

The Importance of Rest and Recovery

Cyclists love to ride and many of us love to ride far and fast and push ourselves. We know that in order to get faster and stronger on the bike, we need to continually push ourselves harder. Improving on the bike is about riding faster, harder and riding more miles. But this is only half the equation. If we ride hard every day, we never give our bodies the chance to rest and recover and eventually will either reach a plateau in fitness, or grind ourselves into over-training. Many cyclists, especially competitive cyclists, have a very strong work ethic and love to ride, so they pile on the miles day after day. But they will likely get faster if they ride a little less and rest a little more.

One of my favorites saying is this: "Training breaks your body down. Recovery is what builds it back up stronger". You see, when you train, you cause micro trauma to your muscle fibers. When you rest and recover, those muscle fibers are repaired by the body and they get rebuild a little bit thicker each time, leading to stronger muscles. It takes a couple of days to fully heal abused muscles. You shouldn't go out every day and beat your legs to a pulp (almost literally). You won't be giving your body a chance to heal and get stronger. Instead, it will progressively get weaker until the point where you get sick - the body's way of forcing you to rest. Rest and recovery is just as important as the riding. You need both in fairly equal doses.

Other things happen with rest, too. You completely replenish your energy stores in the body. With a lot of training, even with rest days built in, over time your carbohydrate stores may never fully be restored and begin to deteriorate. Taking a few days easy can insure that you are once again fully loaded for your next ride. Also, taking some rest can be good for the mind as well. A lot of hard training is mentally taxing as well as physically tiring. It takes a lot of mental energy to train hard. Giving your head a day off from training is a good thing as well. Because if your brain gets tired of training, your body follows. Many times, fatigue may actually be more mental than physical. Some rest your mind and body. Resting also allows other body parts to heal, such as saddle sores. Plus, rest days give you time to clean and do maintenance on your bike, or spend time with your family. Remember them?

So what should rest and recovery look like? Let's consider a cyclist who is training for an event and wants to be as fast as possible. Obviously this cyclist will want to do a lot of training and minimize down time. For a young, fit rider, it is possible to ride hard up to five days a week, although four days is more likely the case for most cyclists. You want to alternate hard and easy days as much as possible. Because our week has a seven days, you won't be able to rest every other day if you are riding 4-5 days per week. So you will double up and ride hard in two or three day blocks, once or twice a week. Here's what a sample week might look like for someone training five days per week:

Monday - rest; Tuesday - hard; Wednesday - hard; Thursday - hard; Friday - rest; Saturday - hard; Sunday - hard;

For four days a week training, it could look like this:

Monday - rest; Tuesday - hard; Wednesday - rest; Thursday - hard; Friday - rest;
Saturday - hard; Sunday - hard;

Less than four hard days of training per week and it is possible to have an easy day or two after every hard day. Just realize the fewer intense days, the less progress you will make.

As we get older, one of the first things we notice about our cycling is that we do not recover as quickly. A good, hard ride may result in sore muscles for two days instead of one. Recovery becomes more important as you get older. You can still train just as hard, but realize your recovery time may increase from one to two days. This is one of the main reasons why cyclists, even fit ones, get slower as they get older - they just can't continue to pile on the same number of miles they could when younger because they can't ride as many hard days per week. A young rider can ride 4-5 times per week, while an older rider may only be able to handle 2-3.

How do you know if you are recovering enough? Pay attention to how your legs feel when you get up in the morning. Are they feeling sluggish or heavy? Do you still feel yesterday's ride when you climb stairs? These are signs your legs aren't recovered. If you get out and begin your hard ride and your legs just aren't able to generate your normal speed or power, that's a sign that you might be better off just spinning easily and letting your legs recover another day. If you want to get the most out of your quality workouts, you need to be quite rested. Otherwise you will end up doing a mediocre workout and not benefitting as much. If in doubt, take a little more rest. At least that way you will be ready to give it your best on your intense training days.

On your easy days you can either stay off the bike completely or you can do some active recovery by going for an easy spin (see Featured Workout). Active recovery probably is more beneficial as it loosens you up and increases blood flow to the tired muscles.

When coming up on a big ride or race, you will want to take an extended rest period. Take it easy for 2-3 days prior to the event. Just go for shorter easier rides during this time to allow your body to be completely refreshed and ready to go on ride day.

Remember, rest and recovery is a part of training, an important part.

All the best in training, and resting!
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