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Bottles vs bladders – when to recommend what

When should you recommend that your customer consider a hydration pack, or when would a bottle be better? Which features should they consider, and which ones should they avoid when selecting a bladder or bottle.

Twenty years ago, this subject would make for easy reading. In the mid nineties, there was one hydration pack available. Invented by CamelBak, a whole new category of sports goods was created. There is very little to be said about the first model – two shoulder straps, a two-litre bladder, a plastic mouth-piece and a ground-breaking feature that distinguished it from a standard backpack: insulation, so the water didn't get too warm.

At the time, the theories of exercise science were filtering down from elite level coaches to the mass market, specifically hydration: athletes who drink fluids experienced a lesser fall-off in performance as the endurance workout progressed.

Bikers like bladders

The benefits of a hydration pack were self-evident:

- Fluid intake could be more regular and evenly dosed with the convenience and efficiency of always having a waterpipe on hand. With the emergence of mountain biking, participants were open to new ideas and once they'd used a hydration pack, it was hard to go back to using regular bottles or rely on refreshment stations during an event.
- "Safety is also a major feature for mountainbikers – eyes always on the path ahead!" says Graham Hall of Cape Cycles, distributors of CamelBak, "For me there are major advantages of a pack over bottles," says top-level adventure racer Tatum Prins of Ram Mountaineering.
- "Firstly a 3L reservoir holds far more than the two bottles on a bike or waist pack, which is what you would need in a long distance endurance race.
- "Secondly, depending on distance of the event, you often need to store a snack or an extra bit of clothing like a waterproof jacket. Side pockets on a hydration pack are especially convenient for easy access to

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Words: NEIL GARDINER. Compiled with the help of Graham Hall of Cape Cycles, distributor of CamelBak, Bruce Woodroffe of Awesome Tools, distributor of Geigerrig hydration systems, adventure racer Tatum Prins of Ram Mountaineering, Billy Honicker of Rebel Elite Fitness, distributors of Inov-8, Jacques Botes of Eiger Equipment, distributor of Nalgene, Rudolf Zuidema, marketing manager at Omnico, distributors of Ryder, Alexi Prodromou of Seagull Industries, distributor of Oztrail hydration packs.



food and gels, instead of digging in a back pocket."

It's not uncommon for customers to emulate their sports heroes on TV. At a mountain bike race, for instance, the top riders often carry bottles, while almost all the backmarkers wear hydration packs. But it's worth noting that the pros take half the time between waterpoints, so there's no need for them to carry more than 1.5L, especially since their race is finished before the mercury reaches maximum. Also, many have seconding or a *hotswap* bottle service.

Riders in the main field need to be a little more independent, so space to store up to 3L of water, food and tools is hugely convenient.

Disadvantages

One disadvantage, though, is that the average fully-filled bag weighs 5kg, changing the wearer's weight distribution and affecting bike or canoe handling.

A waist pack is a viable solution to this as Billy Honicker (of Rebel Elite Fitness, distributors of Inov-8) explains. "With a horizontal pack there's less sloshing and you don't have that extra weight on your shoulders throwing you around, and it takes pressure off the back. It's working quite well for running and cycling. In fact, I use it for enduro riding, the Duzi guys are using it, and we've had good feedback from riders in the ABSA Cape Epic."

- Another disadvantage is that a hydration pack can become uncomfortable on a hot day when you don't want the burden of an extra weight on your back.
- The cleaning and care of a hydration bladder is also more cumbersome than washing a bottle.

Bottles for hikers and campers

There is still a significant demand for bottles, Jacques Botes of Eiger Equipment points out.

- "Hydration packs are not always practical. For example, when you go camping or climbing you may want to collect water so that everyone can share it."
- Packs make it difficult to fetch water for cooking or other communal uses, but bottles have a variety of uses – for example, pouring water over your head if you want to cool down after a long hike.
- Other benefits of bottles are that they often come with a wide mouth, which makes it easy to add supplements and ice, and also to use with a water purifier.
- "For many customers a bottle is the best low-cost option – the cheapest pack can cost more than R200, but a good quality bottle costs about R100."

Botes does, however, caution that all good bottles should be BPA free. Bisphenol A, a compound used in the manufacturing of some plastic items, is controversial because it exerts hormone-like properties.

"People might say *Oh I'll just use a 2L cold drink bottle*. But it contains BPA and is not nearly as robust as a custom-made **To p42**



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Bottles vs bladders cont from p41

sports bottle. Our Nalgene bottles are super strong and have a lifetime warranty on them. If you, for example, go up Kilimanjaro, you'll need something that'll take the knocks."

What size to recommend

With so many shapes and sizes of hydration packs on the shelves, recommending the right option involves identifying the customer's needs. These would include the duration and type of workout or excursion, temperature, and the user's weight and fitness. Nearly all bags include a 1-3L reservoir. Typically, an 80kg rider would drink about 500ml/hour in moderate conditions, increasing that volume slightly for hot conditions. Bear in mind that the digestive system is only capable of absorbing up to 600ml per hour, so the best advice is to drink to thirst, for fear of overhydrating (a condition possibly more life-threatening than dehydration).

As a rule of thumb, try and upsell a customer to a larger reservoir, explaining that they can always half fill it.

However, it's also worth mentioning that when there is extra capacity in the bag, the user will fill it, often resulting in a bag that's too heavy.

Special features

Customers walk into a store with a preconceived idea of what they'd like to spend. Inevitably they'll find a pack with a tag to match.

Trouble is, while the price might be right, the quality and features might not measure up to their expectations.

By explaining the benefits of features found in more upmarket versions, the buyer will leave the store a satisfied customer with a good quality item.

Bladder opening: "A wide opening of the bladder makes it easy to add ice and a preferred energy drink and also to refill during a race with fumbling hands," explains Rudolf Zuidema, marketing manager at Omnico, distributors of Ryder.

Bite valve: "A good quality bite valve is essential, as is a mechanism to close it – if the valve begins to leak, this prevents the dreaded drip on the leg (and a car seat on the way home). Another useful feature is the ability

to route the hose to the left or right."

Storage: According to Hall some popular features are food pockets on the lumbar straps, as well as helmet holders, MP3 pockets and protective gear storage.

"Female specific packs (that are more dimensionally suited) are proving to very consistent sellers throughout the year," he says.

Materials: For Alexi Prodromou of Seagull Industries (Oztrail hydration packs) bladder materials are important. "Not all are BPA-free, which is the big scare at the moment. Ours have a lightweight TPU film, which is antifungal and antimicrobial, and it's freezer proof to -20 degrees. Some people put the bladder in the freezer, so that they'll have a constant supply of cold water."

Pressurised bladders: The concept of pressurised bladders is not new, but as Bruce Woodroffe of Awesome Tools says, it just required a rethink. "A 2-sleeve bladder ensures a pressurised system, without the fluid sloshing around. It can produce a steady stream of water that's cleaner, and can be used to spray dirt off a bike chain or a wound. There's also the added benefit of sharing your water with a friend – or a pet."

The Geigerrig hydration system with the spray nozzle has won nearly every award in the last two years, notably at the Outdoor Retail show in Salt Lake City.

"The thing is though, the pack isn't going to sell sitting on a shelf. The benefits should be shown on the floor," says Woodroffe. "We use a bucket for our training and also have a video loop that we play at point-of-sale."

Accessories: The sale of a pack allows opportunities for add-on sales in terms of accessories. CamelBak, for example, offer a flow meter, which measures the amount of fluid consumed. Filters are available too and supplements are an easy add-on.

Cleaning kits: Reservoir maintenance is essential. If sticky fluids are left in a bladder too long, it might have to be replaced, or worse, a customer could become quite ill from a contaminated pack, even after it had been rinsed. Due to the size of the reservoir, cleaning isn't easy. It would therefore be a good idea to recommend a cleaning kit to help reach the awkward spots.

Activity	Suggested options
Day hike, climbing excursion	Backpack with 15-25L cargo space and hydration, or a bladder only (2-3L reservoir) compatible with customer's backpack
Trail run	Waist pack or running-specific (2L) hydration pack with small cargo capacity and snug-fitting waist belt with pockets
Road bike ride	Sleek pack (1-2L) and some room for cargo – bottles are often preferred, insulated bottles are a good option
Paddling	2-3L hydration pack with moderate cargo capacity or snug-fitting waist pack with pockets
Road run, power walk	Minimalist waist or backpack (1L)
Mountain bike ride	Large pack with 5-12L cargo capacity; 2-3L reservoir