

Be Prepared for the Elements During Winter Riding



The right gear can make or break your winter rides.

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This winter, I hope you embark upon your off-season with excitement. If, on the other hand, the cold has you a bit worried, fear not. Let's talk about some Euro tricks to keep you warm once winter settles in.

Base Layers

A house without a foundation is called a trailer--and no one wants to live in a trailer. You're right, that sounds snotty. What I mean to say is that you may dress in the fanciest duds around, but if your base layer is a low-performance fabric, you'll be hating life before you know it.

Any sporting endeavor starts with the right base layer. You've heard about synthetic wonder fabrics (Patagonia's Capilene, Pearl Izumi's UltraSensor, Hind's DryLete) and they all work. DeFeet also makes a great cycling base layer, but any quality polypro-style fabric should perform well.

The Euros still go for the tried-and-true mainstay: wool. Wool absorbs moisture more aggressively than a synthetic and insulates even when wet. But wool's shortcoming is that it will absorb almost its weight in water. As with all base layer fabrics, your next layer up should absorb whatever moisture your base layer wicks off the skin.

Finding a good wool base layer can be tricky stateside, as synthetics rule the market. One company of note, though, is Vermont-based [Ibex](#), which is expanding its line of wool-based cycling duds.

Wool socks are a wise investment, too. SmartWool and other sock companies make wool models that are thin enough for cycling shoes.

Feet and Hands

Shoe covers can be indispensable. They come in all sizes and materials. Mountain bikers are less apt to wear these, but if you purchase a slightly larger size than fits your road shoes, you'll enjoy the extra warmth. I wore a pair of Northwave thin neoprene ones over my Carnac mountain shoes all last winter.

Neoprene--the material from which wetsuits are made--is great shoe-cover material. It's windproof and fairly water-resistant. Companies like Northwave, Pearl Izumi, Assos and Hind all make several models. Heavier neoprene obviously gives you more warmth and water

resistance. The drawback is bulkiness and the tendency of really heavy models to rub on the inside of a crankarm.

You might also choose a lower-cut model, which ends at the ankle, or one offering more protection up the leg. Pearl's Typhoon bootie was once the heaviest one out there, with rubber-reinforced toes and coverage up the ankle, but remember, it will be overkill in summer. Look at a lighter model if you plan to use it year-round.

Another important feature on booties is the sole. A sketchy or fragile cutout for your cleat (and in some cases, heel) will tear in a few months. Models with reinforced fabric around the cleat opening are preferable.

Now, with your feet dry and snugly, your next worry should be your hands. Frozen fingers won't allow you to shift gears (undesirable) or apply the brakes on a snowy and wet descent (highly undesirable). Again, wool is a great choice for cool days, so try a thin model.

The Euros, however, generally go for a heavier style, sometimes of neoprene. These are great for medium conditions, some damp roads and cold, maybe a bit of wind. Remember, though, neoprene works by trapping a layer of water against the skin, which your body--your core, not your extremities--keeps warm. These gloves aren't the best call for the long haul.

Gauge your weather and riding conditions. If you're going to be doing a real epic winter ride, then I say crack out the ski gloves. Pearl, for example, makes a heavy-duty Lobster glove, with a drawcord wrist and extra insulation.

Use Your Head

Most of your body's heat is lost through the head. Ever see pics of Andy Hampsten winning the Giro over the Gavia Pass in Italy? He shredded the best cyclists in the world that day through some fantastic riding--and proper preparations. He still raves about the old-school heavy-wool cycling cap that he wore on the worst parts of the stage. So at least wear an ear band, but consider a wool cap for under the helmet.

Hot Oil, Baby, Hot Oil

Ever see the road pros starting a big race? Chances are their legs have a little gleam to 'em. That's right, even on fairly warm days, the boys slather it on good.

Now, in cold weather you can do a few things. I carry a rain bag that has a clear PVC jacket, some Vick's Vap-o-Rub, hot-cream and petroleum jelly. Think about smearing some Ben Gay-style cream on your legs with a nice film of petroleum jelly over it if it's nasty out.

On lighter days you can use a film of some kind of oil, too. Many companies make cycling-specific oils, with menthol and camphor in them to help warm the skin.

Skiers also apply a little film of petroleum jelly on their cheeks, ear lobes and nose. Try it on windy, cold days, and you'll be amazed how happy it keeps your skin.

My last bit of advice, gleaned from many kilometers on the roads of France and Italy: Don't be so hard-core. Stop and drink coffee or tea as frequently as you like. If I see you on the roads this winter, I'll try to wave--unless I'm bundled up too tightly to raise an arm.