

There's Fun in Them-Thar Hills!

Bob Geyer

A few years back I was whining to my friend, David Graham, about the hills around here. He said, "Hills on a bike are no problem. You just go slower." And you know, he was right. But let me preface my comments by saying that I am not only not a racer, but I have no racer-wannabe intentions. I ride for fun, not with the primary intent of getting stronger or faster (though those things come anyway). I don't do "training rides". If the primary purpose of your rides is training, you can save yourself some time and not bother reading this article. On the other hand, if your primary purpose in riding is to enjoy the ride, read on!

Why is Riverside Drive/US-251 along the French Broad River such a popular bicycle route? Sure, it's nice along the river, but the real reason cyclists like it is that it's *flat*. If you ride nothing but flat routes, you can have a nice tight gear cluster that shifts lightning-fast and gives you very subtle changes. If you ride nothing but flat routes, you can maintain a nice smooth cadence for your whole ride, and if you're not quite as strong as your riding companions, you can stay glued to someone's wheel the whole ride. But Toto, we're not in Kansas anymore! Along the river to Marshall is just one of the fine bicycle routes in the area. There are other routes with less traffic and more beautiful scenery. But they've all got hills. Mountains, even. So what's wrong with that?

I'll tell you what's wrong with that. Two things: attitude and gears. Attitude is the easier to understand but the more difficult to overcome. We have an expectation that we'll go fast on our bikes. We like the wind in our faces. Plodding along at five miles per hour just doesn't fit the image. Consider: when you're climbing are you more likely thinking of that as a necessary evil so you can do the downhill or as a wonderful part of the ride in its own right? Oh, you say you don't like it because you have to work so hard? Ah. Let's talk about gears.

Fact: the smaller the range of gears on a bike, the smoother it will shift and the more subtle will be the gear changes. Fact: if your gear range is too small you'll either not be able to go as fast as you want downhill or you'll struggle too much going up hill (or both). Inference: you want as tight a

gear range as will give you the climbing and descending ability you want.

Most road bike buyers don't ride in the mountains, and bikes are equipped for "most bike buyers". Demographics, you know! So most road bikes are not equipped with particularly low gears. If you ride both a road and mountain bike, you've probably noticed how you can motor up some very steep hills on your mountain bike, but climbs on the road just about kill you. Why? Gearing!

Bob's first law of gearing: If there are more than a few routes you don't like to ride because they're too tough to climb, your gearing doesn't go low enough. With lower gears, you don't have to die going up those hills. You just go slower.

Most road bikes have two chain rings, but the major component manufacturers also make triple chain ring assemblies for road bikes. One way to increase your gear range is to convert to a triple. Unfortunately, this is a fairly costly change, because you'll probably have to change your crank set, bottom bracket, front derailleur, rear derailleur and integrated shift/brake levers if you have them. (Throw in a new chain and pedals and this is your entire drive train!)

A more economical way to increase your gear range is to get a wider-range cassette or freewheel. Most road bikes come with a 12/25 cassette (12 teeth on the smallest cog and 25 teeth on its biggest cog). Changing to a 12/28 cassette will give you a lower low gear without changing your high gear, and it's a relatively inexpensive change. Chances are you won't have to change anything else. You may be able to get a 12/32 cassette for your bike, but you'll probably have to replace your rear derailleur too, and your component group may or may not permit this. Check with your local bike shop.

If you're buying a new bike, you've got the opportunity to get the best combination possible, and here's what Uncle Bob says is the best combination... and why. You want the tightest gearing that will give you the range you need. Don't even think about a double chain ring. Get that triple, even if you're a very strong rider. Now, get the tightest cassette cluster you're

comfortable with. Two advantages to this approach: If you want to increase your gear range later (say, to climb the Alps) you can just put a wider-range cassette on, and you'll have a much tighter cassette for a given gear range. (Check this out, double-ring gear heads: 39X28T is higher than 30X23T. Now wouldn't you love to be able to ride an 1 1/23 corncob... uphill?)

Now that you've got the gears, you've just got to work on the attitude. Remember, this isn't a race. A recreational ride is like life: the goal is not to be the first to finish, but to enjoy the process.

Keep your wheels on the ground and your head in the sky.

Bob Geyer