

TRIATHALON TRAINING FOR RUNNERS – PART TWO: RIDING THE BIKE

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Most people learn how to ride a bicycle at an early age. As kids, we were ready to cruise around the neighborhood on our bicycles as soon as the training wheels were gone. The bike was a means for transportation, we could ride all day, and form, fitness, or fatigue rarely entered into the equation. Riding a bicycle is a relatively simple exercise. Learning how to race on a bicycle, however, is altogether different.

Al Lyman of Pursuit Fitness (pursuit-fitness.com) has finished a total of eight Ironman triathlons (a race comprised of a 2.4 mile swim, 112 mile bike run, and a 26.2 marathon run). He explains how improving your bicycle riding skills is possible, and it doesn't have to require a ton of cash. "Cycling is a unique activity," says Lyman, "because it's something that everyone does. It's easy to do on a low level, but extremely difficult on a high level." For someone interested in riding, Lyman strongly emphasizes that it is important to get a good quality fit. "You don't need an expensive titanium bike," said Lyman, who competed in his first triathlon on an inexpensive hybrid bike. "You shouldn't be intimidated. What is most important is that you need to be as comfortable as possible on the bike."

For people possessing a distance running background looking to venture into the sport of cycling, it becomes important to realize the differences between the two activities and to cater your training to maximize efficiency on the bike. "It's a different application of fitness," says Lyman. "But the sport (bicycling) does lend itself to better runners doing better on the bike. However, the nature of pedaling a bike is drastically different than running". Lyman suggests that the best way to adapt to cycling is to allow yourself to spin the legs at a high cadence, which promoted more efficient pedaling. For beginners, Lyman recommends riding in an easy gear with a cadence (rotations per minute) of 85-90 in order to reinforce good technique and train coordination. This will also reduce the risk on injury, a setback runners are all too familiar with. For some, bicycling can serve as a physical fitness substitute when runners are unable to run.

Oakdale's Laurie Schaffer turned to competitive bicycling when a stress fracture in her shin temporarily sidelined her from the running and racing. A competitive distance runner and road racer, Schaffer was unable to train and used cycling as a substitute. "You know what endorphin junkies we all are," joked Schaffer of the typical competitive runner persona. Soon, Schaffer was on the bike riding five to six days per week, often tagging along with other cyclists for group rides in the local area. She found that although she was physically fit as a runner, competitive cycling would require something different. "I had tons of endurance (as a runner)," recalls Schaeffer, "but biking requires form and technique and much more sheer power, which I didn't have." Schaffer gradually improved on the bike, and has subsequently been able to return to competitive running, now incorporating multi-sport training into her week. One of Schaeffer's staple workouts is a "brick", which is comprised of an intensive, short ride immediately followed by a run. The purpose of these workouts is to condition the body and the leg muscles to adapt to the rigors of multi-sport racing. "You're using your quad muscles intensely on the bike," explains Schaeffer. "You have to get used to running when these muscles are tired". Now an accomplished duathlete, Schaffer has added swimming to her workout routine and will be attempting her first triathlon next month.

Chris Hansen of Hope Valley, RI, who has qualified for the U.S. National duathlon team, has made a successful transition from distance runner to tri-athlete by learning the specific aspects of each discipline and applying that knowledge to maximize the training benefits for each sport. While Hansen feels that his running background was definitely an asset, he is quick to point out that cycling is different than running. "Most people know how to ride," says Hansen. "But it's different to know how to race. One of the major differences is the leg strength required for biking," says Hansen. "The effort in cycling goes towards an isolated group of muscles." Hansen also emphasizes that technique must still be mastered to gain success in cycling. "Runners tend to "mash" big gears, which is a mistake," claims Hansen. He points out that even Lance Armstrong and the best cyclists in the world pedal at a cadence (rotations per minute) of 90-105. "The proper cadence will help spread the effort more evenly throughout the workout," says Hansen.

Finally, realize that the best way to improve your riding ability is to just get comfortable being on the bike. "Keep it simple," says Lyman. "It's most important to get the appropriate gearing and proper fit. Then spend time spinning at the proper cadence in an easy gear. It all comes back to coordination."

This article is Part Two of a four part series on distance runners learning the three disciplines of triathlon training. Part Three, which will examine triathlon running, will run in the Norwich Bulletin on Sunday, September 17th.

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