

Travel the Benelux

Cyclo-cross racing is action-packed excitement

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Exhilarating, entertaining and fast-paced, cyclo-cross racing has everything you need for a great spectator sport. Fans line the course — standing so close that they could reach out and touch the riders as they scramble past. Cyclo-cross incorporates mud, grass and pavement into every course, and uphill climbs, sharp turns and steep descents play a part in most races.

Cyclo-cross started in Europe as a winter diversion for road racers. They took their bikes off the road for some variety in their training. It quickly became a specialized discipline.

Because it's a major sport in Belgium or, more precisely, Flanders, professional cyclo-cross rankings are dominated by racers from the Benelux. Current elite rankings for men (as determined by Union Cycliste Internationale, or UCI, the world governing body for cycling,) show three Belgian and two Dutch riders in the top five. In the Oct. 15 issue of *Velo News*, an American magazine devoted to bike racing, a feature story

on the most iconic and dynamic venues for cyclo-cross in Europe cited five courses, all in Belgium. In January, the world championships will be held in Belgium. There hasn't been an elite world-championship podium without a Belgian on it since 1998: Belgians have taken the top spot 12 times and swept the podium five times.

"This is where the best riders in the world are; that's why I'm here," said four-time U.S. national champion Jonathan Page, who is based in Oudenaarde, Belgium, for the September-to-March season.

Courses often have a section in which riders dismount and carry their bikes because it's unrideable or just quicker to run. Elite cross races are usually an hour for the men and 40 minutes for the women. Races end when the time limit is reached rather than after a specific number of laps or distance. Most races use short laps from 1.5 km to 2.5 km (about a mile to a mile-and-a-quarter) over terrain from bogs to cobblestones to

farmer's fields. Weather conditions can vary widely from warm and sunny to freezing and snowy.

Fans seem to prefer the more challenging weather. The day of the Koppenbergcross, the weather was warm, and the sun was shining — in short, perfect. Well, that's what you would think — until you come across true cyclo-cross enthusiasts.

"We like it when it's raining or snowing," said one fan along the course, "then it's fun to watch."

Cross racing isn't just for the pros. There are many races for beginners, both adults and children.

"Racing cyclo-cross is a total rush," said Amy Holmes, a USAG Benelux employee who has competed in cyclo-cross races in the United States. "You are riding at your maximum speed for the entire race while dodging obstacles, pushing your bike up muddy slopes and carrying your bike on your shoulder up stairs. The fans really make cyclo-cross racing fun!"

Visit <http://www.uci.ch/cyclo-cross>.



Upcoming races of note

Nov. 22: UCI World Cup, Koksijde, Belgium.

Dec. 6: Druivecross, Overijse, Belgium.

Dec. 20: Namur World Cup, Namur, Belgium.

Jan. 9 to 10, 2016: Belgian National Championships, Lille, Belgium

Jan. 9 to 10, 2016: Dutch National Championships, Hellendoorn, the Netherlands.

Jan. 30 to 31, 2016: World Championships, Heusden-Zolder, Belgium.