

TTIPS Vol. 4/22 – Insights
Bike Fit

Donna and I have a West Highland White Terrier, also known as a "Westie" for short. His name is Duffy and he's energetic, feisty, and sometimes stubborn....signature characteristics of Terrier breeds. As a Terrier, he was bred to hunt rodents and other small animals, and he has a very strong prey instinct....he will chase nearly anything that moves. Case in point; he used to chase everyone on a bicycle. No matter what we did we couldn't stop him. It got so bad, sadly we finally had to take his bike away.

Okay, you know I'm kidding, right? We'd never take away his bike. Let's go.

Last week we introduced a few important generalities about the "fit" of your bike. Let's go slightly deeper on the topic. Recall that we mentioned that your body meets your bike at your feet, your hands, and your backside. This week we'll talk briefly about your hands and handlebars. In coming additions, we'll cover feet/shoes and pedals, and your backside and saddle.

Your hands and the handlebars:

It is mostly intuitive to all of us that the distance between our handlebars and our saddle is a key component of our fit. We get that. We seldom think however, about other important nuances of the bars themselves and what effect their shape, size, geometry and tilt might have. These nuances are often overlooked by riders and some fitters, and thus remain obscured causes of rider dissatisfaction or relatively poorer performance, even with otherwise great fits. So, before we get into fit, let's look at that stuff.

Most of us have drop bars on our road bikes, gravel bikes, and cyclocross bikes. Generally, these bikes and those like them are built for speed, aerodynamic efficiency, and optimum positioning of your body to deliver power to the pedals. Some road bikes and most hybrid and mountain bikes have straight bars. In the case of mountain bikes and hybrids, generally these bikes are built for off-road and unimproved road terrain and are designed to help control the direction of the bike on challenging surfaces. On these bikes, aerodynamics is less important than control thus the rider sits more upright than those on bikes with drop bars. On bikes with straight bars, the further apart your hands are, within reason, the greater and more precise direction control you will have over the bike.

In contrast, the further apart your hands are on a road bike, the less aerodynamic you will be, and because you are tilted forward - to maximize your aerodynamic efficiency - the more quickly your arms and hands will fatigue as you support your upper torso. So, on a road bike, you will compromise some control relative to off-road bikes with straight bars as

you position your hands and arms inward. As you move your hands further inward on drop bars to be more aerodynamic though, your ride position can become very unsafe because you are compromising steering authority over your front wheel. Imagine how it would feel moving your hands inward until they touch each other. Shaky and scary. So, how far apart should they be, and why? On road bikes, fitters will tell you that when your hands are on the brake/shifter hoods (the normal riding position for most roadies) they should be even with (on the same plane as) the natural crease formed by the inside of your shoulder and your torso. That's conventional wisdom and guidance.

So, for you roadies, let's do this by the numbers. With your back straight and shoulders out, put your right-hand fingertips on the outside of your left shoulder, then slowly draw your fingers inward towards your chest. As your fingers depart the roundness of the inside of your shoulder and meet the outer part of your pectoral muscles - STOP. That's the crease we are talking about. The distance between that crease and the corresponding crease on the outside of your right arm is the optimum distance of your bars measured at the brake/shifter hoods.

Now, that is optimum for folks who really want their best position to achieve best speed and a balance of comfort. For me, when my hands are that close together, I feel a bit unstable, so I opt to have my hands a bit wider.

For hybrid and straight bar riders, if you are riding on asphalt (because you are in the Kickin' Asphalt club and not the Kickin' Dirt club), the size of your handlebars may be less important to you. If your hands get numb, or other body parts are prematurely fatigued, the cause is unlikely to be the size of your bars. As long as you are comfortable and you feel in control, you are likely to be "good to go" with respect to the size of your bars.

For all, I emphasize again that this is all advisory. If you like what you have now, keep it. But if you are experience hand, shoulder, or arm fatigue or numbness on distance rides, think about the size of your handlebars. Later, as we get deeper into fit, we'll discuss distance from the saddle, and height of your bars, both of which are also important. Until then,

Make Every Ride Epic,
Darryl

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