

Fine-Tuning Your Clothing Choices for Fun Fall Cycling

By Jim Rutberg

Over the past several years I've grown to love being a cyclist in autumn. This is the no-pressure time of year; your summer racing and touring goals are behind you and you have tremendous fitness from a summer's worth of training. And instead of fighting heat and humidity, autumn brings crisp mornings and more moderate afternoons. Yes, the harshness of winter is only a few months away, but there's plenty of great riding to be done before the snow starts falling. Making the transition from summer to winter means bringing out your cool- and cold-weather gear. Now is a great time to make sure you have the gear you need for the cooler conditions that are right around the corner.

The easiest way to make sure you're prepared for the coming changes in the weather is to think of your body in terms of regions. The whole point of adjusting your clothing choices is to optimize your body temperature, which is why you've spent the last few months of summer riding in as little clothing as possible. Now that it's starting to get cooler, you're going to need to think about using clothing to retain core temperature instead of only trying to dissipate the heat generated from exercise. When you view the body in terms of retaining or dissipating heat, you can think of it in terms of three regions: core, limbs, and extremities. By adjusting the clothing choices you make over these three ranges, you can continue riding comfortably throughout the fall and winter.

The Core: Your top priority

Your body will go to great lengths to keep your core temperature within a very narrow range. When core temperature falls, your body redirects blood from your arms, legs, hands, and feet to your torso and head to keep your vital organs warm and healthy. As a result, it's very difficult to perform at your best – using muscles in your arms and legs – when your core temperature is too cold. Here are some temperature-based guidelines you can use to adjust your apparel choices as the fall progresses into winter:

Temperature Range (F) Clothing Recommendation

60 degrees and over: Wicking base layer and short-sleeved jersey, or just a short-sleeved jersey.

50-60 degrees: Wicking base layer, jersey, and wind vest. Or base layer and a long-sleeved jersey.

45-50 degrees: Wicking base layer, long-sleeved jersey. Consider a Windtex or similar wind-front long-sleeved jersey.

40-45 degrees: Wicking base layer, Windtex or similar wind-front long-sleeved jersey.

Below 40 degrees: Thermal long-sleeved base layer, Windtex long-sleeve jersey or full thermal long-sleeved jersey.

In all temperature ranges, keep a careful eye on the weather and be prepared for rain. It may not be the height of fashion, but a simple plastic rain jacket can be enormously valuable. Once you're soaking wet, core temperature is quick to fall and difficult to regain. The good old clear-plastic rain jacket keeps heat in very effectively; just remember to put it on before you get completely soaked.

The Limbs: Your radiator

Your choice of jersey and base layer are difficult to change once you're out on the road or trail, but you have great flexibility when it comes to covering or baring your arms and legs. You can think of your arms and legs as your radiator; the more skin you expose to the open air, the cooler you're going to be. If you're going uphill, you can roll down your arm warmers to stay cooler. When it's time to go back downhill, you can pull them back up. Knee and leg warmers are a bit less convenient to take on and off during your ride, but can be great for long rides that start on crisp, cold fall mornings and extend into warm fall afternoons.

Temperature Range (F) Clothing Recommendation

60 degrees and over: Nothing, but you might want to carry arm warmers if you think the temperature might drop during your ride.

50-60 degrees: Arm warmers and knee warmers

45-50 degrees: Arm warmers if you're still wearing a short-sleeved jersey with a thermal vest. If you're wearing a long-sleeved jersey your arms are taken care of. Knee warmers.

40-45 degrees: At this point you should be wearing a base layer and a long-sleeved jersey. If you're arms still get cold, you could wear arm warmers under your jersey. Full leg warmers

Below 40 degrees: With the thermal base layer and warm jersey, there should be no need for arm warmers. Wear full leg warmers and consider full-length thermal tights/bibs.

The Extremities: The linchpin

Cold fingers, frozen toes, and a chilled head can absolutely ruin a ride, even if your core and limbs are perfectly toasty. And since your fingers and toes are furthest from your heart, once these extremities get chilled, it can be very difficult to get them to warm up again. Keep in mind, properly fitting gloves should be a little bit loose; gloves that are too tight won't do as good a job at keeping your hands warm. The same is true for socks. If your socks are so thick they constrict the movement of your toes, they won't do

as good a job at keeping your feet warm. Some people find that a thinner pair of socks, coupled with a warmer shoe cover or full bootie, can be a better solution than thick socks and no shoe covers.

Temperature Range (F) Clothing Recommendation

60 degrees and over: Short-fingered gloves, wicking socks, traditional cycling cap or nothing under your helmet.

50-60 degrees: Short-fingered gloves or thin full-fingered gloves, wicking socks, traditional cycling cap or nothing under your helmet.

45-50 degrees: For many riders this is the most variable temperature region, where you have to decide between wicking and thermal socks, shoe covers or nothing over your shoes, and the appropriate thickness of gloves.

40-45 degrees: Long-fingered gloves (possibly of thermal/wind-stopping material), wool or thermal socks, toe covers or wind/water-proof shoe covers. Possibly a thermal skull cap under helmet.

Below 40 degrees: Thermal, wind-stopping gloves; thermal skull-cap under helmet, possibly a helmet cover, wool or thermal socks, thermal booties that cover the ankle.

The important thing to remember as you head out for rides in the fall and winter is that you can always remove layers if you get too hot, but if you're too cold once you're out there, you can only warm yourself using the clothing you're wearing/carrying. In cold environments, athletes perform best when they can maintain core temperature without restricting blood flow to the limbs and extremities. That means that managing your clothing choices is a big factor in determining how enjoyable your fall and winter rides are, and how effective fall and winter training rides will be toward improving your fitness.

Jim Rutberg is a Pro Coach for Carmichael Training Systems and co-author of "The Time-Crunched Cyclist" and five other training and nutrition books with Chris Carmichael. For information on coaching, camps, Official Ironman Training Camps, and performance testing, visit www.trainright.com or call 866-355-0645.