

# Advice for casual riders on buying a bike

By Toby Dogwiler

**Audience:** I wrote this for my friends who are not serious cyclists, but who have questions about how to buy a good bike for themselves or their families. This is targeted at people who would be best classified as casual, recreational cyclists. If you want to get serious about cycling from a fitness or competitive standpoint then the following advice is at most a starting point for you. We should engage in what will be a much more fun and more in-depth conversation. However, the information at the end of this document about the price of higher end bikes will certainly be useful. With that said...

**Know the Purpose for your bike:** Firstly, there are many types of specialized bike styles: Fat bikes, mountain bikes, and time trial bikes are good examples. Unless you intend to primarily use the bike for one of those specialized purposes, you want to steer toward a more “generalized” bike.

Most people who are looking for a generalized bike have a primary purpose that is somewhere on the “fitness to casual recreation” spectrum. A pure “fitness” rider would be someone who wants to use their bike to get in shape, build cardiovascular capacity, and get faster. The other end of the spectrum is someone purely interested in “casual recreation”. That would be someone who will only use the bike to ride with their family around the neighborhood or on a developed bike path or trail. This person probably won’t ride many miles per week and won’t care about speed.

Most people are going to fall somewhere on this spectrum for their primary biking goal. Many people will also have secondary goals. So, for example, someone primarily interested in fitness may also want to use the bike for occasional family recreation rides. A good analogy is shoes. Walking shoes and running shoes are different. A runner will definitely want running shoes, but the running shoes will be fine for the occasional walk. Likewise, walking shoes are okay for the occasional jog. Which type of shoes you buy should depend on which activity you intend to do the most.

In addition, you need to consider other potential uses of your bike such as commuting. There’s a bike for every purpose and if you purchase strategically you can probably find a bike that will serve your primary purpose well and your secondary purposes adequately. But you need to know your purposes and express them clearly to your bike shop. When you go to the bike shop you should feel like they are “hearing” you and working through the pros and cons of the various options relative to your purposes.

**A note mountain bikes.** Most people will say they want a mountain bike when first asked what they are looking for. I think this is because they don’t want a road bike but don’t realize there are many other alternatives. A mountain bike is a very specialized type of bike and only does one thing well. I do not advise getting a mountain bike unless you really intend to go mountain biking on MTB trails. Other bike styles are much more versatile and will serve you better on the recreational / fitness spectrum. If you are not experienced at MTB, but you are interested in occasionally riding on some easy trails or gravel roads, you might be much better off looking at a gravel bike. You won’t be stump jumping on a gravel bike, but it can handle dirt, mud, and gravel and most gravel bikes have a geometry that will work well across the fitness to recreation spectrum.

**Versatility:** The bike that many/most people should be looking at is something listed as “comfort”, “commuter”, or “fitness” on the KHS website (<https://khsbicycles.com/>). I’m not necessarily recommending KHS, I just think their website shows the different bike classes well and they have lots of options within each

class. In fact, I don't think any of the local bike shops in the Springfield area carry KHS. However, most other large brands offer a similar range and quality of bikes. For what it's worth, my wife and daughter both have this model of KHS: <https://khsbicycles.com/bikes/vitamin-a-16/>. Sometimes the bikes in the categories listed above are generically called "hybrids", although there is a specific bike geometry referred to as "hybrid", too. The general term "hybrid" refers to a bike geometry that offers a compromise: they do well on pavement, hard packed gravel, and for most purposes on the fitness to recreation spectrum. Their geometry is such that you sit in a more upright position (versus a road bike where you are positioned to lean further forward). Hybrids will fit tires that are similar to road bikes tires as well as tires that are a little wider and would work for hard-packed gravel like the Frisco Trail or Katy Trail. The hybrid bike geometry is relaxed—so it is more comfortable—but that is not a position that is going to allow you to do a hardcore workout or fulfill a "need for speed".

**Purchasing:** How to shop...and where. Buy your bike at a bike shop. You may pay a little bit more, but you will get a LOT more. When you buy at a bike shop you are entering into a relationship. When I go to my bike shop they give me great service. I recently took one of my bikes in because the back wheel was rubbing. Because I bought the bike there and I am a regular customer they did the adjustment while I waited and for free. The little bit extra you pay at the local bike shop is more than made up for in terms of quality, service, and support.

Stay away from Walmart, Target, and other big box stores. Their bikes are cheap, and you'll have problems with the shifters and other moving components almost right away. You'll get the bike for \$150 and then not ride it because it's heavy and doesn't work right. These cheap bikes have cheap components that are not as serviceable and repairable as better bikes. They are essentially disposable. The components include the brakes, shifters, derailleurs, chain, etc.—basically everything attached to the frame. The frame is the one thing you probably won't have problems with. The components are what need serviced, tuned, and maintained on a bike. Cheap components will eventually relegate your bike to the dustbin and it's common for "big box" bikes to never shift right or brake correctly from day one. Certainly, they won't be working right by day 30.

I suggest that you visit two or three local bike shops. Tell them what you are interested in. The KHS Vitamin A that my wife and daughter ride were about \$400. You should be expecting to get something in that price range if you're shopping for a good quality, lower-end hybrid (note: in this case lower end is not junk and is suitable for most casual uses). You will end up with a much better bike than the Walmart / Target junk. With an occasional tune-up and maintenance, it will work for you indefinitely.

You may be able to find something a little cheaper if you ask them about used bikes. Used bikes purchased at a real bike shop are often a great deal. I purchased three of my five bikes used and I have saved thousands of dollars. Bike shops may not display used inventory, but they often have some stuff "in back". Or if they know what you are looking for, they will give you a call when something comes in that fits your needs. That's how I got my most recent bike. This is a great way to save a lot of money if you are looking for a medium to higher-end bike and aren't in a hurry.

If you are after a higher degree of training and exertion, you should look at something like a road bike (or a bike with a similar geometry like a gravel, cyclocross, or touring bike). Not all road-type bikes have a super-aggressive riding position, and the position can be tweaked based on what is comfortable for you. Road bikes intimidate people, but they are great bikes for exercise and casual riding. If you lean toward the exercising end of the spectrum and want to do longer rides or plan to ride more than 40 miles per week you should be looking at a road bike. A good road bike will cost you more than a hybrid or other more casual bike. A good entry-level bike in this category will be \$600-\$1000.

**Brands:** Don't be too concerned about the brand. The purpose of the bike is the important thing! Trek is a brand most people have heard of and their higher end bikes are *really* good. But they also have low end models for big box stores that are junk. Other brands you haven't heard of may be really good. Here is a good rule of thumb: if you see a bike in Walmart, regardless of brand, it is junk. Period. If you see a brand you've never heard of at your local bike shop, it is most likely a solid brand and a good bike. A *real* bike shop carries brands they are willing to stand behind. They will be able to service the bike they sell you and maintain it for you indefinitely. Bike shops know that they can't compete with Walmart on price. So they are selling you quality, service, and support. It's worth the extra money.

**Also, about price...** Between \$0 and \$1000 you get what you pay for when it comes to bikes. The difference in bike quality between \$150 and \$400 and \$1000 is really big between each step. However, after about \$1000 the differences become much smaller. A \$400 bike from a bike shop will be 10x better than \$150 bike from Walmart. A \$1000 bike will be much better than the \$400 bike. However, a \$5000 bike will be hard for the novice to distinguish from a \$1000 bike.

**Why do some people spend thousands?** Past about \$1000 you are paying for (1) less weight, (2) incrementally higher quality components and frame, and / or (3) specialization. Firstly, when I say high end, I'm not even talking about the stuff they ride in the Tour de France. Those bikes can cost \$50,000 dollars because everything is custom built and fit. So, when I say high-end, I'm talking about the bikes and components that mere mortals can purchase.

Most people don't walk into a bike shop and buy a \$7000 bike. Usually, they buy a high-quality frame for \$1500 to \$2500 and start with modest stock components or move components over from their old bike. Then they save up and buy better wheels and upgrade the groupset (i.e., the shifters, brakes, chainrings, and cranks). Once you get into this range the components can get really expensive. As one ascends the hierarchy of components each step higher in quality yields smaller and more incremental differences that come at an increasingly greater cost. This is usually due to lower weight, greater stiffness, greater accuracy, and more precision (especially with shifting). A high-end drivetrain (the pedals, cranks, sprockets, chain, and derailleurs) will be lightweight but stiff, and as such, will better translate the power applied to the pedals into forward velocity. A top-of-the-line road bike drivetrain can run well north of \$1,500 dollars. High end wheels can cost \$1500 to \$3500. Eventually, they end up with a bike that is worth many thousands in terms of the "new" price for their frame and all the upgraded pieces and parts.

Is the \$5000 or \$7000 or \$10,000 bike better than the \$1000 entry level? Yes. Is the difference in price proportional to the increased quality, speed, or performance of the bike? Definitely not! I know cyclists who are 20 pounds overweight and paid top dollar for a super light bike. From an economic and speed perspective it would have been much cheaper for them to lose the 20 pounds and buy a cheaper bike. That leaner, stronger person on a \$1000 bike will beat the overweight person on the \$10,000 bike *every. single. time.* However, prestige is certainly a part of having an expensive bike. The high-end bike will impress all your cyclist friends at the next group ride—at least until they all get dropped by the cardio beast on the economy bike.

With that said, I also know cyclists who are competitive on the local, state, and national level. For them, the difference between the \$5000 bike and the \$7000 bike might be the difference between a state championship and being runner up. They are at the top of their game in terms of fitness and skill and the bike is a potential edge over the competition. For people at this level the extra cost for that small additional advantage is a price they will happily pay. But remember: a great bike will not make a mediocre rider a champion.

Let me know if you have questions!