

Cleaning Your Bike

This article is based upon a clinic taught by USA Cycling Mechanic Chris Kreidl at the 2009 Midwest 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. However, if you would rather look at a sparkling clean machine that performs exactly as it should, read on.

There are lots of reasons why you should take the time to keep your bike clean. Appearance is one, 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 of your bike 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. That is why it is a good idea to 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 glance at your brake pads, tires, cables, derailleurs, and chain to spot excessive wear or damage. It is also pretty easy to look at tires and see cracks in the rubber or debris lodged in them or find cracks in your frame, damage to your forks or wiggle your handlebars and find the bearings are loose or damaged.

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 of cleaning your bike along. After every ride take a few minutes to wipe your bike down. This takes just a few minutes and can eliminate most of the nasty build up of dirt that is virtually impossible to remove. If you want, some people go one step further and use a damp rag or even some auto detailer after every ride.

It is equally important to 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.

The big question is what is the best way to clean a bike? Most mechanics have their own tricks, but there are common themes. First, degrease parts of your bike that attract grease and grime. For this you can spend a fortune on bike degreaser from a specialty shop, or you can head out to the local hardware store. However, be careful what you buy. Before you use any degreaser, make sure it is safe for your equipment. Some products will not interact well with the metallic parts of your bike or its finish, and others can be harmful to the environment. My personal favorite is a biodegradable citrus cleaner. It is always wise to check the manufacturer's recommendations relative to how to clean specific parts and what may or may not be used on them. More exotic materials and parts may require special attention.

Cleaning is easiest if you have a repair stand, but if you don't, find a good spot to support your bike that will allow you to maneuver in and around it without knocking it down. If you do have a repair stand, mount the bike in it and remove the front and rear wheels. A good investment is a chain keeper for the rear wheel so you can keep it from scratching your frame while you work on the chain and so it is easier to rotate the chain as you clean.

The first chore will be cleaning the drive train and other parts of the bike that have attracted grease. Start by cutting an old water bottle's top off and putting it in your bottle cage on your seat tube. Fill it half way with degreaser. Using a paint brush dip it in the degreaser and gently massage it into 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. In addition, if you find that there are real problem areas, try using a stiffer bristled brush such as an old tooth brush. By the time you are done, a large amount of the degreaser will be gone and what is left should be pretty 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 up 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. 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, headsets, or wheel bearings as this could flush out the grease and cause damage.

Once you have finished with the really dirty stuff it is time to turn to the rest of the bike. Start by rinsing any loose and heavy dirt off with a hose. Next get a sponge and working from the top of the bike to the bottom clean everything with soapy water. Be

sure to remember to wash your seat and handlebars too as they can be some of the dirtiest parts of your bike. Also, if you have a white saddle or handlebar tape wash them thoroughly and invest in a bleaching agent to keep them looking white and bright. Nothing is nastier than a white seat stained light brown or handlebar tape that is grey.

As you wash, take the time to get inside hard-to-reach areas and make sure you get all the dirt. If you have the bike on a stand with the wheels off, you can get up inside the brakes and clean the pads and arms as well as the inside of the forks and stays. You can still do this with the bike on the ground by removing one wheel at a time. It takes a little longer, but it is worth the time since these spots often have some of the worst gunk built up on them. Another tricky spot is the underside of the frame, especially beneath your water bottle cages since this is where sticky sports drinks can collect. Once you have washed everything, rinse it clean from top to bottom. It is also a good idea to take a dry cloth and do a once over on metallic parts like your chain. After you are done, let it dry thoroughly before you re-lube.

For your tires, use a sponge to clean the tires and rims and a small washcloth to get each spoke and the hubs. Rinse them clean after you have finished. If there is a lot of build up on the braking areas of your rims, take an abrasive cleaning pad and give just the brake surface a once over. Then clean with a sponge and rinse again. When doing this, be careful not to rub anything but the brake surface, especially if you have polished or painted rims. Be sure not to do this if you have carbon fiber rims, as the pad may scratch and potentially damage them.

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 waiting to attract dirt. Therefore, take the extra time to be sure to get all the excess off.

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.

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