

## The Value of Tempo Riding

Like all coaches, I use a series of training zones to prescribe the amount of effort or intensity for my workouts. I happen to use six zones. Some coaches use five and some use seven. I find six to suit me and covers all the different intensities quite well. My six zones are:

- 1: Recovery
2. Endurance
3. Tempo
4. Threshold
5. Anaerobic
6. Maximum effort

This article focuses in on Zone 3, the Tempo Zone. This is perhaps the most mysterious and misunderstood zone there is. Tempo pace falls between Endurance and Threshold pace. Endurance pace is the speed your ride when out on long 2+ hour rides. It is a self-selected pace that is fairly comfortable and is well within the aerobic range. Threshold pace is the speed at which you are hovering right at the aerobic/anaerobic threshold, where your breathing is hard. This is a pace you can maintain with effort for up to an hour. Tempo pace falls nicely between the two. I describe this intensity as neither hard nor easy, but requires concentration to keep it up. It may be about 2 mph faster than your endurance pace. You should be able to maintain this pace, with concentration for one to two hours without too much difficulty. For reference, I define Zone 3 as 82-91% of your anaerobic threshold heart rate, or 76-85% of your maximum heart rate.

So why is this mysterious or misunderstood? You may have heard of 'riding in no-man's land'. If you have, tempo zone is what they are talking about. You see, tempo zone is hard enough work that it will make you tired yet too much riding in this zone will prevent you from getting faster. You need some Zone 4 and 5 training to get faster. Zone 3 is where fast recreational riders often find themselves riding. It is the speed that occurs when two or more riders get together and start pushing each other. Some coaches advocate avoiding this zone and either ride slower and longer for endurance (LSD training) or fast enough to push your anaerobic threshold higher. They feel that zone 3 isn't fast enough to elicit a training response but fast enough to make you tired which can interfere with your training. I don't disagree with this, but I do feel there is a place for tempo training, especially during the off-season and during base training.

The Base period of training is late winter and spring, when you are rebuilding your aerobic fitness and endurance following the off-season, or winter. Typically coaches advocate lots of miles at a moderate pace (zone 2) to build this aerobic fitness. However, it is also okay to throw in some Tempo paced rides as well. This will expand your aerobic fitness faster than endurance pace and probably won't make you overly tired as you aren't doing a lot of high intensity training during the Base phase anyway.

Here's where I like to use Tempo rides. During the winter and early spring, if you are unable to put in long endurance rides due to weather (or any other reason), then consider doing a shorter

but faster (i.e. Tempo) ride. Here's why: you don't really get an endurance effect unless your ride is two hours or longer. If you only have an hour or an hour and a half, push the pace into zone 3 for these shorter rides. For any ride longer than one hour but shorter than two, consider riding in zone 3 instead of zone 2. These are also great for longer indoor trainer sessions, where you may not want to go for two hours, but can force yourself to pedal for up to 90 minutes. You will find yourself adequately tired after these sessions but they aren't so hard that you find yourself hating them. So use them in addition to your longer endurance rides in the pre-season to help build aerobic fitness. But once summer comes, you should shift more to Zone 4 and 5 workouts to get the most out of your fitness.

All the best in training!  
Coach David Ertl

---

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)

He can be contacted at [Coach@CyclesportCoaching.com](mailto:Coach@CyclesportCoaching.com)