, she promptly made me move about 20 of the jerseys into an upstairs closet so she would have more room! This led me to consider (and reorganize) all my cycling clothes which led to a trip to Target to get some of those stacking plastic drawers and eventually, to this long note about how to dress for riding in cold weather.

I have updated this note for 2010 - I have accumulated quite a bit of cycling clothing over 18 years. Each year, I do add a few articles to the mix so I have changed some of my favorites and recommendations. So go find a warm/cozy spot and read on...

Today's topic answers a question several new riders asked me. **"I'm a new rider, what should I get to help stay warm when it's cold outside?"** (Disclaimer - The rest of this note is all based on personal experience. There is no scientific method or any method to my madness - just sharing what has worked for me...)

First of all, what you DON'T want to do is get a heavy pillow to throw over your alarm clock on cold mornings!

So, how do you cope with the cool weather? The key concept is to dress in layers. In Houston's mild climate 2-3 layers is the most you should ever need as long as you learn your comfort level and keep a few favorite good cold weather clothes handy.

Layering has several benefits - You can use lightweight layers so your clothing is not heavy - 2-3 layers plus the air in between makes a very effective insulation system - Key benefit - you can adjust your layers as you warm up

One related cold weather rule - if you are comfortable when we start, you WILL overheat unless you have layers you can unzip and/or stop and shed as you warm up.

I'm going to break this down into vertical groupings from toe to head but first, I'm going to mention the items that I have gotten the most use out of - my "Top 3". Those of you with short attention spans can quit after this and go stock up...

1 - **Gore Windstopper Jacket (& Shell)**

This has been my favorite, most used, cool weather item - I also run in the shell a lot. Windstopper fabric is a lot more reasonably priced than full Gore-Tex, breathes as well and is said to be slightly less waterproof but I can't tell the difference. A couple of years ago, I got a second cycling specific Windstopper jacket and it has displaced the shell as my top pick. It is more fitted and has long sleeves that can zip off so it is very flexible for riding and doesn't flap in the wind. On the other hand, the new jacket is gray and black which clearly doesn't match much whereas the reliable old shell is purple and we all know that purple goes w/ just about anything...at least in my closet... On the other hand, whenever I wear the new jacket, no one recognizes me!-)

Both Windstopper tops keep me warm but don't let me get too hot (they unzip). I can't say enough good things about new Gore fabric technology!

You should be able to find some locally - it's worth trying on to confirm the fit - bring your proposed inner layers to test the entire combination. My purple shell is a running shell and it came from the marathon expo many years ago. The new Gore jacket came from a bike shop. Both are excellent - very highly rated for the wind/waterproof aspects and great comfort level - cold, wet or both!

2 - **Smart Wool "Base layer" long sleeve top**

Remember the layering concept - the base layer is as critical as the outer layer. This can be worn under a shell or under a jersey. It is definitely worth the modest additional investment to get a good fabric here - it wicks your body moisture away - Stays warm and relatively dry against your skin - I'm not a fabric expert, I try these on - this is an item you want to try on to see what feels good to you.

I have been using the high tech fabric base layers and still like them but two years ago, Marc Davis, 1/2 of the sometimes famous Davis Brothers, told me about the Smart Wool shirt he had to get in Oregon when the ride temps were so cold. I had tried a plain wool base jersey but it seemed itchy to me. The Smart Wool, on the other hand is WONDERFUL! The company uses a very fine fiber and does some magic because it is not scratchy, keeps you warm, wicks perspiration pretty effectively, doesn't overheat, and doesn't develop odors - this can happen with some of the tech fabrics.

It was quite cool out (with a headwind) as we headed off to Austin on Sunday the past two years. My Smart Wool top under a jersey was perfect. It was smart enough to keep me warm in the early morning but also smart enough to keep me comfortable as the day warmed up. I wore it all the way to the last rest stop and slipped it in a back pocket for the final stretch.

My Smartwool base is the first layer that goes on when it's cool enough for layers. When combined with a good shell and long or short sleeve jersey for the middle layer, you can handle any Houston weather.

You may need to look around to find the Smart Wool items but it's worth the search!

3 - Good pair of full finger gloves

There are many styles so, if possible, head to the local bike shops to look and try several on. This is a cycling specialty item (I've never found good ones at the Marathon Expo). My most used pair has a Gore liner (waterproof, & breathe) and big "cuffs" that can fit over the sleeves on my jacket. I also have a pair of funky "convertible" gloves that have a full thumb and open fingers. They also have a mitten-like cover that can go over all four fingers or fold back so your fingers are exposed when the day warms up. I usually combine these with a pair of light weight liners for really cold days. I will bring these to the Sun & Ski Bike U on Jan 22 as they are hard to describe but quite effective and flexible.

I always keep these in my bike bag until the weather warms up (March) but I only wear them if it's 40 or below or cool and possibility of rain. Cool hands don't bother me but cold & wet is not fun!

OK, that's my "Top 3" and I'm sticking to it! Note that all these are upper body items. I'm not an expert but suspect that's because your legs stay warmer from the constant pedaling effort. If you ride at a more casual pace, you may want some leg protection in your top 3 - there is not a right/wrong answer here.

Now, more musings about the various components starting from the bottom up...

Feet

My feet seem less sensitive to getting cold than some of you but I do have a few items which I do appreciate for really cold rides:

- Wool socks - Definitely worth buying at least one pair, they do stay warm and dry. Of course, I added a pair of Smart Wool socks to my wardrobe and again, they are the most used but my feet don't notice the wool itch as much as my upper body did so any form of wool helps keep your feet warm.

- Insulated "booties" - This is a small insulated cover that slips over the front half of your shoe. They are MUCH easier to get on/off than the full boots and keep my feet very cozy unless it's really wet. These plus wool socks covers 95+% of my cool ride needs.

- Full cover insulated boots - If it's really cold and wet, these make the ride a LOT more pleasant - I rarely use mine but have a pair just in case...

Legs

For many years, I just put a pair of my running tights on over my cycling shorts and that worked fine. The benefits were less cost, lighter weight and many colors to choose from (more on this later, much later...)

Two years ago, I finally broke down and got a pair of insulated, full length biking tights with a chamois liner. I wore them for the first time on a 38 degree day rising to low 50's. I really enjoyed them and I never noticed my legs being cold early or warm later in the ride. This is still fairly low on my priority list but worth it if you have all the other layers covered. After our cold wet New Ulm ride, I also have a 2nd pair with a waterproof lining in the front only. They are quite effective in keeping your legs warm & dry on a cold/wet day.

Other leggings in my drawer

: - Leg warmers - these extend from the knees to your ankles and are worn on cool days with shorts and usually removed after it warms up. I very rarely use these - if it's cold, I prefer full tights - you may like this option for cool, but warming weather

- Waterproof leg covers (wear over tights) I've had these for 3 years and never worn them - even at New Ulm in 2007 (mid 40's when the rain came), my legs were fine w/ tights. I suspect that if it's cold and raining hard enough to appreciate these, we'd wimp out and call off the ride!

Upper Body

As you can tell, I've collected quite a few base layer tops and two Windstopper shells over the years and these have got a LOT of miles on them. My base layer tops vary from pretty light to fairly heavy and I select based on the temperature, top layer and color (on milder days when this layer will be exposed). I have never needed more than three layers in the Houston weather. I will be wearing three layers this Saturday for the safety training.

Other items I've added recently

- Light, water resistant shell - You've probably seen these, many are very bright yellow (mine is). They are quite good to have on mild days as they can easily fit in a back pocket as you warm up. I might use mine a lot more if I didn't have the Windstopper shell all these years. Ideal for cool, but not cold days.

Arms/Hands

First my arms. I have a light and medium weight pair of arm warmers. I use these when it's sunny and the temps are in the low 50's at the start. They keep your arms warm but give you the flexibility to slip them off as the day warms up. **(2009 Update)** I finally broke down and got three pairs of color coordinated arm warmers to my collection since these are usually worn with a short sleeve jersey. It was an end of the season deal (\$5/pair).

As for my hands, I have three scenarios:

- Normal - 50 degrees and up - normal open finger bike gloves
- Cool - 40's - Light finger gloves w/ bike gloves over. These usually come off at a rest stop
- Cold - 30's or cooler - My Gore lined gloves or my convertible gloves/mittens as noted in my Top 3 above.

I have an old pair of Gore-Tex mittens that I will wear over my gloves before the ride if it's really cold.

These are not good for riding but the Gore-Tex mitten keeps my hands quite toasty until I need to slip them off to ride and they are very small/light so they easily fit into a back pocket.

Head

I have several really heavy duty head/face covers in the drawer but these were all acquired for bicycle commuting purposes.

I like to associate cycling with pleasure so I calculate that if it's cold enough to need my insulated balaclava (or is it baklava?), the pleasure association has gone out of the window - not to mention the dork factor! I must confess that these heavy head covers have helped make a few really cold, wettish commutes reasonably plush but in the 13 years I've have the balaclava, this has only happened on 3-5 commutes.

I don't put on my head cover unless it's 45 or below. I have a fairly light head cover for cool days and a heavier, stretchy cover incl ears. The heavier cover makes it hard to hear so I only pull it out below 35 degrees.

Bike Bag

No, I don't wear my bike bag but this has become an incredibly useful part of my equipment and makes it very easy to make sure I have the right stuff at the right place at the right time. I looked around and got a cycling bag with a LOT of pockets/compartments including mesh shoe pockets on one end, a helmet compartment, a BIG main compartment another mid size compartment and several side pockets plus holders for two water bottles. I keep my helmet, shoes, cheap sunglasses, gloves, two towels, spare change, dollar bills, gels and energy bars and other basics in the bag 24/7 and swap out the clothes weekly and keep some seasonal backups such as the previously mentioned full shoe covers, etc. It's a BIG bag but when I get to the ride, I have everything I need and some spares for someone who forgot something. This is not on the top of your winter wear list but once you have the basics covered and you get bit by the cycling bug, a good cycling bag will make your life much easier...

OK, one more tip...

Most of the year, it's fairly warm in Houston so I freeze my drinks (in insulated water bottles) overnight before the ride. I freeze a full bottle of sport drink and a half bottle* of water. I top off the water before I leave and the water is cold but melted enough to drink as we get going and the sport drink is ready to drink and maybe still a little slushy when the water runs out. But that's NOT the tip! The tip is that I put the tops to the water bottles on top of my car keys and next to the door from the kitchen to the garage. This way, I can't forget to get the water bottles and put them in the bottle holders in my bike bag before I head out the door. That's the tip!-)

* - When you see the bottle, are you a half full or half empty person? When presented with this dilemma, I try to convince the half empty person to let me take their half so they can justifiably see the bottle as ALL empty and I have a FULL bottle - I'm VERY accommodating!-)

I do need to note that I've been collecting cold weather cycling clothing for almost 18 years and it rarely wears out in Houston - the Gore-Tex mittens mentioned above were one of my very first running splurges and actually just turned 26 years old in December! I have only seen one other rider wearing the Windstopper cycling jacket that is my #1 winter wear item - that was a mountain biker in the UK - IN JULY!!!

I do have a lot of things stuffed in my cold weather drawer. Start with the basics and build your collection over several years. Do visit the local bike shops - now for the essentials and later when the winter gear is on sale. Our coldest (wet) ride in recent years occurred in April so take advantage of the end of winter prices to expand your wardrobe foundation at good prices...

If you are training up north, here is a related article with more specific items. Note that it's written by a rider in Minnesota so it's focused on REAL cold weather. <http://www.startribune.com/lifestyle/12962872.html>

There is also some good info on the Active.com site right now. Here are the links:

<http://www.active.com/cycling/Articles/Why-I-Bike-in-Really-Cold-Weather--And-How-You-Can-Too.htm>
And...

http://www.active.com/cycling/Articles/Winterize_your_cycling_wardrobe_to_enjoy_rides_in_the_cold.htm

I think I mentioned the other critical cycling clothing issue earlier. That's the whole style/color coordination issue. That's a topic that really needs some hands-on mentoring so we'll start working that one at the upcoming training rides. Just remember that purple and pink are hot colors and when it's cold out, hot clothing is helpful...

OK, I have exhausted the topic so I better quit here at page 2 (or 3?).

Be safe, stay warm and have fun getting ready to ride. Watch your inbox for an update on the newbie

ride this Saturday - it looks like we will call off the ride so you can either use the time to take the morning or afternoon safety class the MS Society is offering or start shopping for some warm, winter wear...

Happy riding!

Stephen Moskowitz

Team Captain, ConocoPhillips

281 293-2599

steve.e.moskowitz@conocophillips.com

<http://www.conocophillipsbikeclub.org>