

Weight! Don't Forget Your Upper Body

Generally speaking, cyclists have great legs and butts. That's from the hours and hours of riding we do. However, have you looked in the mirror at your upper body lately? Ever notice that above your waist, your muscles (what muscles you have) aren't as defined or impressive as your legs? Or have you seen the Tour riders take off their jerseys? They look like emaciated prisoners of war. Cyclists like riding and tend not to like training in the gym. We are afraid if we train our upper bodies, we will gain unwanted weight, albeit muscle, that we have to lug up hills. In this article, the last in my series on strength training, I will lay out some reasons why you should consider strengthening your upper body and core muscles.

When we push on the pedals, there is a transmission of power through our feet to the pedals. However, there must be something for your legs to push off of when generating power to the pedals, and that something is your core. Your core includes the muscles of the pelvis, abs, lower back and diaphragm. The force transmitted to the pedals must be counteracted by transmission of that power through your core to your arms to the handlebars. Have you ever tried pushing hard on the pedals without holding on to the handlebars? A strong core, shoulders and arms will help transmit that power efficiently with little loss. If weak, you will lose some power through an unstable core. I'm sure you've seen riders who are moving all over their bikes. Upper body motion is wasted power.

Although we tend to think most about our legs getting tired when we ride, your upper body will also get fatigued on long rides. You've probably noticed your back, shoulder or arms getting tired on long rides. The upper body uses a fairly static position when we ride on the road and can get tired and sore from holding itself that way. A toned upper body will help resist fatigue on long rides.

Upper body and core strength are especially important when mountain biking and cyclocross. You have to constantly be shifting your weight on the bike to maneuver tight curves, logs and other obstacles. Your arms are constantly working too, and you know this well if you do cyclocross. Running while holding a bike off to one side requires a lot of core strength and stability, not to mention shoulder strength.

Another advantage of upper body strength training is that it adds some variety to your training program. You can take a day off the bike and give your legs a break on days when you do your upper body workout. I usually schedule an upper body day on Monday and/or Friday for my coaching clients.

But the most important reason to consider upper body strength training as a cyclist is simply for well rounded fitness. Cyclists are very fit people, but we are unbalanced. We have an extremely strong cardiovascular system and strong lower body. But our upper body isn't usually as fit. For general health and well-being, work on your upper body to maintain some balance to your fit body. A little extra muscle mass is not going to hurt you as a recreational racer. It will actually help. The most important reason to do strength training, though, may be for your bone density. Cycling is not a weight bearing sport, and combined with the large amount of sweating we do, we are susceptible

to loss in bone density. Strength training, especially with heavier weight, will encourage strong bones.

There isn't enough space here to write about how to conduct a well-rounded upper body and core workout but here are a few things to consider. You don't need to spend a lot of time in the gym. In 30 minutes you can do about 12 exercises that hit all the major muscle groups in your upper body. I typically do eight arm/shoulder exercises and four core exercises, twice a week. If you limit your time in the gym, you won't have to worry about bulking up, but you will shore up some under-used muscles. Use fairly high weights, as safely as you can handle. This is most efficient at building strength and bone density, which is what you want to do. If you aren't familiar with resistance training, I'd strongly suggest you visit with a coach or personal trainer who can set you up with a personalized program and show you how to do it correctly.

Okay, enough on strength training, future articles will now focus more on riding.

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Ride on -- David Ertl

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