SPOKESPIECE · Gloucester City Cycling Club

Winter Miles, Together

An experienced club rider's guide to Zwift, and why we'd love to see you on our virtual club runs

By Jeff Welch

You know the club run. The roll-out from town, chat on the flat, half-wheeling on the way up to Painswick and the café stop. Then November comes. It's dark by half four, the lanes are covered in mud and leaves, and the gritters are out. For a lot of us winter means getting the turbo out and staring at the garage wall for an hour.

That's where Zwift comes in. If you've heard of it but filed it under "video games" or "something the youngsters do", this article is for you. You already have the fitness, the bunch skills and the competitive streak. Zwift just gives you somewhere to use them when the weather won't.

So what actually is Zwift?

Zwift is an app that connects your own bike to an online world. Your bike sits on a **smart trainer**, which measures the power you're putting out and sends it to Zwift. On screen, your avatar rides at the speed your watts and body weight would give you on the road.

The clever part is that it works both ways. When the road tilts up in the game, the trainer adds resistance, so you feel the climb in your legs. On a descent it eases off. **Drafting works too**: sit on a wheel and you use fewer watts, the same as outside. That one feature is why group riding, wheel-sitting and race tactics all carry over, and why a virtual bunch ride feels much more like the real thing than you'd expect.

There are thousands of riders online at any time of day, spread across several worlds. Watopia is a made-up island with everything from flat seafront loops to the Alpe du Zwift. There are also courses based on real places: London, Richmond, Innsbruck, Yorkshire, Scotland, New York and Paris, where you can ride the Champs-Élysées. You can ride on your own, do a structured workout, join an organised group ride or enter a race. There's an events calendar running all day.

What you need (less than you think)

Here's the good news: you probably have most of it already. To join a club ride next week, the bare minimum is:

> **1. Your bike.** The one in the hall will do.
>
> **2. Your phone, tablet or laptop.** Zwift runs on all of them.
>
> **3. A turbo trainer of any kind,** smart or basic. If it isn't "smart", a cheap speed sensor on the back wheel is enough. Zwift works out your power from the speed for most common turbos.

> **4. A Zwift account.** It's a monthly membership you can cancel any time. Check the Zwift website for current offers.

That's it. No turbo yet? Basic turbos turn up cheaply second-hand, and it's worth asking on the club Discord in case anyone has a spare to lend. Whatever you're riding on, I'm happy to help you get set up.

Nice-to-haves, not must-haves: a smart trainer, which adds resistance on the hills so you feel the climbs; a bigger screen; the free Zwift Companion app for signing up to rides; and a headset for chatting on Discord. Get a fan and a towel too. Indoors there's no breeze, and you'll be glad of both.

Not sure? Come and try it. Turn up to one club ride, ride steady at the back, have a chat and see what you think. Nobody is watching your numbers, and the ride keeps everyone together, so you can't get dropped. If you can ride a club run, you can do this.

Gloucester City club rides, the Discord way

Zwift has a **Clubs** feature, and that's where we're building up the Gloucester City presence. We post club rides as events. Everyone signs up, starts together in the same pen and rolls out as one bunch. Club rides can use a "keep everyone together" setting, so nobody gets dropped on the drags and the ride stays social, just like a proper club run.

The in-game text chat is a bit clunky when you're pedalling, so we use the **club Discord channel**. Discord is a free voice and chat app. Pop on a headset or leave the phone on speaker, and you can chat while you ride: banter, encouragement, and plenty of grumbling about the Alpe. Within ten minutes you forget it's indoors. It's the closest you'll get to the café-stop atmosphere in the middle of January.

We want to run **more regular club rides** this winter, but we need riders to make it worthwhile. If you've never tried it, a steady social club ride is the perfect place to start. No pressure, no results, just a good hour's riding with familiar faces.

Riding with the pros, and for great causes

One of the best things about Zwift is that the stars of the sport turn up and ride with everyone else. Tour winners, pro teams, world champions and Olympians regularly lead group rides that anyone can join.

Jonas Vingegaard. After his Tour de France wins, Jonas led victory rides on Zwift's Champs-Élysées, and I was in the bunch for them. It's wonderfully daft: a wet weeknight in Gloucestershire, and you're rolling round Paris in a bunch of thousands with the yellow jersey at the front. Riders send their questions about the race and give the champion a "Ride On" (Zwift's thumbs-up). It's a lovely way to celebrate a great Tour with the cycling community around the world.

L39ION of Los Angeles and Justin Williams. Riding with L39ION was ace. Justin Williams and his brother Cory started the team to change who gets to race bikes and how the sport looks, and they've built it into one of the most successful and exciting outfits in American crit racing. I'm a big fan of what they've achieved. Rolling along in a bunch with Justin, chatting and taking a pull with a team like that, is the kind of thing that just doesn't happen on a Sunday club run.

André Greipel's retirement ride. When "The Gorilla" hung up his wheels, he said goodbye with a farewell ride on Zwift, and I wasn't going to miss it. It was brilliant. The highlight was being led out for the sprints by the man himself: one of the greatest sprinters of his generation, with Tour, Giro and Vuelta stage wins to his name, doing the lead-out for the rest of us. You don't get that every day.

Sir Chris Hoy and the Tour de 4. These rides mean even more. Sir Chris, who is living with stage 4 cancer, launched the Tour de 4 to change how people see a stage 4 diagnosis and to raise money for UK cancer charities: Breast Cancer Now, Cancer Research UK, Macmillan, Maggie's and Prostate Cancer UK. Zwift has been a founding partner since 2025. In each of the last two years it has hosted a series of Saturday-morning rides with Sir Chris and special guests, building up to the real-world Tour de 4 ride in Glasgow. They were 45-minute social rides with everyone kept together, and finishing one unlocked the Tour de 4 kit in the game. Zwift backed the rides with donations of its own, and riders gave generously too. The 2026 series wrapped up with the Glasgow ride last month.

I rode several of these and they were among the most uplifting hours I've spent on a bike, indoors or out. A bunch of thousands from all over the world, all riding behind one of Britain's greatest sportsmen for a cause that touches almost every family. If the Tour de 4 rides return next year, let's get a **Gloucester City group** in the bunch, chatting together on Discord as we ride.

The wider world: racing as a team

Once you've found your Zwift legs, there's a whole team-racing scene built by the community. Zwift places you in a category based on your results, so you race people of similar ability. And unlike a Sunday reliability ride, you're home in time for a shower before tea.

Team Time Trials (TTT). The weekly WTRL Team Time Trial is the obvious way in for club riders. Teams of 4 to 8 ride against the clock with set start times, doing through-and-off just like a chaingang, and teams are grouped by speed so you're competing against similar squads. It rewards exactly what club riding teaches: smooth turns, holding a wheel and not blowing the group apart on the front. It's also a fantastic team-building session.

Zwift Racing League (ZRL). The biggest team competition in virtual cycling, run by WTRL with Zwift. Teams race weekly on Tuesday evenings across a season, with a mix of formats: scratch races, points races and team time trials. There are divisions for every level from D category up to the Premier Division where the esports pros race. Do well and your team gets promoted. A Gloucester City ZRL team would be a great goal for the club.

Club Ladder. If you've ever been in a squash or tennis ladder at your local club, you already understand this one. Teams of five race head-to-head, 5 vs 5, and you can challenge teams up to five places above you. Win and you climb the ladder. Team captains arrange the races and agree times between them (very often on Discord), and the team lower down usually picks the course. It's flexible, tactical and great fun. Ladder races feel more like a real road race than a big Zwift free-for-all, with teammates working together, covering moves and setting up the sprint. Riders register on zwiftracing.app, which places them in ability categories so the teams are fairly matched.

Getting started

1. Set up your trainer, install Zwift on your laptop, tablet or phone, and create your account.
2. Do a couple of solo rides to get used to it, steering and all. Enter your weight accurately: it matters for your speed on the hills.
3. Join the **Gloucester City** club on Zwift (see below).
4. Join the club **Discord** (see below) so you hear about rides and can chat on them.
5. Sign up for a club ride, put the kettle on for afterwards, and come and say hello.

How to join Gloucester City on Zwift

You join clubs in the free **Zwift Companion** app on your phone, not in the main Zwift app.

1. Download **Zwift Companion** from the App Store or Google Play and log in with your Zwift account.
2. Open **Clubs**. On iPhone, tap **Clubs** in the bottom menu bar. On Android, tap the menu button, then **Clubs**.
3. Tap **All Clubs** and search for **Gloucester City**.
4. Open our club and tap **Apply**.
5. If it's your first club, you'll be asked to accept Zwift's club terms. Tap **Accept**.
6. Wait for a club admin to approve you. Your request shows under **Club Applications** until then. Once you're in, our club rides appear in the club's event list. Tap **Sign up** on one, then open Zwift at ride time.

How to join the club Discord

Discord is a free chat app that lets us talk to each other while we ride. Members have access to the GCCC Clubhouse on Discord:

- **On ride day,** open the Discord app on your phone, join the voice channel for the ride and leave it running while you pedal. A headset or earbuds help, but the phone on speaker works fine.

> **Join us this winter.** Questions about setup, trainers or whether your old turbo will work? Grab me at the next club run or drop a message on the club Discord. And if you're interested in a

> TTT, ZRL or Ladder team, let us know. With enough interest we'll get a Gloucester City squad together.

Winter doesn't have to mean riding alone. See you in the bunch.