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Shoes for your bike – stiffen your sole

Feet sore after a long ride? Feel like other riders have an unfair advantage? Want to be more efficient and comfortable on your bike? Cycling specific shoes may be the answer.

Better than sneakers

Your normal shoes may be fine for shorter rides and general use, but if you are serious about your riding or ride a lot, cycling shoes have distinct advantages. Cycling shoes have stiffer soles than normal shoes. This spreads the pressure from the pedal over a larger area of your foot meaning less discomfort from pressure points. A stiffer sole also means that less of your effort is lost to the bending of the sole of your shoe. More power is transferred through the pedal to your rear wheel and you go faster for less effort.

Clip-in (clipless) pedals

Cycling shoes also let you use “clip-in” (generally known, confusingly, as clipless) pedals. These let you pedal more efficiently by pulling up on the pedal as well as pushing down. This allows you to “pedal in circles” and transfer your effort better to the rear wheel. Clip-in pedals require a cleat to be screwed to the sole of your shoe – something not possible with normal shoes. This cleat clips in or engages into a spring loaded mechanism in the pedal to provide a no slip connection between your shoe and the pedal.

If you are not quite ready to be clipped into your bike don't let this dissuade you from buying cycling shoes. You can still enjoy the benefits of the stiffer sole with normal pedals. Some cycling shoes have a section of sole that is cut out to mount the cleats into the shoe. If you don't want to use clip-in pedals just leave this section of sole intact and enjoy the benefits of a stiffer soles with normal pedals. You can always buy the pedals (and cleats) later.

Traps for the unwary

There are a few things to be wary of using clip-in pedals:

Clipping in and out – this can be a bit difficult at first. Make sure you are confident clipping in and out before venturing onto busy roads. Ask the bike shop if you can try the shoes and pedals on a stationary trainer first. New cleats take a bit of wearing in so they may be a bit stiff at first. You can also adjust the spring tension of most pedals to make it easier to clip in and out of. This may be a good option at first but may result in unintended disengagement from the pedals when you go to take off from the lights.

Sore knees – some people experience sore knees when using clip-in pedals. Re-check your saddle height first as cleats can effectively make your legs longer than before. You may also need to adjust the position of the cleat in the sole. Some pedal/ cleat systems allow only limited rotation of your foot on the pedal and this may also contribute to knee pain. If you have experienced knee pain in the past it may be best to look for pedals which allow more rotation of your foot (or float) in the pedal.

Walking – if you think you'll be walking any distance in your cycling shoes look for a shoe/pedal system where the cleat is recessed in the sole. This allows you to walk (almost) normally. Most mountain bike cycling shoes allow this while some road specific shoes with smooth plastic soles and large cleats are nearly impossible to walk in. This is why road cyclists always park their bikes as close

to the café as possible – they don't want people mistaking them for brightly coloured ducks as they waddle towards their latte.

Different pedals require different cleats – make sure you buy a shoe that is compatible with the pedal system and cleats you want to use. Some cleats are not compatible with some shoes (ask about the drill pattern of the shoes and whether they will allow you to use the pedals and cleats you want to use). .

Styles and prices

There are a wide variety of cycling shoes available from casual street wear styles to brightly coloured road riding shoes. Velcro straps instead of laces are a good feature as they allow you to tighten or loosen the fit of the shoes without getting off the bike.

Prices for shoes range from \$120 - \$400. You pay more for lighter and stiffer soled shoes. Prices for pedals range from \$60 - \$500. You pay more for lighter pedals and easier/more reliable cleat engagement.

Terminology

SPD – Shimano Pedaling Dynamics – Shimano, the big bicycle component manufacturer, chooses to call their pedal/ cleat system SPD. Other manufacturers make shoes and cleats that are compatible with SPD but they often don't work as well as the original stuff.

Float – refers to the amount of rotation the cleats and pedals allow before the cleats disengage the pedals. People with sore knees may want to check out pedals which allow more “float”.

Cleats – the things you bolt on to cycling shoes that engage or clip in to a spring-loaded mechanism in the pedal. A few systems have the spring loading mechanism in the cleat.

Dual sided – most mountain bike pedals (and non clip-in pedals or “flats”) are dual sided, meaning that you can clip-in to either side of the pedal. This is handy when trying to clip in on rough tracks and don't want to worry about finding the correct side of the pedal. Most road pedals are only one sided. This allows a lower profile and better cornering clearance (you can lean into the corners more without the pedals catching on the road surface). There are some touring pedals that are clip in on one side and flat on the other. This gives you the option of using shoes with cleats or normal shoes depending on the circumstances.

More Info

For a comprehensive listing of shoes and pedals check out the Bicycle Buyers' Guide that comes free with your Bicycle Victoria membership in December.

B Sbeghen, 26 April 2002