

Passion for cycling blends technology and nostalgia

They say those who want to start a new business should keep in a business area they know something about. Simon Mottram has been passionate about cycling for many years and he will talk eloquently about the history of racing cycling to any audience. He explains how, in the UK, road racing was forbidden in the 1940s meaning that 'racing cycling' was for many years based on time trials. Now he believes we have a generation of boomers who are nostalgic for the continental cycling of the glory days and want to emulate this when they are themselves keeping fit or cycling to work. Yet many of these enthusiasts now have the money to indulge in the type of product which allows them to marry the best in modern technology with their memories of those past glories, real and imagined. As Mottram puts it he recognised "a growing market for men of a certain age, who ride bikes, are short of time, and have a bit of money…"

Therefore when he set up his new business, Rapha, the search for the appropriate technologies for the modern cycling enthusiast who has everything was wide and deep right down to the carefully chosen reflective tape and piping from JRC-reflex from France—a world leader in reflective materials in areas such as cycling and women's running. Also in the Rapha range is pure merino wool in selected layers and a prize-winning shirt in Sportwool. Some of the shorts are made from water and stain resistant Schoeller Nanosphere fabric. The company's shorts also use the top of the range Petacchi pad from Nalini, designed in conjunction with the great sprinter; the pad has pronounced padding to support the sit bones, with a super-soft chamois-like cover across the rest of the seat area.

Typical of Rapha's collection is the "Fixed" jersey, designed for everyday urban riding, to and from work, grabbing a quick training run or dashing across town to the next meeting. Full racing gear is impractical, but 'commuter clothes' and baggy mountain bike gear are unappealing.

The Fixed jersey is a performance garment that looks good enough to wear to the office or to a bar. It uses pure New Zealand merino to provide excellent moisture transfer on warm days and insulation when it's cold. The jersey has a generous fit for all-day wear, with extra-long sleeves and back for enhanced comfort on the bike. The use of a 20cm Riri zip gives a pared down, elegant style with no unnecessary rear pockets.

Sportwool cycling shirt voted 'Top Top'

Cycling Plus magazine gave the Gold award to the Sportwool cycling jersey made by Rapha, for best product in category. It said that the top was chosen over the others because of the quality of the garment and its functionality, versatility and style despite carrying a seemingly expensive price tag. Cycling Plus said, "The top was superbly well-made from the very latest technical fabric, and had matching arm warmers." Sportwool is a blend of Merino wool and polyester that offers the natural benefits of wool, such as insulation and wicking, but with added ease of care and workability. Designed to be worn next to the skin or as a mid-layer, the Rapha jersey also incorporates a lower back gripper to prevent the top riding up, and hem adjusters for a snug fit to maintain body temperature.

One clever piece of kit is the Emergency Gilet. However carefully you prepare for a ride, the weather can always catch you out and there are often moments—such as the early morning, at the top of a hill, or a mechanical problem on the way home in the evening—when a little more protection is needed. The Rapha Emergency Gilet was designed with these moments in mind. It is manufactured from 30g parachute silk that is described as "light as a feather, but as tough as a Belgian rouleur". It is completely windproof and will keep the rain off for 30 minutes which is thought to be enough time to get you to shelter. It comes with its own stuff sack with straps to attach it under the saddle. To minimise the weight and bulk of the gilet a full front zip has been replaced by twin zips on the shoulders. A Lycra binding around the arm holes and base ensures a snug fit. The high neck is held in place by Velcro. The mesh back is totally breathable, with a central spray panel at the bottom and a small chest pocket with concealed zip completes the specification.

Most of the items made by Rapha are sold on the Internet, and they are one of only a few companies that have been successful in selling gloves this way. The company does recognise that gloves are difficult, and it is the category in which it receives the most returned goods, but it still views it as overwhelmingly worthwhile. Rapha notes that the average transaction made on the Rapha website is over $200. It has a variety of gloves in its range including the Fixed glove which is intended to give protection from falls with a full back and padded knuckles. Super soft and strong, perforated African hair sheep leather is used, with sniper glove padding taken from the cult Rapha Grand Tour mitts. The gloves are sourced from Burfield in England which made some of the original cycling gloves when it was itself a young company back in the 1940s.



Rapha

In talking openly about the products Mottram says, "Our clothes and accessories celebrate the glory and suffering of road racers. I used to frequent my local bike shop and was frustrated with the quality and style of the clothes and accessories on offer. Where was the passion? I didn't want to wear unflattering, day-glo Lycra. Road riders deserve the best fabrics, features and styles so they look and feel better on the bike. At Rapha we're trying to meet that need."

Not a clothing brand, but a road racing brand

Mottram argues that Rapha is not a clothing brand, but a road racing brand. The products cross many categories but are united in their reference to and passion for the sport of road racing. As well as performance clothing, it has now added luggage and a magazine to its portfolio. Other things are also in the pipeline.