

Do you just ride or do you train?

I am using the term “train” here rather loosely, but any cycling you do to get ready for a ride or tour counts as ‘training’ in this discussion. The single biggest thing, in my observation, that separates the recreational rider from the competitive rider is the way they ride (well, okay, we shave our legs too). For the most part, recreational cyclists go out for rides and usually ride about the same pace every time. Nothing wrong with that at all, but if you are looking to get a little faster or be able to ride farther more comfortably, then adding some variety to your riding (e.g. training) can really help. This article will give you some ideas on how to do this.

I typically break training into six broad categories: endurance, threshold, anaerobic, max power, strength and recovery. Competitive racers need to do all of these. Recreational riders who want to improve, but don’t plan on racing, still should do at least four of these: endurance, threshold, strength and recovery. Below I will lay out these four in more detail. You don’t need to do much in the way of anaerobic or max power type workouts.

Endurance: This should be a no-brainer – road cycling is an endurance sport and we need to ride a long way on our training rides to be able to do long rides, at least do them comfortably. The pace during endurance rides should be comfortable, even leisurely. The idea is to ride a pace that you can hold for 3 or more hours. You should pass the “talk test” while riding – in other words, you should be able to carry on a conversation during these rides without having to pause to breathe. Start with short distances and work your way up. Try to increase your mileage on these long rides no more than 5-10 miles per week. These rides increase your body’s ability to burn fat for fuel, improves your blood chemistry and does a lot of other good things for you. These are fun to do and that’s why recreational riders tend to do most of their riding at this pace.

Threshold: This is the pace where you are at your limit of sustainable riding. It’s the pace you can keep up (barely) for an hour. Riding at this pace requires concentration and effort. The pace is no longer comfortable. Talking becomes more labored at this pace. This is often the pace you may find yourself at when trying to keep up with riders who who are faster than you. It’s good to do some of your riding at this pace so as to be able to push faster when you need to. This pace begins to expand your aerobic capacity and gives you the ability to take in and use more oxygen more efficiently. You should do one of these rides every week, year round. An example would be to push this pace every 3 min, followed by 3 min at endurance pace. Continue alternating back and forth during an hour ride.

Strength: Riding requires leg strength. The stronger you are, the more easily you can push a larger gear, or the faster you can turn the pedals. A great way to increase leg strength is by riding hills (see last month’s article). You can also increase strength by using a headwind – push hard into headwinds. Make the wind work in your favor. There is also a wide arrange of indoor strength training workouts you can do such as squats, leg presses, and lunges. You should try to try to work on leg strength specifically at least one day a week, year round.

Recovery: Resting may not seem like a workout but it does more to make you stronger than the above workouts. You see, training tears your body down – it’s the recovery which heals you and

brings you back stronger. There are two types of recovery – passive and active. Passive recovery is sitting around with your legs up not doing much. This is good to do following a hard ride when you are really tired and when your legs are sore from the previous day's ride. Active recovery means keeping moving but not putting additional stress on your body. A real easy spin in a low gear is great – it loosens up sore muscles and gets the blood circulating to help remove waste products and speed healing. You can also do other activities that are different from riding, such as walking and swimming. These get the legs moving but don't stress them the way riding does. And don't shortchange these recovery days. At least 2-3 days a week should be reserved to rest your legs. Less than that and you may never be fully allowing your legs to recover and get fresh.

So mix up your riding a little bit more and start training. I think you'll find it adds a nice variety to your weekly rides and will improve your ability to ride farther and faster.

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