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Advice on dressing for cold weather

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While Kathryn and I now own Ready2Roll Cycling, from time to time, we'll use some great material in our email archives because Marshall, Jan, Robbie and Steve spent 12 years building a great organization and some useful and timeless cycling material.

This Winter Wear Advisory note has been an annual Ready2Roll Cycling tradition since its inception, and it is updated annually to reflect lessons learned and new fabric technology, etc.

This note is especially useful for our new riders as we prepare to get on the road during the coldest part of the year.

Also note that our tech support sponsor is Sun & Ski Sports. While we mostly lean on the "Sun" portion of their name, we will be moving quickly through cold air over the next several weeks, so we highly recommend you drop in to the nearest Sun & Ski store to check out some great buys on ski wear, which helps keep you cozy, and nimble on cold rides. Hint: Sun & Ski has their annual Bike University coming up on Feb 24/25 at the store located at 6100 Westheimer (Ready2Roll Cycling will be there) and will offer great sales.

So, take it away Steve/Marshall...

2023 Winter Wear Advisory

Each year, a number of new riders have written asking about riding and dressing for the cool weather. For this reason, We now send our annual Winter Wear Advisory note shortly before our beginner ride, so newbies have some tips to how to dress for the ride,

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

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 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 cold weather clothes handy.

Layering has several benefits - You can use lightweight layers so your clothing is not heavy. two to three layers plus the air in between makes a very effective insulation system. Another key benefit is that you can fine tune your layers as you warm up and take off layer and put it in your back pocket so you don't overheat.

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

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

1 - **Gore Windstopper Jacket**

This has been the most used, cool weather item, starting with a Windstopper running shell found at the Marathon Expo many 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 we can't tell the difference on rainy rides. A few years ago, the shell was replaced with a cycling specific Gore Windstopper jacket. 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.

The Windstopper tops keep you warm but doesn't let you get too hot (they breathe and unzip). We 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 dry and 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.

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. Try these on - this is an item you want to try on to see what feels good to you - 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, a rider 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, it was too itchy to me. The Smartwool, on the other hand is WONDERFUL! Smartwool uses only finer (smaller, smoother) 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.

(Update - Smartwool is wonderful but sticking to the softest wool fibers seems to allow small holes to wear through the fabric quicker than regular wool. This doesn't impact it's great value as a base layer, the holes are hidden by the outer layer)

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.

3 - **Good pair of full finger gloves (Several pairs, actually)**

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, & breathes) 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

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, and even toasty on the coldest, windiest Houston rides.

During the cold early season, always keep the Gore gloves and light liners in your bike bag until the weather warms up (March). They will come in real handy if it's 40 or below or cool and possibility of rain.

Update - While taking advantage of a Gore sale, I splurged on a Gore-tex hat. It's not a top 3 for cycling item, but it is definitely a useful item for cool outdoor activities. The Gore-tex cap keeps your head warm and dry but does allow heat/sweat to get through so your head is very comfortable. We highly recommend a Gore cap for runners, or for wearing to stay warm and dry before/after the ride.

OK, that's our "Top 3". Note that all these are upper body items. We 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

Feet seem less sensitive to getting cold, but there are a few items which you will appreciate for real cold rides:

- Wool socks - Definitely worth buying at least one pair. They do stay warm and dry. Of course, several pairs of Smartwool socks have joined the wardrobe, and they are the most used but feet don't seem to notice the wool itch as much as the 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 "Toesties" - 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 feet very cozy unless it's very wet. These plus wool socks should work fine for 95+% of your cool ride needs.
- Full cover insulated boots - If it's real cold and wet, these make the ride a LOT more pleasant - They will be rarely used, but have a pair around, just in case. We were on a ride in New Ulm where we ran into rain and temp dropping into the 40's about 15 miles out. Our feet would have been real cozy if we had owned these at the time - we do now!

Legs

For many years, on really cold days, I wore a pair of my running tights over cycling shorts and that worked fine. The benefits were less cost, lighter weight and many colors to choose from. Eight years ago, a pair of insulated, full length biking tights with a chamois liner was added and that little bit of extra insulation makes a big improvement in comfort. Your legs tend to stay warm since you use them so heavily to ride so this is still low on the high priority list but worth a splurge if you have all the other layers covered. After that cold wet ride a few years back, there is 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.

Upper Body

As you can tell, We've collected quite a few base layer tops over the years and these have got a LOT of miles on them. They vary from light to fairly heavy and are selected based on the temperature and the top layer being worn. Base layers last a LONG time in Houston weather.

Other items added recently

- **Uniqlo base layer** - Uniqlo is a very trendy Japanese clothing maker. They offer some less trendy stuff, such as their "Heattech" base layer clothing. They offer it in medium and heavy weight. It is not as soft as Smartwool and doesn't wick as well but it is a lot lower priced and occasionally, they practically give it away on sale so, if the cost of Smartwool is not in your budget yet, we definitely suggest taking a look at the Uniqlo base layers - they are well-made, well-priced, and go on sale periodically.
- **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. These are ideal for cool days and as a water resistant outer shell over the insulating layers.

Arms/Hands

Arm warmers are really useful 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.

Here are the three most common Houston scenarios:

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

Speaking of hands, another secret Pro Tip is to buy some hand warmers from Sun & Ski and place them into your cycling gloves. Of course you still need to have hand mobility to operate your brakes, but those hand warmers inside your gloves will really make a difference. The theory is, if your hands are warm, your body will be warm.

Head

Up until 2011, I had a clunky face cover, but due to the "dork" factor, I never wore it. 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 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 recommended to 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 (get it?) 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 a 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.

Bike Bag

OK, I know you don't wear a bike bag but this can become an incredibly useful part of your equipment and makes it very easy to make sure you have the right stuff at the right place at the right time. Get a cycling bag with a LOT of pockets/compartments including shoe pockets, a helmet compartment, a BIG main compartment another mid-size compartment and several side pockets. The more, the merrier, as this gives you plenty of flexibility to organize, and manage things.

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, especially Saturday mornings during training season...

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 60-90 minutes later, 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 Sun & Ski - now while the winter gear is on sale. Take advantage of the end of winter prices to expand your wardrobe foundation at good prices...

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

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

Happy riding!
Sybre & Kathryn
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