



Seven Tips to Turn Any Cyclist into a Climbing Goat

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Climbing is the nemesis of many a cyclist. As much as we love watching riders float up the switchbacks of l'Alpe d'Huez in July, many cyclists loathe the hills during their own training and events. While it could be argued that watts per kilogram is the essential key to climbing prowess, there are other details that help weaker climbers keep up and make good climbers even better. Don't avoid ascents because you struggle; practicing climbing will help you become more efficient and maximize your abilities. Here are seven tips to incorporate into your training to help you climb like a champion this season.



Photo courtesy of Courage Classic

Gearing and cadence

To maintain a certain power level, you must either pedal harder or pedal faster. Pedaling harder, or pushing a larger gear, requires more force production, which recruits "fast twitch" muscle fibers. These fibers

Give yourself short goals on long climbs, it keeps you motivated and you'll reach the top faster.

are biased toward glycogen fuel, a limited fuel source in the body. Pedaling faster uses less force, favoring "slow twitch" fibers. They use fat as an energy source and can last for a much longer duration. Proper gearing will allow you to maintain a higher cadence. Most standard road bikes come with a 39-tooth (small ring) and 53-tooth (large ring) chainring in front, and a 12-25-tooth cassette in the rear. Don't be afraid to swap out the cassette for something larger, like a 12-27 or something in that range. Additionally, compact gearing is becoming

increasingly popular – and for good reason – as it provides smaller gear increments. Many use a compact drivetrain with 34- and 50-tooth chainrings up front, which allows for a much lower climbing gear. This, coupled with a smaller cassette, either a 12-25, 12-23 or 12-21, can help you maintain a similar top gear for descents.

Pace yourself and know the course

A hard hill climb is like a time trial: you need to pace yourself to finish strong. The absolute worst thing you can do is begin a climb too hard. When in doubt, start easier than you anticipate, then go harder and harder as the climb progresses. If you dig too deep too early, there might not be a chance to recover before the top. You want to finish strong, so be patient. Also, do your homework and research the course. It's fairly easy to find elevation profiles online for nearly every ride these days. Take the time and prepare accordingly.

Specificity of training

Climbing may not be your favorite terrain, but if it's in your future, you had best train for it. Be specific with your training. Find climbs near your house that match the climbs in your upcoming event, as your body will adapt to the specific training you do. Riding on flats will only get you so far so don't hide from the hills. Embrace the challenge and add climbing to your training routine.

Diet

Need I say more? Yes, watts per kilogram are important, and physics don't lie – Newton's Laws have no mercy. Train right and eat smart. Every little bit makes a difference, but shouldn't you be eating right for many other reasons? Now you have another one.

The "sprinters drift"

If you are riding in a group and you know the course, go ahead of the field prior to the climb.

This is a common technique for racers. Essentially, you're giving yourself a head start (but you have to earn it). This allows you to ride at your own pace and hopefully hit the summit at the same time as the group.

Posture and technique on the bike

When climbing, you need to utilize a stable yet relaxed upper body. The more effort you put forth, such as rocking the bike and standing up, the more oxygen is used by your upper body. This is oxygen that could be used by your lower body to propel you up the mountain. Stay relaxed and fluid by controlling your breathing and keeping steady. This will allow your legs to function optimally. Technically, practice shifting to a lower gear prior to needing it; if you wait until you are bogged down with a slow cadence your drivetrain will stumble, so shift in advance. This is especially important with compact gearing, as the shift between the two chainrings is more dramatic. Practice the transition from sitting to standing while remaining smooth and maintaining power to the pedals. Don't allow your bike to shoot

backwards as you stand. Keep pedaling and keep moving forward.

Get a lighter bike

Again, less weight means less to carry to the top. New bikes can easily be ten pounds lighter than the bikes of years past. Ten pounds! That's a big difference. If you are riding an older bike that has some excess weight, consider a new, lighter model. I'm not one to promote the gluttonous buying of equipment, but if the hills are your priority, this will help.

Incorporate these tips into your preparation for the season. Spend time climbing, preparing correctly and focusing on your technique and you will see an improvement. While climbing is a challenge, it is well worth it and is among the most exhilarating experiences in all of cycling.

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