



Clean Your Bike!

This article is based upon a clinic taught by USA Cycling Mechanic Chris Kreidl at the 2009 North Central Regional Junior Development Camp in LaCrosse, Wisconsin. Many thanks to Chris for his wisdom and experience working with some of the best riders in the country.

Are you one of those riders that never seems to have any time to clean your bike? Do you believe that the extra pound of grease and grime on your chain adds character to your four-thousand dollar carbon fiber machine? If so, then don't bother reading any further.

Why Bother Cleaning?

Appearance is one reason, but more important is performance. Cleaning your bike helps ensure that everything is working properly and increases its overall performance. As dirt collects in moving parts, it makes them respond slower, increases wear and tear, and can lead to unnecessary breakdowns. Cleaning also gives you the chance to inspect various parts and catch problems before they rear their ugly head. Nothing is worse than being stranded 50 miles from home, all alone, in an area where your cell phone doesn't get a signal.

Develop a checklist of things to inspect every time you clean your bike and keep a supply of spare parts around just in case you find a problem. You don't have to be a mechanic to look at your brake pads, tires, cables, derailleurs, and chain to spot excessive wear or damage. A frayed cable, missing screw or a crack in your frame are all pretty obvious problems. Similarly, spotting issues with tires such as cracks and cuts in the rubber or debris lodged in them takes just a quick look.

Keep it Simple

Contrary to popular belief, cleaning your bike is not as hard as you may think. Sure, we have all heard the horror stories of riders spending hours on this task. However, if you follow some simple rules it doesn't have to be a nightmare.

First, some preventive maintenance will help speed the task. After every ride take a few minutes to wipe your bike down. This takes seconds and can eliminate most of the nasty build up of dirt that is virtually impossible to remove when allowed to sit for months.

Second, clean early and often. If you just wash your bike once a year the odds are pretty high that it is going to be a lot harder to clean than if you give it a good wash on a regular basis. Likewise, take the time to at least rinse your bike off after you ride in the rain, or on damp or dusty roads. If you stay on top of it, washing should only take a short time.



Keys to Cleaning

Most mechanics have their own tricks, but there are some common themes when it comes to cleaning a bike.

- Degrease parts prone to attracting oil, grit, and grime. You can spend a fortune on a bike degreaser from a specialty shop, or you can head out to the local hardware store. However, be careful what you buy. Make sure it is safe for your equipment as some products will not interact well with the metallic parts of your bike or its finish while others can be harmful to the environment. My personal favorite is a biodegradable citrus cleaner but even with these products check the manufacturer's recommendations relative to how to clean specific parts and what it may or may not be used on. More exotic materials and parts may require special attention.
- Cleaning is easiest if you have a repair stand, but if you don't it isn't the end of the world. Instead, find a good spot to support your bike that will allow you to maneuver in and around it without knocking it down. Also, you want to have a spot where you can take off the wheels and clean them separate from your bike. If you do have a repair stand, mount the bike in it and remove both wheels. A good investment is a chain keeper for the rear wheel so you can keep the chain from scratching your frame while you work on the bike and so it is easier to rotate the chain as you clean.
- Start with the drive train then move to other components that have attracted the most dirt. Cut the top off an old water bottle, fill it half way with degreaser and put it in your bottle cage on the seat tube. Using paint brush or other soft bristled brush dip it in the degreaser and gently massage each chain link top, bottom and both sides. Then move on to the chain rings, cassette, front and rear derailleurs. Be sure to get into every nook and cranny and return to the degreaser frequently to help wash away the dirt and keep your brush clean. Scrub the brakes and rims the same way. If you find that there are real problem areas, try using a stiffer bristled brush such as an old tooth brush but be careful not to use something that will scratch or damage the bike. By the time you are done, a large amount of the degreaser will be gone and what is left should be dirty. To minimize mess and clean up I like to use a shallow bowl to catch the drippings.
- Now that you have degreased everything, it is time to wash. For this, get a nice sized bucket and put in a healthy amount of dish washing soap. Fill it about half way and with the same paint brush clean all of the portions of the bike you degreased with the soap and water. Just as before, frequently dip the paint brush into the soapy water and get inside every nook and cranny. The goal is to get rid of all the degreaser and any remaining dirt.



- When you have finished, rinse with clean water and your drive train should be sparkling clean. If you use a hose, be careful not to blast water into bottom brackets, headset, or wheel bearings as this could flush out the grease used to lubricate those parts and cause damage.
- After you are done, dry thoroughly and let it sit in the sun before you re-lube.

Lube it Up

After you have given everything plenty of time to dry it is time to re-lube. A good place to start is your chain. Be sure it is completely dry before you start and using a high quality lubricant in a drip bottle, apply one drop of lube to each roller on the chain. I usually mark the chain with a Sharpie to show where I started so I don't over lube. After you go all the way around once, let it sit for about a half hour and then come back with a clean dry cloth and run the chain through it several times to wipe off any excess lube. Since the only part of the chain that needs to be lubricated is the tiny roller between each link, that is where you want the lube to be.

In addition to your chain be sure to lube other moving parts as well. Pivot points on brakes and derailleurs should be lubed ensuring that the points where the part moves receives just enough lubrication to allow it to move smoothly. Depending upon the type of shifter you use, some lube may be called for here too. A spot many people forget to lube are cables. A drop or two of oil where cables go into the housing will help keep them moving freely and inhibit corrosion. Again, the key is to not over-lube and it is worth the extra time to let the lube penetrate and then wipe off the excess.

The key to lubrication is getting it where it is needed and keeping it off places it is not. Having it all over the outside of parts just creates a sticky mess.

Hit the Road

After you have finished with the lube you should be ready to roll. Remember, any time you clean be sure to also inspect all of the moving parts on your bike. Make sure cables aren't frayed or worn, the frame doesn't have any cracks, and all of the bolts are tight and in place. This will keep you on the road and potentially save you from a long walk home.

Alan Martin is a USA Cycling Level I Coach, Certified Skill Instructor, and owner of Central Ohio Velosport, LLC (www.cohvelosport.com) a bicycle coaching business that trains cyclists to become better riders and competitors. For questions or input he can be contacted at centralohvelo@gmail.com.