

First Time Guide to Criterium Racing

What to Know Beforehand

- A Criterium or crit is a short road race, typically on a road circuit of between 800m to 3 kilometres.
- Crits are short, fast races, often involving technical (lots of corners!) courses with close competition.
- They usually have no set distance, but instead the race is run over a set time and then a number of laps. For example, A Grade at SKCC race for 60 minutes and then three laps, while C and D grade race for less time, but still with 3 laps at the completion of the time. Having a timer as part of your cycle computer is therefore useful.
- Like all sports cycle racing has rules. 95% of cycling rules have a safety intention. Do not race until you have read and understand the rules which apply to the race you plan on entering. Check out SKCC race rules [HERE](#).
- Water bottles, take one on your bike, and one for afterwards. As the races are short there's rarely a need for more than one bottle, and also there's no need to eat during a crit.
- A legal bicycle. Crits in Australia require that you use a road-race legal bicycle. Road bike handlebars are mandatory, and the ends of the bars must be plugged. You can't ride disk or bladed wheels or aero-bars.
- Lights, mirrors, frame pumps etc., take them off before you race. Apart from them being heavy they can fall off and cause an accident.
- Your helmet must be Australian Standards approved.
- Gloves aren't mandatory, but I anyone racing without gloves is insane.
- Wear cycling clothes, everyone else will be in lycra (bib) knicks and jerseys, you'll look funny if you're the odd one out.
- Many riders wear trade team kit or their local bike shop kit, or plain jerseys. In open races the rules are tighter about what you can wear, but for club and regional races you can wear anything really.
- Entry fee. This is usually \$15 or \$25. Race organisers sometimes won't accept coins or \$50 notes or more.

When You Arrive.

- Firstly, be on time. Price, location, start times, race duration and anything you need to bring for SKCC crits can be found [HERE](#).
- Try to be at the course around 30-45 minutes early. As soon as you get there, find the officials and tell them it's your first race, and that you'd like to enter. They'll usually ask you what grade you want to race, if it's your first race, ride the lowest grade they have. No matter how strong you think you are, or how strong you actually are, you need to learn how to race and develop race skills. It is not easy taking a corner at 40kmh a few inches behind somebody and with a person rubbing each of your shoulders. At SKCC start in E Grade. If you have raced before you will be asked to complete a Grading Form before being allocated a grade.
- Once you've entered, you'll get a number. This is usually a square bit of fabric with 2 or 4 safety pins. I always get 4 pins on mine, if they only have 2, ask for 2 more - a number flapping around is annoying and harder for the officials to read. Take your jersey off and pin the number to the back of your jersey, low down so that the bottom of the number is a few cm above the bottom of your jersey. Either in the centre or off slightly to the right.



- Then, go for a warm-up, but not on the course if a race is on. Ride around the course, taking note of the best lines through the corners, where the finish line is and if there's any tricky bits.
- Make sure that with around 5 minutes before race time, that you're warmed up well - crits take off pretty quickly sometimes, and if you're not warm you'll blow up in the first 10 minutes.

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Race Time!

- There'll be a start area where all the riders for your grade will be at the start. Get into the bunch and try to be reasonably close to the front. Listen to the race briefing. When the officials start the race make sure you start your timer on your computer.
- Sometimes races start with a period of riding "under control". This means that the field will ride around the course a bit slower than racing speed, and no-one will try and attack (ride away off the front). This is to let the field have a look at the course and in the case of lower grade races, let the field get used to each other and being in a racing bunch

What Tactics to Follow?

- Once the race starts, you'll need to understand a bit about how road racing works. Generally, riders will race to their strengths, which means that people who can ride at high speeds for a long time but can't sprint well will want to break away from the bunch, and riders who can't ride fast and long but who can sprint will want a bunch finish so that they can sprint clear after drafting the bunch. If you remember this, you'll see what different things different riders will try and do to set the race up for their win.
- And then, there's bunch fodder riders, who don't really have a plan and who do things for no logical reason. They're the ones who take off in very early attacks and get reeled in over and over again. Watch what happens, see who seems strong, and remember one racing golden rule - never do any work unless it's for your benefit or the benefit of a team mate.
- There's no prizes for who does the biggest turn on the front, but sometimes you may have to do a turn to help chase down a break. Sometimes other riders won't help, sometimes riders will shout at you to chase - always think before acting in a race, if someone shouts at you to chase down a break, ask yourself if you think it will benefit your race.
- Race tactics is the subject of whole books and experience is what counts, but if you remember the golden rule, you'll generally be ok. Try not to let gaps open up, stay near the front and stay out of the wind! Treat the race officials with respect. They're usually volunteers and without them, you're not racing. Thank them after the race too.

Racing Etiquette and Rules

- Racing is not like a training bunch ride where everyone's doing turns and riding smoothly together, but it is usually a bunch ride, and you need to remember a few basics - always ride safely is the biggest one of all. Again the [SKCC Race Rules](#) are all about safety, your safety and the safety of other riders.
- Racing's pretty simple, but in crits there's some interesting rules - for example if you have a mechanical problem - a puncture etc., you can usually take a lap out to fix it and then re-join the main bunch in your grade. You have to ride around to the race officials and inform them. You can't do this in the last few laps - but the officials should tell you that at the start.
- If you've been dropped by your bunch and lapped, you have to pull out with 3 laps to go and stay out of the way for the rest of the time.
- You can't ride with another grade. If you're riding D grade and C grade comes past overtaking your bunch, you are not permitted to jump across into the C grade bunch.

You have to ride outside their slipstream. Usually your bunch will be neutralised when being overtaken, and if you think that's a good time for a surge or an attack, be prepared to be disqualified!

- As you get closer to the finish, the pace usually increases, and riders will try late attacks and so on, don't panic at this point. If you have a plan, stick to it (at least for your first race!). And you do have a plan, right? If you're in a sprint for the finish, ride in a straight line, do not try and weave over the road to stop anyone overtaking you. It's illegal and very dangerous.
- Once you cross the finish line, ease off and roll around the course or follow the instructions of the officials. There's usually other grades racing at the same time and you don't want to get in their way, especially close to a finish! If you think you got a place or won, see the finish line officials and tell them (it's called "claiming").
- Although the Pros put both hands in the air when celebrating a win, don't do it. It's actually illegal in amateur racing to take both hands off the bars at any point during a race, and you run the risk of not only crashing, but being disqualified!

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And that's it, your first criterium! Get out and do it!