

Winter Wear Advisory 2020

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Advice on dressing for cold weather

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2020 Winter Wear Advisory

A number of new riders have written asking about riding and dressing for the cool weather Saturday morning warming up as the day goes on. For this reason, We're going to send our annual Winter Wear Advisory note a few days early so newbies have some tips to how to dress for the ride and some ideas of what to look for at Jan Cohen's GREAT Garage Sale this Saturday...

OK, let's get to this long, but very informative note...

Several, no, make that MANY years ago, it occurred to me that a significant life milestone had occurred - **I hit the big seven-oh.** That is to say, I was looking in my closet and counted 70 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.
(**2020 update...** I'm getting close to the big eight-oh but please don't tell Robbie...)

I have updated this note many times since then. I have accumulated quite a bit of cycling clothing over 27 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?"** (Disclaimer - The rest of this note is based on personal experience. There is no scientific method or actually, 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 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 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 fine tune your layers as you warm up and roll up a layer and put it 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.

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 of my wardrobe 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 tops keep me warm but don'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, keep you warm, but allow your perspiration to escape so you stay comfortable.

You can find these locally (i.e. Sun & Ski Sports). 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.

(2020 Update - Several shops offered Gore products at pretty significant discounts recently so I added a light Gore-tex outer shell and Gore-tex bib leggings which I wore on a cold Sunday while supporting a running group. The leggings were especially good at keeping my legs warm but breathing and should give me a perfect option, if we have a cold, wet day.)

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 really 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.

(2020 Update - Smartwool is wonderful but sticking to the softest wool riders seems to allow holes to wear through a bit quicker than regular wool. Fortunately, this same cycle shops also have Smartwool on sale so I got two new light base layer tops and one heavier top and I'll have my Smartwool base layer ready to go when it's cold. I still recall the first year I had a Smartwool base and put it on for Day 2 of the MS 150 - a day similar to this Saturday but it got sunny and into the 70's. I was really pleased that the Smartwool was warm in the morning but also comfortable as I warmed up in the afternoon.)

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

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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 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 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.

(2020 Update - While taking advantage of the Gore sale, I also threw in a Gore-tex hat into my cart and while it's not in my top 3 for cycling, it is definitely a top 3 item in my running bag. The Gore-tex cap keeps my head warm and dry but does allow heat/sweat to get through so my head is very comfortable - I highly recommend a Gore cap for runners, or for wearing to stay warm and dry after the ride, if you are hanging around like I need to do)

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.

(2020 Update - As I noted above, I added a pair of Gore-tex full leg bibs that were on sale and these will easily cover the coldest/wettest ride days I can ever imagine we would experience here.

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 24 years now and base layers last a LONG time in Houston weather.

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. Ideal for cool, but not cold days
- I found a pair of the running shoes I use in the same high-viz yellow color to match my shell. I can't ride in them but it's useful to be stylin' before and after the rides as well...

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...

(2020 Update - Ready2Roll Cycling is offering the wildest, most WAY COOL arm sleeves to match our WAY COOL 2020 custom jersey. These are a lighter weight than regular arm warmers so they can be used for days which start cool and warm up in the morning. If you missed the note to order these, watch for another reminder coming this Sunday...)

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 the to 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 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 halarlava (or is it haklava?) I learned my lesson and I won't be as

well as a Smartwool balaclava (or is it balaava?) 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.

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...

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 while 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...

OK, I have exhausted the topic so I better quit here at page 8...

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

Happy riding!

Steve, Marshall, Jan & Robbie

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