

THE NEWCOMER'S ESSENTIAL GUIDE

10 Mistakes Every New Cyclist Makes

— and exactly how to avoid them. A no-nonsense, evidence-based guide to getting your first months on the bike right.

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TrainingPeaks Level 2 Accredited



Tried & Tested Cycle Coaching
Maximise Your Full Potential

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Before You Begin

Every cyclist who has ever pinned on a number, joined a club run, or simply tried to get fitter has made some version of the mistakes in this guide. Most of us made all of them – and made them more than once.

The good news is that none of these mistakes are about talent or genetics. They're about information – knowing what actually moves the needle versus what just feels like it should. This guide strips that down to the ten highest-impact mistakes newcomers make, explains why they happen, and gives you the specific fix for each one.

How to use this guide: Read it in order for the full picture, or jump to whatever's causing you problems right now. Every section follows the same format – the mistake, the fix, and the detail you need to act on it immediately.

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Getting Your Bike Fit Wrong

Bike fit is the single biggest reason newcomers quit in the first three months — and it's almost never discussed until something already hurts. Most bikes leave the shop fitted to an "average" rider, which means they're poorly fitted to almost everyone.

THE MISTAKE

Riding a bike straight out of the shop with stock saddle height, default cleat position, and a "that feels about right" approach to reach and stack. Discomfort gets blamed on "not being fit enough" rather than the actual culprit — the setup.

THE FIX

Sort the basics before blaming your fitness. **Saddle height:** leg almost fully extended at the bottom of the pedal stroke, slight bend at the knee (roughly 25–30°). **Saddle fore-aft:** knee roughly above the pedal spindle at the 3 o'clock position. **Cleats:** ball of the foot over the pedal axle, neutral rotation aligned to your natural leg angle.

Warning signs of a poor fit

- Numbness or tingling in hands, feet, or the saddle area after 20+ minutes
- Lower back or neck pain that builds steadily through a ride
- Knee pain at the front (saddle often too low) or back (saddle often too high)
- Constantly sliding forward or backward on the saddle mid-ride
- Hot spots or burning sensation in the ball of the foot (cleat position issue)

Make one small adjustment at a time with a few rides between each change. Never adjust multiple things at once — you'll lose track of what helped. If discomfort persists after working through the basics, a professional fit session pays for itself many times over and isn't just for racers.

COACH'S NOTE

A saddle that is 5mm too high will cause more long-term damage than almost any training error. If in doubt, go slightly lower — you can always raise it, but a chronic knee injury can sideline you for months.

Riding Hard, All The Time

This is the most common — and most damaging — mistake in the sport. It's known among coaches as the "moderate-intensity rut," and almost every newcomer falls straight into it without realising.

THE MISTAKE

Every ride is ridden at roughly the same moderately hard effort. Not easy enough to build a real aerobic base, not hard enough to drive meaningful fitness gains. It feels productive because every ride is tiring — but tired and effective are not the same thing.

THE FIX

Most of your riding time (roughly 70–80%) should feel genuinely easy — a pace where conversation is completely comfortable. The remaining portion should be deliberately hard, in focused, structured efforts with proper recovery between them. This polarised approach is the most evidence-backed principle in endurance training.

A simple effort self-check

- **Easy (Zone 2):** Full conversation, nose-breathing comfortable, could ride for hours
- **Moderate (Zone 3):** Short sentences only, breathing noticeably elevated
- **Hard (Zone 4–5):** Single words at most, cannot be sustained beyond minutes

If virtually every ride sits in that "moderate" middle zone — and for most newcomers it does — that's the rut. A heart rate monitor is the cheapest useful training tool you can buy and makes honest effort management far easier. Your perception of effort is usually less reliable than you'd think, especially when riding in a group that pushes the pace.

COACH'S NOTE

Easy riding should feel almost embarrassingly slow. If you feel like you're wasting your time on an easy ride, you're probably doing it right. Aerobic base is the foundation everything else is built on — neglect it and your progress will plateau within months.

Ignoring Rest and Recovery

Fitness isn't built during the ride. It's built in the 24–48 hours afterward, when the body adapts to the training stress. Skip that recovery window consistently and you aren't training — you're accumulating fatigue without the adaptation.

THE MISTAKE

Riding every day to "build fitness faster," treating rest days as wasted time, and ignoring early warning signs of overreaching — poor sleep, creeping irritability, a resting heart rate that's quietly climbing, and performance that's subtly going backward despite training hard.

THE FIX

Build in at least one full rest day every week from day one, and plan an easier week every three to four weeks as your training volume grows. Recovery is not the absence of training — it is training. The adaptation you're after happens during it, not despite it.

Signs you need more recovery, not more training

- Resting heart rate noticeably elevated over several mornings in a row
- Sessions that used to feel manageable now feel disproportionately hard
- Persistent low mood, irritability, or disrupted sleep alongside your training load
- Getting ill more frequently than usual — a suppressed immune system is a classic sign
- Loss of motivation for riding that previously excited you

If you notice two or more of these together, the answer is almost always less training, not more. A recovery week taken now prevents a forced two-week break later through illness or injury.

COACH'S NOTE

Sleep is the single most powerful recovery tool available to any athlete, and it's free. Poor sleep of under 7 hours per night will undermine even the best-structured training. Prioritise it before any supplement or recovery gadget.

Getting Nutrition and Hydration Wrong

The "bonk" — a sudden, dramatic collapse in energy mid-ride — is one of the most preventable experiences a newcomer will have. It's caused by depleting available glycogen (carbohydrate stores), and it hits fast and hard. One moment you're fine; twenty minutes later you can barely turn the pedals.

THE MISTAKE

Heading out on a long ride having eaten very little, then trying to tough out the energy crash when it arrives. Or the opposite — over-fuelling on short, easy rides where it simply isn't needed, then being confused when body composition doesn't improve.

THE FIX

Match your fuelling to your ride duration and intensity. Start eating early and little-and-often on longer rides — don't wait until you're hungry, because by then you're already behind. Real food works as well as sports products for most rides under two hours.

A practical starting framework

- **Under 60 min, easy:** Water only. A pre-ride meal is sufficient.
- **60–90 min, moderate:** Water plus 20–30g carbohydrate after the first hour (a banana, a bar)
- **90 min–2.5 hrs:** 40–60g carbohydrate per hour plus electrolytes
- **2.5 hrs+:** 60–90g carbohydrate per hour — mix carb sources for better absorption

Hydration matters just as much in cooler weather — fluid loss is consistently underestimated below 15°C. Aim for 500–750ml per hour as a baseline and adjust for heat and effort level.

COACH'S NOTE

Train your gut as well as your legs. Your body needs to practise absorbing carbohydrate during exercise. Start fuelling on every long ride, even when you don't feel like you need it — you're building a habit and a capacity that will serve you for years.

Buying the Wrong Gear (and Skipping Maintenance)

The cycling industry excels at selling newcomers marginal upgrades that won't meaningfully help them yet. Meanwhile, the cheap, unglamorous things that actually prevent problems — correct tyre pressure, a clean drivetrain — get ignored entirely.

THE MISTAKE

Spending heavily on aero wheels, the lightest possible components, or the latest power meter before the fundamentals are in place — while running tyres at the wrong pressure, never lubricating the chain, and owning kit that doesn't fit properly.

THE FIX

Spend in this order: **bike fit first**, then a properly-fitted helmet, then quality padded shorts (these make more difference than almost anything else you can buy at this stage), then correct tyre pressure, then basic maintenance tools. Performance upgrades can wait until you have a fitness base to notice the difference.

Maintenance habits that prevent most mechanicals

- Check tyre pressure before every ride — it drops with temperature change
- Clean and lubricate your chain every 150–250km, more in wet or muddy conditions
- Listen for new noises — creaks, clicks, and grinding are almost always cheaper to fix early
- Learn to fix a puncture at home before you have to do it on the roadside in the rain
- Check brake pads periodically — worn pads are a safety issue, not just a performance one

COACH'S NOTE

A clean, well-lubricated drivetrain and correctly inflated tyres cost almost nothing and will make your bike measurably faster and more reliable. More watt savings come from basic maintenance than from most expensive upgrades available to newcomers.

Group Riding Mistakes That Put Everyone at Risk

Your first group ride is often the most anxiety-inducing part of starting structured cycling — and that anxiety almost always comes from not knowing the unwritten rules, not from lack of fitness. Group riding has a code, and understanding it makes you safer and more welcome in any bunch.

THE MISTAKE

Riding unpredictably — sudden braking, swerving around hazards without signalling, half-wheeling the rider alongside you, or sitting too close without the bike-handling confidence to hold a steady line. One unpredictable move in a group can bring down multiple riders.

THE FIX

Predictability is everything in a group. Signal early, call out hazards clearly, hold your line, and brake gradually rather than suddenly. Every piece of group etiquette exists for one reason — to keep people's wheels and bones intact.

Group riding essentials before your first bunch ride

- Point at and clearly call out potholes, gravel, and obstacles well in advance
- Never overlap your front wheel with the rear wheel of the rider ahead of you
- If you need to slow, soft-pedal first — don't grab the brakes without warning
- Call "stopping," "car back," "car up," and "single out" loudly and early — pass it back
- Indicate before moving — signal with your hand before pulling out or changing position
- Don't surge at the front and then soft-pedal — keep a steady, consistent effort

COACH'S NOTE

If you're new to group riding, tell the ride leader before you set off. Any decent group will accommodate a newcomer — and it means they can keep an eye out for you rather than being surprised by a hesitant move mid-ride.

Setting the Wrong Goals, the Wrong Way

Motivation gets people on the bike in the first place. Structure is what keeps them there for months and years. Most newcomers have an initial surge of the first and none of the second – which is why the sport has such a high dropout rate in the first six months.

THE MISTAKE

Comparing your numbers to other people's on Strava, setting vague goals like "get fitter" or "lose weight," and training with no sense of structure or progression. Without a target, every ride is just a ride – and the inevitable harder days have no context to make them worthwhile.

THE FIX

Set one specific, time-bound goal – a sportive, a particular distance, a climb you want to complete – and build a simple plan backward from that date. Track your own progress against your own starting point, not against strangers on the internet whose training history, age, and experience you know nothing about.

"The cyclist who improves fastest isn't the one who suffers most – it's the one who's still riding in six months."

Better ways to measure your own progress

- How does a familiar route feel compared to a month ago at the same effort?
- Is your resting heart rate trending downward over several weeks?
- Can you hold a conversation at a pace that used to leave you breathing hard?
- Are you recovering faster between rides than you did 8 weeks ago?

COACH'S NOTE

Progress in cycling is non-linear. There will be weeks that feel like you're going backward. That's normal – trust the process, keep the easy rides easy, and the fitness will come. Consistency over 6 months beats intensity over 6 weeks every time.

Your First 12 Weeks — A Simple Framework

You don't need a complicated plan to make excellent progress in your first three months. You need consistency, mostly-easy riding, and a small amount of structured intensity once a base is established. This framework applies all seven principles from the previous sections.

Weeks	Focus	What it looks like in practice
1–4	Build the habit	3–4 rides per week at an easy, conversational pace. Aim for 45–75 min per session. Consistency is the only goal — not speed or distance.
5–8	Extend the base	Keep 3 shorter easy rides. Add one longer ride each week, building to 90–120 min by week 8. Still Zone 2 effort throughout.
9–11	Add intensity	Keep easy rides easy. Add one structured session per week: e.g. 5 x 3 min at a hard-but-controlled effort with 3 min recovery between each.
12	Consolidate	An easier week — reduce volume by 30–40%. Let the adaptation happen. Note how much easier Week 1 would feel right now.

This framework is intentionally conservative. Most newcomers want to do more in weeks 1–4, and almost all of them benefit from holding back. The fitness you build in these first 12 weeks forms the ceiling for everything that comes after it — rush it and you'll pay later.

COACH'S NOTE

Once you have this base established, the returns on structured, individualised training increase significantly. A coach or a proper structured plan will take you much further from this point than guesswork — the base you've built means you're finally ready to use it properly.

The Quick Reference Checklist

Everything in this guide, distilled to one printable page. Run through this regularly — especially in your first few months.

BIKE FIT

- Saddle height gives a slight knee bend at the bottom of each stroke
- No numbness in hands, feet, or saddle area after 20 minutes
- Cleat position checked — ball of foot over the axle

TRAINING

- 70–80% of ride time at genuinely easy (conversational) effort
- Hard efforts are structured and intentional, not accidental
- Effort monitored with HR or RPE every ride

RECOVERY

- At least one full rest day every week, non-negotiable
- An easier week every 3–4 weeks as volume increases
- 7+ hours of sleep consistently prioritised

NUTRITION

- Fuelling early on rides over 60–90 min, not waiting until hungry
- Hydrating consistently, even on cold or short rides
- Carbohydrate intake matched to ride duration and intensity

GEAR & MAINTENANCE

- Tyre pressure checked before every ride
- Chain cleaned and lubricated every 150–250km
- Can fix a puncture confidently before needing to roadside

GOALS

- One specific, time-bound goal clearly defined
- Progress tracked against personal baseline, not others
- Consistency over 6 months is the primary success measure

Where to Go From Here

Everything in this guide will carry you a long way. Cyclists who get these ten things right in their first year avoid the vast majority of setbacks that cause people to plateau, get injured, or simply stop riding.

But there's a natural ceiling to what a general guide can do for any individual, because every rider's starting point, physiology, time availability, and goals are different. That's the point at which structured, individualised coaching starts to make a genuinely significant difference – not in vague motivational terms, but in measurable fitness gains.

A good coach doesn't just write your sessions. They interpret your data, adjust your plan when life gets in the way, identify the specific weaknesses holding back your performance, and ensure the training you do is the training you actually need – rather than the training you guess you might need.

What structured coaching looks like in practice

- Training built around your specific data, not a generic template
- Weekly plan adjustments based on how your body is actually responding
- Race and event-specific preparation with a properly structured taper
- Accountability, feedback, and an expert second opinion when something isn't working

Ready to take the next step?

Tried & Tested Cycle Coaching offers personalised, evidence-based coaching programmes and structured training plans for riders at every level – from those building their first aerobic base to competitive Masters athletes chasing podiums.

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