

Test drive a bicycle, then decide to buy

Get through the shopping experience and on to a great workout

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Buying a road bike these days is like shopping for a car, and the sticker shock makes it even more so.

Five thousand bucks for two skinny wheels?

At that point I'll stick with four wide ones and plan to get my exercise elsewhere.

Which is a shame, because biking is a great way to disentangle from the cardio machines and actually do something.

If you haven't bought a bike for a while, it can be intimidating. There are more than 100 brands on the market now, with a variety of frame materials and a whole vocabulary for the brake and gear components.

"A lot of people are freaked out by the technology and freaked out by the retail experience," said Steve Madden, editor in chief of *Bicycling* magazine.

Given a bit of patience, a budget and a sense of what type of riding you want to do, however, you can overcome these hurdles.

To be clear, road bikes are the thin-tired, curved-handlebar models used for faster riding on paved surfaces. If you're interested in riding gravelly trails like the C&O canal, going off-road or hanging panniers on the side for commuting, you'll need a wider-tired hybrid or a mountain bike.

If you think a road bike is appropriate, here is the first question Madden suggests: "Do you want to be racer boy, or cruise the bike paths?"

If you want to keep it casual and don't mind accommodating the fellow bikers, pedestrians and others on the paths, you can find solid entry-level road bikes for about \$700.

Weight won't be much of an issue, so a heavier steel frame is fine. The need to shift speeds may not be as fast or frequent, so the less-costly components from Shimano — in the company's terminology, either the Sora or Tiagra level — should suit.

SHOPPING TIPS

You'll face some key decisions when picking out a road bike. Here's an overview:

■ Frame material

Steel: Used in an estimated 40 percent or more of road bikes sold, for less expensive models as well as well-tuned racers. It absorbs road shock well and is easily repaired. The disadvantage? It's heavy.

Aluminum: Lighter than steel, it can also be found on less expensive bikes. But it's the least "absorptive" material and considered harder on the body.

Carbon: The lightest of the three, it offers a less jarring ride than aluminum. It has quickly captured 15 to 20 percent of the market as the price drops. On the downside, it remains more expensive and can't be repaired if it cracks.

■ Gear sets

The typical setup for road bikes is two gear rings up front, on the crank set, and nine or 10 in the back. If you're worried about hill-climbing, you can install a three-ring set on the front, including a smaller "granny gear" to make pedaling easier.

■ Pedals

A moment of truth. Do you trust yourself to clip in? Pedals that have clips for bike shoes transfer energy more efficiently, but there is also the issue of clipping and unclipping in time to stop. I chose pedals with one flat side and one that accommodates a clip.

Best bet? Start riding. Specialty bike stores (despite the temptation to go big box, I recommend sticking with people who know what they are talking about) are generally happy to let you take a test drive. Some bike shops are near to a path where you can test the ride, the shifting and the speed.

REI holds introductory riding clinics that are helpful if you are new to the sport. There's a fee, but they will provide a bike if you don't have one.

Here is where patience comes in: Once you break the barrier of \$1,000 or so, the choices multiply and so does the chance of finding a bargain: As in car shopping, even the larger stores want to move last year's models. If you think you may grow into the sport — with a desire to go faster, get onto

the road and start tackling hills — it's probably worth adding a few hundred dollars to your initial budget and widening the search.

"A hundred dollars when you buy the bike is like \$300 when you upgrade" to components or other parts that suit more-aggressive riding, said Butch Counts, a riding coach and member of the Potomac Pedalers Touring Club.

At that price, bikes made of carbon fiber are within reach — weighing in at perhaps 17 pounds compared, for example, with about 24 pounds for a steel frame, a considerable difference if you are pushing up a hill.

Frame geometry is another concern that, again, argues for testing a number of bikes. By Father's Day, I had narrowed my choice to two — an aluminum-frame Orbea with Campagnolo components, and the Fuji Team Pro, a carbon model with Shimano gear. When I rode the two against each other, the Orbea felt too aggressive — even in the upright position I felt more stooped than on the Fuji, and the low-slung drops on the handlebars felt too low for my back. The Fuji felt more relaxed, and I liked the Shimano shifters because, for me at least, they keep the whole hand more involved.

The price? Since it was a 2006 model, the bike was on sale for \$1,200 with near top-of-the-line components — the Shimano Ultegra line in most spots, with the top-end Dura-Ace rear derailleur.

It's more bike than I was looking for, and probably more than I need.

But I am sure the lighter carbon frame helped out on my maiden ride.