

EXPERT JOURNAL / CYCLING

An Expert Guide to Cycling Shoes

There are a ton of options when it comes to cycling shoes! Check out this guide from Cycling Expert Jacob Cummings to decide which shoe is the best fit for you



BY JACOB CUMMINGS



Photo by Ashley de Lotz

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- Why Use Cycling Shoes?
 - Considering Your Bike's Pedals
 - My Shoe of Choice
- What Shoes Do I Recommend for Bike Commuters?
- What Shoe Would I Recommend for Cycling? MTB Sneakers
- There Is a Time for Cycling Shoes and Pedals
- How Do You Know When You Need to Wear Cycling Shoes?
 - Will I Be Walking Less Than 10% of My Total Bike Ride?
 - Will I Be Walking Less Than 30% of the Overall Ride?
 - Will I Be Walking About 50% of the Overall Ride?
 - Will I Be Walking 80% or More of the Overall Bike Ride?



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CYCLING EXPERT



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I will be one of many enthusiastic and committed riders to admit it: I cannot remember the last time I wore [cycling shoes](#). Only after years of experimenting with a variety of footwear options that featured either carbon soles for road biking, heavy lugs for mountain biking, or just plain sneakers for urban adventures did I discover my nuanced preferences for different contexts.

Why Use Cycling Shoes?

It's been a matter of me identifying and realizing the importance of this question: *What exactly do I need my feet for around the near moments when they aren't planted to the pedals and spinning away?*

And the context to the question's answer has been the last six years: Me working four seasons a year as a bike courier. During a normal work shift, I might walk three to eight miles. I started working as a courier wearing an old pair of [Sidi Dominators](#) and [Shimano SPD pedals](#). That was okay for me, but, ultimately, I was not thrilled about the quality of walking and found myself worrying about breaking my ankles on slippery surfaces—the greasy tiles of fast food restaurants, foremost. So I decided that with all the time I spent going back and forth between people's front doors, elevator lobbies, and restaurant pick-up areas, I needed the most reliable traction and comfort of walking combined with the best possible cycling experience.





Most bike couriers wear sneakers because they have such a variety of tasks to do on their feet all day long, aside from riding the bike. Photos by Jacob Cummings

What shoe do I love for all-day comfort when walking and aggressively riding my bike 30 to 50 miles around the city? Let's first talk about pedals a bit more.

Considering Your Bike's Pedals

I love basic, flat pedals or what we call "platform pedals." I like the kind of pedals that are the least offensive and will never tear my shins apart in case I brush against them one of the 60 times a day that I'm getting on and off the bike. And because my pedals are so slick and devoid of traction, I have to compensate with the grippiest rubber I can find.

My Shoe of Choice

I have found that I prefer riding with a low profile, gum rubber outsole, and laced shoe. I like the materials of the uppers to be flexible, lightweight, and breathable canvas. The **Adidas Nizza Low** fits the bill. I love how the canvas ages, it develops a great faded-black patina, but what I like even more is that they're affordable and easy to replace. And at the end of a long work week, it's simple enough to throw them in the washing machine before letting them air dry. The pair I'm currently wearing has nearly 10,000 miles of courier work on them in the last seven months.

What Shoes Do I Recommend for Bike Commuters?

Many people who [commute on a bike](#) fit into a similar category as me on the topic of the right cycling shoes. The prime ones encompass the tension of cycling enjoyment held together with the freedom to move nonetheless. For those reasons, I prefer and recommend riding in sneakers that have a flat sole.

I do love the versatility of the [Converse All-Star](#) and [Vans Slip-Ons](#) because they're great for flat pedals. But I am not impressed with their durability. I've seen it happen so many times: The toe box often splits on the Vans, and the sidewall of the All-Star busts open, leaving a flapping piece of gum rubber on the bottom. If you know, you know.

Then there is the case of the [Adidas Sambas](#). It is a good match, and many folks love them, but they're just not for me. I do not prefer them because their leather material isn't as breathable. This makes for hot and wet feet during the ride and wet shoes at the end of the day. This cumulates into gross shoes that never get enough time to air out, especially around the toe of the shoe.



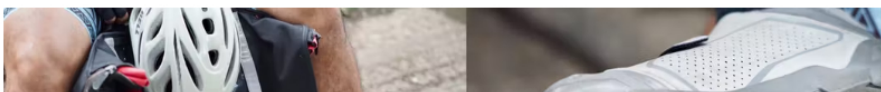
It's true, the original Adidas Samba is one of the champions for cycling. It's such a good option that Adidas made a version of it that is specifically for cycling. Photos by Jacob Cummings

There is also the [Chrome Kursk](#), which is made for this kind of urban commuter stuff. They have a classic canvas sneaker aesthetic but upon closer inspection, you'll find everything about the shoe is overbuilt and cycling specific. The canvas is tougher than your standard sneaker, the sole has a nylon plate running from toe to heel to provide protection and rigidity while pedaling. And most importantly, this shoe has a standard two-bolt plate for installing a cleat for clipless pedals. In my experience, walking in these was less comfortable than a regular pair of sneakers, and cycling in them was not quite as good as a complete cycling shoe. Overall though, I have owned them before and would be open to trying them again.

However, the [Adidas Nizza Low](#) is, in my opinion, one of the most simple and technically advanced shoes in this category. There are many reasons for this nomination. For starters, the Nizza is a durable and superior fit above all the modern gum outsole flats. It has a suede-style heel cup that holds your foot in place, letting your ankles do the work, and the heel cup material lasts way longer than the canvas construction of the Converse or the Vans. The Nizza also has a half-open rubber toe cap that creates a perfect balance of providing protection while remaining breathable and lightweight.

What Shoe Would I Recommend for Cycling? MTB Sneakers

Because my choice of cycling shoe is so soft, I'm losing out on a ton of pedaling efficiency that I could be experiencing with more specific cycling shoes. And while I'm certainly not alone in my choice of footwear, I know most bike couriers in my life still ride with purpose-built cycling shoes. Most often, I see them wearing clapped-out MTB shoes with a nylon sole; these are a very secure fit with loop straps or a BOA dial over lace and tongue. Their choices offer a consistent cycling experience. Wearing mountain bike shoes for urban commuting is a classic option that many people continue to prefer.





Shimano SPD pedals combined with MTB shoes a top choice with bike couriers. This rider admitted they started out wearing road shoes and quickly learned how dangerous it was to be walking around in them. Photos by Jacob Cummings

There Is a Time for Cycling Shoes and Pedals

For years of my life, I only used Shimano 105 SPD SL road pedals with [Specialized Pearl Izumi](#) or [Fizik](#) road shoes that had full-length lightweight carbon soles and a BOA dial or velcro strap closure. All the shoes I wore had highly breathable materials and outsoles that were vented to keep my feet dry and cool. These were for long days of getting lost in Skamania County or the backroads and rolling hills of Oregon's Willamette Valley. This was my spin class: Carrying speed at a good clip with no exclusions before returning to the city for racing the local criteriums at Portland International Raceway and on Mount Tabor.

I would have been unhappy and possibly injured without wearing cycling shoes with proper tension on the pedals and a studio fit on the cleats. In this case, [bike comfort and longevity](#) are critical to having an integrated sole to create a seamless bond with the bike's pedals. At which point, the ankles become such a key player in the whole dynamic; it's almost like the feet become part of the bike. Perfect unity.

How Do You Know When You Need to Wear Cycling Shoes?

Well, what if someone told you that you needed to own a pair of cycling shoes? It would've been helpful if, along with their gratuitous advice, they could've enlightened you on what specific types and when to wear them. I'll try my best to lead us all to the right answers.

There are many questions that come into play here: Should you get a pair with perfect cleat alignment from the professional at your local bike studio to protect your knees and hips? Something with SPD compatibility, loop straps, or BOA dial?

The magic within these questions is that they already have the answers you're looking for. It's up to you to explore and decide for yourself.

For me? There's a self-questionnaire I use to explore whether I choose a gum outsole sneaker or BOA dials with a nylon sole for my day. The default logic always abides with: walking in cycling shoes sucks more than cycling in sneakers. And yet, cycling in cycling shoes is way less work than sneakers. So, you have to examine how much of your bike ride day will be actually allotted to riding.

Will I Be Walking Less Than 10% of My Total Bike Ride?

If you answered "yes," it sounds like you might be taking riding seriously for reasons other than just transportation. Perhaps [training or preparing for a race](#)? Consider if a carbon fiber composite sole makes sense for you as you will get the most energy transfer to the pedals. The rigidity of your cycling shoe will positively impact your overall riding experience. Whether you're in the mud on a [mountain bike](#) or crunching gravel, I feel you should 100% consider wearing cycling shoes.

Maybe you already own cycling shoes and pedals but haven't had a professional fit? Don't hesitate on this! Get to your local studio and pay a professional fitter to adjust your cleats to help make sure you don't hurt your knees or other joints. If you don't have nearby access to one, [hit up a Cycling Expert here on Curated](#), and we'll see how we can help you!

Will I Be Walking Less Than 30% of the Overall Ride?

I would consider at this point the importance of the wide range of expert- and entry-level cycling shoes with an adjustable cleat. Mountain bike shoes will be your best option here, or if you have space and desire to bring a second pair of shoes for walking. Lightweight sandals can be great for this.

Will I Be Walking About 50% of the Overall Ride?

You guessed it: It's probably time to embrace the old-school sneaker if this is your particular situation.

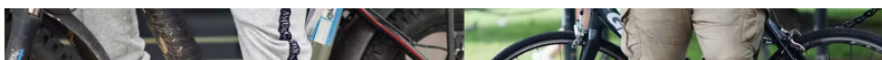
This is where top cycling shoe brands just can't deliver, no matter what. No amount of adhering to the stiffness index of cycling shoes will help you here because walking will just not be fun with them, and your bike's pedals will be waiting there unspun while you struggle to traverse the earth in your clompy footwear. If you *really* still want cycling shoes, take a look at the [Adidas Velosamba](#) and the [Chrome Kursk](#) once again. And even still, consider heavily bringing a second pair of shoes.

Or maybe it's time to relax and just ride in sneakers.

Will I Be Walking 80% or More of the Overall Bike Ride?

I hope it's obvious at this point what that question's circumstance means. I wish to fully empower you to wear exactly whatever footwear you need, but you might be best served in sneakers over cycling shoes in this case.

However, please do prioritize whatever shoe you're feeling most comfortable with despite the bike ride. Again, the ultimate decision is up to you (and your feet). With a pick (and a second backup) made, get on the bike and happy riding.





Both of these photos are of bicycle couriers who work full time and have decided that they like to wear whatever is most comfortable or protective for their feet. Photos by Jacob Cummings

Thank you for reading, and thanks to all the bicycle couriers in Washington, D.C., who let me photograph their feet for this article.

If you still have questions about what kind of cycling shoes to set out in for your next ride, you don't even have to find them yourself. At Curated, you can [connect to Cycling Expert](#) who can give you personalized recommendations in minutes. All for free!

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Presently, traveling the US in my truck and camper, I am enjoying part-time work as a bicycle courier in the various urban areas that I pass through! Although my peak athletic days are long behind me, I used to enjoy racing different kinds of bikes on the road, track, cyclocross, mountain and BMX. I...

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