

IF THE BIKE FITS—BUY IT

BY JOE LINDSEY

How to find the right frame and make adjustments for endless comfort

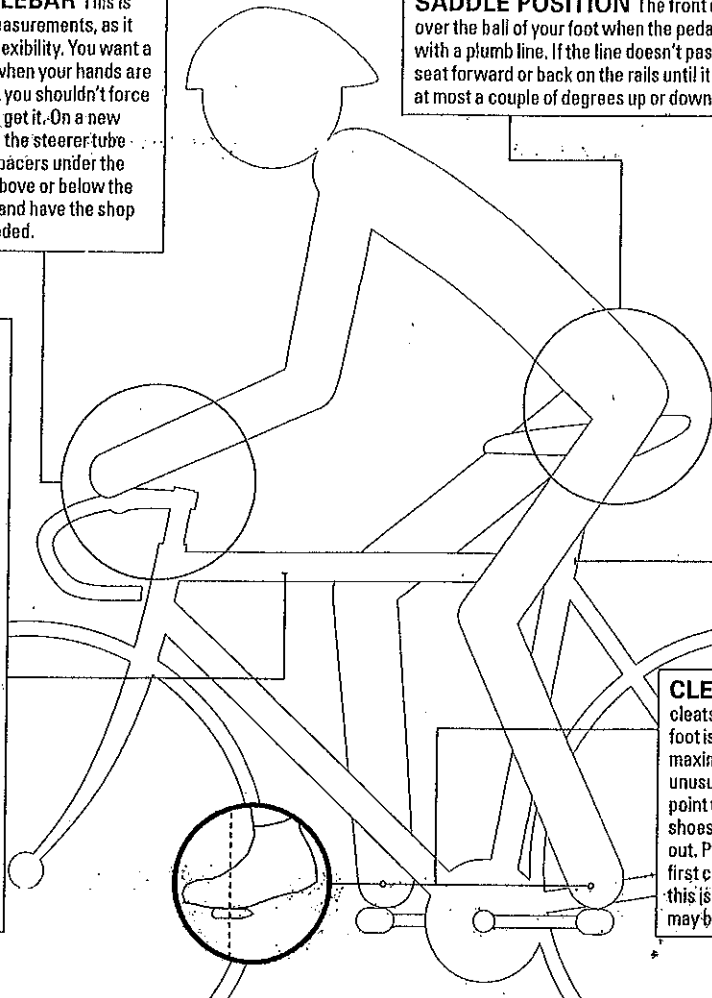
While there is no universal method for fitting a bicycle to the rider, fit theories do agree on most things, and proper training and equipment help bike-shop workers and fitters do their job consistently well. You'll have an easier time shopping if you know a few benchmark measurements. Start with figuring your frame size and seat height, and then, when you have the bike, determine your proper cleat placement, saddle position and handlebar reach, in that order.

REACH TO HANDLEBAR This is the most variable of all measurements, as it depends greatly on your flexibility. You want a slight angle at the elbow when your hands are on the hoods or drops, but you shouldn't force yourself to bend double to get it. On a new bike, ask the shop to leave the steerer tube long and add 2 inches of spacers under the stem. Move the spacers above or below the stem to fine-tune your fit, and have the shop cut the steerer later, if needed.

SADDLE POSITION The front of your forward knee should be directly over the ball of your foot when the pedal is at the 3 o'clock position. Check this with a plumb line. If the line doesn't pass the front of the pedal axle, move your seat forward or back on the rails until it does. Your seat should be level, or point at most a couple of degrees up or down. Check it with a carpenter's level.

SEAT HEIGHT Your knee should have a slight bend in it at the bottom of your pedal stroke. (The bottom is when the crankarm is parallel to the seat tube, not perpendicular to the ground.) To check this, in cycling shoes, pedal unclipped with your heels on the pedals. You should barely maintain contact with the pedal at the bottom of the stroke, without rocking your pelvis. Measure the distance between the bottom bracket and the top of the seat. This is your seat height. It should be very close to the product of your inseam (in centimeters) multiplied by 0.883.

FRAME SIZE In socks, place a thin hardcover book, spine up, between your legs with about the same upward pressure a saddle produces. Measure your inseam, from the book's spine to the floor, in centimeters. Multiply that number by 0.65; the result is your approximate road frame size. For example, 81cm x 0.65 = 52.65—a 52 or 53cm frame (sizes are the seat-tube length). Note that compact sizing uses a virtual seat-tube length, so don't go by the stated size unless it has the same virtual size. To convert to inch sizing, divide by 2.54. For mountain bikes, subtract 10–12cm from your road size.



CLEAT PLACEMENT Mount your cleats on your shoes so that the ball of your foot is directly over the pedal spindle for maximum power transfer. Unless you have an unusual stride or stance (splayfoot, etc.), point the tips of the cleats at the tips of the shoes for a neutral pedaling stance to start out. Pay attention to your pedaling style on the first couple of rides and adjust as needed—this is one place where professional fit advice may be worth the cost to help avoid injury.

<p>WHAT TO ASK FOR AT THE BIKE SHOP</p> <p>A good shop helps you find the right fit, even if you're not buying an expensive custom. Here's what to ask to ensure success.</p> <p>WILL YOU BUILD ME A TEST RIDE? Always ride before you buy. If a shop doesn't have your size on display, ask to have a sample built up. Or, test a similar model from that brand; product lines often share geometries, even whole frame designs.</p> <p>WHAT ABOUT PARTS SWAPS? Not all saddles and stems work for everyone. A shop should be willing to swap a part here and there to ensure proper fit, and it may offer upgrades at a discount.</p>	<p>DO YOU USE A FIT SERVICE? A good shop uses a recognized fit service, like Fit Kit or the Serotta Size Cycle, which has a defined methodology and offers technician training. (Serotta requires it.) A fit session will cost between \$40 and \$200, depending on the complexity of service you want, but it can be a worthwhile investment.</p> <p>IS THERE A FIT GUARANTEE? Some elements of bike fit, such as reach to the bar, bar height and cleat position, manifest themselves only over time. Is the shop prepared to help you dial in those issues as part of your bike-buying investment? Look for a written guarantee that lasts at least 30 days.</p>	<p>WARNING SIGNS</p> <p>Most bike shops are great, but beware if:</p> <p>THEY SAY NO TEST RIDES: A few shops have stopped offering test rides for liability reasons. We recommend steering clear of them because it could lead to potential future headaches on fit issues.</p> <p>YOUR OBJECTIONS ARE OVERRULED: If a salesman insists a frame is the right size and you think it's not, seek a second opinion at another shop. The first shop may be trying to get rid of old inventory. A key tip-off here is low levels of floor stock, especially if you're considering a discounted model from last year.</p> <p>YOU GET ATTITUDE OR IGNORED: If the salesman seems uninterested in you, go elsewhere.</p>
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