

This winter, hundreds of families are signing up for cycling's wacky races – a full-on challenge to go as fast as you can over an obstacle course that leaves you fit and filthy. It's the most fun you'll ever have in lycra.

As the starter buzzer goes, 30 cyclists charge off at full speed over a rain-sodden grass park.

At the first muddy corner, two riders take a quick tumble on to the soft ground as the rest ride on.

Next up is a steep embankment and at least three more riders fall to the side.

While they struggle to haul themselves and their bikes to the top, the other cyclists race on to reach the next obstacle.

This time, all riders need to dismount to carry their bikes over a series of wooden planks before jumping back into the saddle to pedal on.

During the first lap of this eventful cyclocross event, which takes around six to seven minutes to complete, most riders skid, slide or fall off at least once.

But the amazing thing is that everyone is still smiling or grinning.

This is Scottish cyclocross racing at its best – wet, muddy, mad, challenging and yet, a great deal of fun.

In recent years, cyclocross events have grown significantly with the Callendar Park race in Falkirk a fortnight ago scoring a record entry of 388 riders.

“Most riders slide, skid or fall off once... but everyone's grinning”

Spaces on the Scottish Cyclocross winter series, which includes six events and culminates in a Scottish Championships, frequently sell out with another seven non-affiliated cyclocross races in Scotland this season also proving extremely popular. Davie Graham, secretary at the Scottish Cyclocross

Association, is delighted to see the sport gaining so much interest.

He said: "It is fantastic to see the growth of cyclocross from total entries of only 30 riders less than a decade ago to fields of almost 400 today.

"These last few years have seen the biggest growth, especially among women, children and men aged 40-plus.

"We have had to create more categories for riding age groups and for both genders, as well as extending the duration of the event to cope with entries."

A cyclocross event usually takes place in winter and follows a course across terrain that includes muddy trails, grass, woodland, tarmac and steep slopes.

Riders have to dismount to run over small hurdles and sometimes need to

THEY'RE OFF
Riders at the start of the Callendar Park race in Falkirk



MUD, SWEAT AND GEARS



FIONA RUSSELL

shoulder their bikes to get over natural obstacles.

The race comprises laps of one to two miles with riders competing to finish the most laps in a set time of 30 to 60 minutes, depending on age and gender.

Most use special cyclocross bikes, which are based on road bicycle frames with more clearance for mud and with the addition of disc brakes.

Others compete on mountain bikes.

Davie believes there are several reasons for its growing popularity. He said "There has been a general increase in cyclists – and many are now looking for a good way to stay cycle-fit in winter. In addition, cyclocross bikes have become popular for commuters on pot-holed roads and this then leads them to cyclocross races.

"And the word has simply spread that cyclocross is great fun."

Young cyclocross rider Louis Moore, of Edinburgh, agrees. Louis, 10, who races in the under-12s category, said: "Cyclocross is the best fun you can have on a bike.

"There is a bit of everything, from trails to road, mud and running. Where else would you be allowed to get so muddy without your parents telling you off?"

Dad Fraser, 41, nods. He said: "I didn't

realise how much fun cyclocross could be until I gave it a go. I tried it because I'm here with Louis anyway – and I now enjoy it as much as he does.

"Cyclocross is a great race for all ages and abilities."

The winning lady veteran at the Callendar Park race in Falkirk also followed her daughter into the sport.

Brenda Callander, 47, of Stirling, said: "My daughter Rhona loves cycling and has raced cyclocross for a few years.

"I thought it looked like fun so I decided to join her and I've not looked back.

"I am actually racing today while she is doing a track cycling session instead."

Brenda likes the speed and length of the event.

She said: "The races are over really quickly but they are still a great challenge so it keeps me fit.

"I have been impressed by how friendly the events are, especially for families.

"I'd recommend people just give it a go to see how much fun they can have on a bike in the mud."

● For more info and a race calendar, see www.scottishcyclocross.org.uk WWW.FIONAOUTDOORS@AOL.COM

PICTURE OF



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