

SPORTIVE BIKES – A BEGINNER’S GUIDE.

Part 2 – Choosing the right frame for you.

Before you start emptying your wallet in pursuit of the perfect sportive frame it's worth considering what job your new machine will be doing. In truth many standard road bikes make excellent sportive machines and whether you're buying off the peg or building up a bike from scratch there are some key requirements that you need to keep in mind, the most important of which is frame fit.

“Riding a frame that's the right size is more important than anything,” says Ben Atkins, European Editor of ‘cyclingnews.com’, “what geometry you choose is very personal but it has to fit as you are likely to spend many hours in the saddle, often on rough roads.”

Richard Hallett, Editor of ‘RoadcyclingUK’ and a veteran of the ultra distance Paris-Brest-Paris event agrees;

“It's vital the frame fits perfectly, make sure you use a reputable fitting service, there are many available online or go to a top class bike shop with a fitting service. Choose a geometry that gives you a longer wheelbase than an out and out race bike. A sportive bike should be steady, have neutral steering and be comfortable. Stability is the key.”

Once you are happy with your choices of size and geometry move on to your choice of materials. Don't be tempted to look at materials first and fit second. An ill-fitting bike made from the most exotic materials in the world will still always be an ill-fitting and uncomfortable bike.

In general aluminium will provide the harshest ride, especially over rough surfaces but despite this the availability low cost, high quality aluminium frames makes it an excellent choice to a first bike. Mate it with a good quality carbon fork not an aluminium one to take some sting out of the ride.

If you're thinking of having a frame custom built don't dismiss the traditional, remember what they say; ‘steel is real’. With custom steel you may pay a little more than off the peg aluminium but you get exactly the right fit, with a range of tubeset and braze-on options and almost any colour you want. Steel rides beautifully too, being lively and responsive and not overly stiff for a full day in the saddle. If you're a U.K. rider try Roberts, Brian Rourke, Wilson, Paul Hewitt or Mercian to name a few.

If stiff is what you want there are dozens of high quality carbon frames on the market, many from top manufacturers and some top class independents such as Billato and Parlee. Carbon frames have improved significantly over the last 5 years in ride quality but sadly some of build quality of ‘bargain’ carbon frames is not what it should be. A good carbon frame will be a joy on smooth roads; light, responsive and delicate but can be a little uncomfortable on rough surfaces.

Titanium was the professional peloton's wonder material 10 years ago and for exactly the same reasons as it makes a great sportive bike material. Ti is light, corrosion resistant, can be custom made and is very comfortable to ride. Up until now it has been THE choice of sportive riders. Excellent framesets are available at reasonable cost from the likes of Enigma and Van Nicholas, Merlin and Litespeed.

However, we've chosen the new Museeuw MF5 for our sportive build in 2008. Here the frame is constructed from a mixture of 80% flax fibre and 20% high modulus carbon fibres. The use of flax is common in the performance car market to damp shock and the same is true of the MF5 making it a very comfortable long distance performance bike. You can read the latest reviews on the MF5 at www.museeuwbikes.be

Whatever you choose Rob Spedding, Editor of U.K. magazine ‘Cycling Plus’ has good advice for all those approaching sportive riding for the first time;

“Don't be prejudiced against certain materials, and remember don't be afraid to appear a novice if you are when you're getting your bike. Sportive machines from big manufacturers like Trek and Specialised are a safe option but be practical about what you choose, you don't need the equivalent of a GTI to ride sportives.”