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Advice on dressing for cold weather

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I hope that everyone is staying cozy and warm as we get through the few weeks of Houston's annual (almost) winter weather...

Today, I am sending out my annual note about dressing for cycling in the cold weather.

Tomorrow, you will all be getting the first weekly Wednesday note which will cover the details for the beginner ride this coming Saturday as well as details about what to expect and do on (and just before) ride day.

Before I get to the annual early season winter wear note, I have a few very useful tips to share...

1. **Please read our weekly emails!**

This may seem like an obvious tip but as the first ride approaches, I have seen several questions come up about items covered in the first email. So, out of curiosity, I looked and, this morning, only 69.1% of you had opened that note. That means that almost 1 in 3 of our riders don't have a clue what we're up to! I have taken a vow to be more concise and to put the important ride info at the top of the weekly ride note each Wednesday but we are counting on you to read the emails and make appropriate plans - we can't do that for you!:-)

2. **Have Email sent to two addresses?**

Some of you have asked if I could send email to you at work and home. This can be done but we need you to enroll a second time, using the email only option, and use the second address when you enroll. The enrollment app only supports one email per rider but you can enroll a 2nd time for email only (there is no fee for this) and get your notes in two places at once (within a few milliseconds).

3. **Volunteer Details Coming**

The volunteer details are sent to all volunteers on the Thursday before their volunteer date. There are quite a few details to cover so the note is long but it helps the entire crew hit the ground running when they arrive at the ride. I will be sending a general note to all our volunteers next week to make sure they are all plugged in - some of you signed up to volunteer three months ago so we'll send you an extra reminder.

OK, now get comfortable because the rest of this note has been over 16 years in the making. I started it many years ago and have refined it, added to it and this year, even deleted some old stuff. It is a summary of 25+ years of riding experience and what works for me, when riding in cold weather. You will see a few brand names in the note so I will explain that no one has paid me anything for product placement. I rarely pay attention to the brand but in these specific cases, the brand (and their fabric technology) really does make a difference - in my experience.

Here you go, enjoy the 2018 Edition...

2018 Winter Wear Advisory

Several, no, make that MANY years ago, it occurred to me that a significant life milestone had occurred - **I hit the big five-oh.** That is to say, I was looking in my closet and counted 50 cycling jerseys! Of course, when I reported this milestone to my wife, she promptly made me move many of the jerseys into another closet so we 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 many times since then. I have accumulated quite a bit of cycling clothing over many years of riding and, to be honest, some of the cold weather stuff gets worn 0-2 times a year in Houston so it lasts a LONG time. 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 new riders ask me every year. **"I'm a new rider, what should I get to help stay warm when it's cold outside?"**

First of all, what you DON'T want to do is get a 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 several light to medium 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. Another key benefit - you can remove layer(s) as you warm up and put them in your back pocket.

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.

OK, let's get going on the topic...

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 - my "Top 3". Those of you with short attention spans can quit after this and go stock up...

1 - Gore Windstopper Jacket

This has been my favorite, most used, cool weather item - I started with a Windstopper running shell I found at the Marathon Expo many years ago. Windstopper fabric is a lot more reasonably priced than full Gore-Tex, breathes as well and is said to be less waterproof but I can't tell the difference on rainy rides I've used it for. A few years ago, I got a cycling specific Gore 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 anything in my closet...

The Windstopper top keeps me warm but doesn't let me get too hot (they breathe and unzip). I can't say enough good things about Gore fabric technology - they really do work as promised - keep the wind and water out and keep you warm, but allow your perspiration to escape so you stay comfortable.

You can find these right now and possibly even on sale, at your local bike shop. It is definitely worth trying on the jacket to confirm the fit so bring your proposed inner layers to test how the entire combination works on you. This Friday or Saturday, you can also check out the Marathon Expo at the George R Brown Convention Center for all sorts of great jackets, base layers, etc.

2 - Smartwool "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 worth the modest additional investment to get a good fabric here - one that wicks your body moisture away and 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 do have a long sleeve wool jersey but it is scratchy against my skin so I rarely wear it. I learned it's important to try on the base layer before buying.

For many years, I wore the high-tech fabric base layers and still like them but a few years ago, Marc Davis, 1/2 of the sometimes famous Davis Brothers, told me about the Smartwool shirt he had to get in Oregon when the September ride temps were so cold. I had tried a plain wool base jersey but, as I noted above, it was too itchy to me. The Smartwool, on the other hand is WONDERFUL! Smartwool uses only fine wool fiber and does some magic because it is not scratchy at all, keeps you warm, wicks perspiration very effectively, doesn't overheat, and it doesn't develop odors - which happens with many of the tech fabrics.

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 almost any Houston weather.

2018 Update - Some of you may gasp when you see the \$60-80 cost (retail) for a Smartwool base-layer. Last year, I picked up a set of light weight base-layer clothes (leggings, long & short sleeve tees) at Uniqlo as they had a store at the California mall near our kids. They aren't as effective as Smartwool (not as warm and don't wick moisture as well) but they do work pretty well and are very reasonable (Uniqlo puts them on sale fairly often). Since I have Smartwool, I use the Uniqlo for running but if the cost of SW is too much, these are a good Plan B. (note that's a "Q", not a "G" - www.uniqlo.com.)

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. My most used pair has a Gore liner (waterproof, & breathe) and big "cuffs" that can fit over the sleeves on my jacket. I combine these with a pair of light weight inner liners for real cold days.

Speaking of real cold days, a related tip here is to check out the glove selection at Sun & Ski Sports. The secret to this tip is to sneak away from the bike area and head over to the ski area where they have some seriously warm gloves. Skip the huge ones but I did get a pair of medium weight ski gloves which have room for an inner liner and keep my hands dry, warm, even toasty on the coldest, windiest Houston rides.

I always keep the Gore gloves and light liners 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.

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 clothing 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 real cold rides:

- Wool socks - Definitely worth buying at least one pair, they do stay warm and dry. Of course, I have gradually added several weights of Smartwool 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 and dry and, again, wool doesn't develop odors over time.
- Insulated "Toasties" - This is a small insulated cover that slips on over the front of your shoe. They are MUCH easier to get on/off than the full boots and keep my feet very cozy unless it's very wet. These plus wool socks work fine for 95+% of my cool ride needs.
- Full cover insulated boots - If it's real cold and wet, these make the ride a LOT more pleasant - I rarely use mine but have a pair just in case - I was on the infamous New Ulm ride where we ran into rain and temp dropping into the 40's about 15 miles out and my feet would have been real cozy if I had owned these at the time. I do own them now and bring them if it may be real cold & wet.

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. Seven 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 36-degree day. I really enjoyed them and I never noticed my legs being cold early or warm later in the ride. My legs tend to stay warm since you use them so heavily to ride so this is still low on my priority list but worth a small splurge 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 5 years and never worn them. They were on sale and maybe if I commute more in the winter they would come in handy.
- **Running tights** – I mostly use these for running but, every now and then, when it's cool and the mood hits, I'll put a pair on over cycling shorts and enjoy showing off my fullback legs. If you don't have cycling tights yet, this is a cost-effective way to deal with Houston's mild winter weather – keeping the cold air off your skin makes a difference and running tights work well.

Upper Body

As you can tell, I've collected quite a few base layer tops over the years and these have got a LOT of miles on them. My base layer tops vary from light to fairly heavy and I select based on the temperature and the top layer I'll be wearing. I even have a light and a medium Smartwool top but I've been collecting for 25 years now and base layers last a LONG time in Houston weather.

I have found that it's worth spending more for the inner-most layer since this is against your skin. Smartwool is my usual base layer with the Windstopper outer shell. If it's really cold, I'll add a jersey or Uniqlo "Heatech" liner for extra warmth.

Arms/Hands

First my arms...

I have many pairs of light to medium weight 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 and give you the flexibility to easily slip them off as the day warms up.

Update - A few years ago, I broke down and started adding pairs of color coordinated arm warmers to my collection to coordinate with various favorite jerseys. These are mostly an end of the season deal (\$5-8/pair) or custom made arm-warmers to match our recent team jerseys. When your bike has been repainted to match one of your favorite jerseys, you do have a standard to maintain...

As for my hands, I have three scenarios:

- Normal - 50 degrees and up - normal open finger bike gloves
- Cool - 40's - Light "liner" gloves w/ bike gloves over. The inner gloves usually come off at a rest stop
- Cold - 30's or cooler - My Gore lined gloves or my ski "clamshell" gloves over Smartwool liners.

Head

Up until 2011, I had some face covers but due to the "dork" factor, I never wore them. Then, on ride 2 of our 2011 season, we headed out and made an immediate turn to the north into a very stiff wind and 34 degrees. All my great clothes worked great and I was comfortable...just about everywhere...except my cheeks and jaw. They were SO cold that all of me felt miserable - warm but miserable! When we got to the rest stop, I actually had to wait for my jaw to warm up a bit before I could chew - I can never recall my face (and the rest of me) feeling so miserable.

So now, I have a great lower face wrap that one of our very thoughtful riders sent me as well as a Smartwool balaclava. I learned my lesson and I won't be as hesitant to put one of these on if we face the prospect of riding into a stiff wind on a real cold day.

As for the top of my head - I have to confess that there's not much there so I do need a head cover on cooler rides. I put on my head cover if it's 45 or below. I have a light head cover for cool days and a heavier, stretchy cover including ears. The heavier cover makes it harder to hear and I like to talk and listen when we ride so I only pull it out below 35 degrees - when there are usually not too many riders out. I did buy a medium weight Smartwool head cover in the off season, I'll try it if we have a cold ride day this year.

2018 Update – Due to the hearing issue, I ordered a stretchy cover that goes over your helmet. I want to see if this, plus a light cover on my head will keep me warm without needing to cover my ears so much. It hasn't been cold enough to try it yet. We'll see...

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, inexpensive backup sunglasses, gloves, 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 (sometimes me!) 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 with all the basics and some key backup items will make your life much easier...

2018 Update – My bike bag had great compartments but the zippers were all failing so I got a new bag last year. It's a little smaller and a few less compartments but it should work after I reprogram my brain and my packing routine to match the new bag. Hopefully, many of you will bring extra stuff in case I forget something...

PS – Speaking of forgetting stuff, I'm looking for a bike bag with one large compartment for a backup bike – I have (on two occasions) remembered the hundreds of items on my checklist for our rides only to leave my bike in the garage! If you know of a bag w/ a bike size compartment, please let me know...

OK, one more tip from the other side of the coin - for keeping cool...

Most of the year, it's 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 bottle from the tap 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 usually still a little slushy when the water runs out.

That's NOT the only tip here... The bonus tip is that I put the tops of the water bottles on top of my car keys and put this next to the door from the kitchen to the garage. This way, I can't forget to get the water bottles before I head out the door. There you go - two great tips in one!-)

As you can tell, I do have a lot of things stuffed in my cold weather drawer(s). You should 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...

There is also some good info on the Active.com site. 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
(This writer has recently discovered tech fabric base-layers but hasn't discovered Smartwool yet...)

OK, I have exhausted the topic so I better quit here at page 4 (on my laptop).

Be safe, stay warm and have fun getting ready to roll...

Happy riding!
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