

# Racing Into Shape

If you have been around bike racing very long, especially in springtime, you have probably heard cyclists talking about 'racing into shape'. If you aren't familiar with this term, what it means is you use races to whip yourself into shape. At first blush, it sounds kind of backwards, after all, aren't you supposed to train first and then race? What 'racing into shape' means is that you actually use early season races as intense training sessions to help accelerate your fitness up to racing fitness more quickly. Should you do this, and if so, what are some watch outs?

Using racing to whip yourself into shape can be a very good idea. Racing provides the best training for racing because it is racing! It's very difficult to mimic race conditions in a training session. When you go to a race, most likely you prepare physically and get psyched mentally more so than when you go to a training ride. There's just something about making the effort to travel to a race and pay an entry fee that makes a race seem more important. There's also the pressure to do well. Results aren't posted for training rides but they usually are for races and you don't want to end up at the bottom so there's pride on the line. Then there's the intensity of a race situation. You tend to push yourself harder in a race because of the competitive atmosphere. Even if there isn't cash on the line, racing for a pair of socks or a pie still brings out the competitive spirit in us. You are willing to push yourself to the limit in a race as if it's the most important thing in the world, because at the time, it is! Unless you are extremely motivated or have great training partners, it is difficult to push yourself as hard during a training session. With the use of power meters, it is now possible to quantify the effort you put out during training rides and races. I've read several times where pro cyclists comment that the power they reach in races can never be matched in their training, so they need to race to bring themselves up to racing shape. If you wish to read about these cyclists and their power outputs, check out the athlete profiles on [www.Saris.com](http://www.Saris.com).

If you decide to do some early season races primarily for training purposes, you need to do a few things to be successful. You need to set appropriate goals. If you aren't yet in racing shape and you enter a race for training purposes, your goals need to be more modest than if you were racing for a high placing. You might decide that your main objective is to hang with the pack if it's a road race, or to beat your first race's time from last year, if it's a time trial. There are a lot of variables out of your control including the fitness of other racers in these spring races. So don't be upset with yourself if you can't even do what you planned as a modest goal. The most important thing is that you push yourself harder than you would in training. Ask yourself after the race if you got a better workout from this race than if you stayed home and trained by yourself. If you answer affirmatively, then you met your main goal.

Using races for training also helps you practice preparing for races. The more races you do, even if just for training, the better you will be able to develop routines which are useful for your race preparation. This includes refining your taper the days before a race, nutrition for pre-race, during the race, and post-race, and also helps you develop a checklist to use so you don't forget important items such as shoes and helmets.

Now, there are some watch outs to be mindful of if you use races for training, both mentally and physically. If you are used to doing fairly well in races, it may be hard on your ego to simply sit in

the pack or worse, to get dropped. You need to tell yourself going in to the race that placing doesn't matter as long as you get a good workout, but that's a hard thing to do, especially if your rivals are doing better than you are. But keep reminding yourself the sole purpose of this race is to get yourself ready to be competitive later in the season. You can also tell your fellow competitors that you aren't really in shape yet, but they will of course just think you are bluffing.

You do need to have some level of fitness before jumping into a race for training. You need to have a decent base built. It is also helpful to have a few intense group rides or interval sessions before jumping into your first race of the season, or you may find yourself really hurting. I don't know that you can injure yourself by all of a sudden doing a race if not prepared well, but it will certainly be hard and you may be sore the next day or two. You also risk not doing well at all if you aren't prepared and losing out on any training benefit of the race. If you get dropped two miles into a race and ride the whole thing alone, you might as well have stayed home and trained and saved face and money! You also should be selective in the types of races. Try to pick low-key races where the competition won't be as great. If you have a spring training series, these are perfect. You might select a road race or time trial over a criterium where you will have a better chance of achieving your training goal.

So don't be afraid to jump into a race for training. Just realize that your goals need to be focused on the training effect and not the placing.

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Ride on -- David Ertl

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David Ertl is a USA Cycling Level 1 (Elite) Coach and NSCA Certified Personal Trainer. He coaches individuals interested in improving on their current cycling ability, whatever level that may be. He also provides cycling training plans and ebooks at his website: [www.CyclesportCoaching.com](http://www.CyclesportCoaching.com)  
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