



CYCLING FACT SHEET No. 90

A bike computer can be a handy accessory

Prior to 1980, the only way to tell how fast or far someone was riding a bicycle was by means of a mechanical cable-operated speedometer.

Although those chrome gadgets could be attractive, the old-style speedos were bulky and fairly inaccurate.

During the early 1980s, a couple of accessory manufacturers recognised the need for a small lightweight alternative and began producing electronic bicycle computers.

The original cyclocomputers were basic affairs that only gave speed, distance and time.

Since those initial models hit the market, many brands have introduced their own computer ranges, offering a wide selection of styles with a mind-boggling array of functions including altitude, gradient, temperature, cadence (RPM of the pedals), power output and wind speed.

A bike computer is particularly handy for anyone completing regular training runs, because it enables you to carefully measure your activity level and progress. It is also an important accessory for the bicycle tourist, who often needs to refer to map distances when route planning.

Wireless models are more expensive, but are easier to move from one bike to another and they are also better suited to the rigours of off-road riding because there are no wires to get snagged. However, they require more batteries and can be prone to interference from roadside electrical or telephony equipment.

Bicycle computers use a calibration system to tell the unit what size wheel the bike has, but some folding bikes with very small wheels are not able to accommodate the sensor, so check the manufacturer's specifications.

Regardless of the type, always look for a unit with an easy-to-read display, backlight and sturdy case.

When buying a bike computer with a heart rate monitor, make sure it is a comfortable fit, especially if you have an unusual chest girth, or are a woman who wears a heavy sports bra.



High-end cycling computers are able to store ride information that can then be downloaded to a personal computer.

Some manufacturers have now begun to incorporate cyclocomputer features into their bicycle-mounted GPS units. These are generally considered to be more accurate than the old magnet-driven ones, because they use satellite information to monitor position and movement.

This fact sheet is one of a series dealing with the use of bicycles for recreation and transport in Western Australia. The series looks at a range of cycling-related topics including ride routes, touring tips, maintenance, safety, road rules, insurance and product reviews. It is not to be construed as the provision of legal advice or advice about insurance products.

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