Travel Cycling: Strength, Power and Speed Training on a Stationary Bike

Matt Russ
For Active.com

For many athletes, staying on top of their training while traveling is one of the biggest challenges they encounter. While running and even swimming can be performed relatively easily on the road, cycling presents the greatest challenge.

Perhaps you've experienced a similar situation: You haven't been on your bike since last Sunday's ride and feel you're losing your fitness in the face of your upcoming race. You go down to the hotel gym and find one somewhat-dilapidated Lifecycle.

Is it possible to get a good workout on one of these? Will my workout remotely transfer to real road cycling?

The answer is that you *can* get a good workout that will transfer to road cycling. While training on a stationary bike could never fully substitute time on the road, there are many workouts you can perform to work on a piece of your cycling.

Cycling can be broken down into two basic components: leg speed and force production, both of which can be trained on a stationary bike if necessary. Some workouts are actually better performed in a controlled environment where power, cadence, and resistance can all be monitored and adjusted.

Think Ahead

The first step is planning. If you know you'll be traveling, select the workouts that are going to be easiest to perform on the stationary bike. I consider this when building my athletes' plans by putting their long, more general road workouts on the weekends and putting the shorter, more specific workouts during the week.

The next step is choosing a hotel that has an exercise room and stationary bike. Some hotels are advertising this as a feature to attract customers. If at all possible, frequent the hotels that have raised the standard for their fitness rooms.

Many hotels have reciprocal arrangements with local gyms. In this case, a spin cycle would be an option. Don't assume that just because the hotel has a gym, it will have a stationary bike, or more specifically, one that's in good repair.

I've been amazed to find that some of the nicer hotels often have equipment that's in disrepair. Don't be afraid to explain when making reservations that you're training for a race and that you require an exercise bike.

You may want to explain that "the last time I was there it was broken; would you mind checking to make sure it's working properly and get back to me?" This may extreme, but it's very frustrating to prepare for a workout only to have it nixed due to factors beyond your control.

Strength Training

Strength training enhances your cycling and athletes often spend a portion of their season lifting weights to increase force production. Strength training performed on the bike and is even more specific. You can perform the following strength workouts on a stationary bike.

Force reps: Warm up for 10 to 15 minutes, then crank the resistance down until it's very heavy; as if you were climbing a steep hill. Drive the pedals down for 20 to 30 pedal strokes, concentrating on producing force on the down stroke. Don't increase cadence; keep cadence very slow. Recover for five minutes and repeat. You can perform four to eight force reps per workout.

Leg tension: Trains strength endurance. Envision climbing a long, steep hill. Keep your cadence in the 50 to 60 rpm range with heavy resistance. Smoothly pedal the length of the interval using good climbing form. You can perform leg tension intervals of five to 20 minutes with five to 10 minutes recovery between efforts.

Aerobic tension: Trains aerobic strength. Picture a very long, moderate climb. Keep your cadence in the 65 to 75 rpm range and your heart rate towards the top of your aerobic zone. Smoothly pedal for 20 to 60 minutes using these parameters. This workout is a lot harder than it may seem at first and is highly productive.

Power Training

Power training is strength and speed. You should have a good strength base before performing these workouts. Form is important—make sure you're producing smooth power and not bobbing in the saddle.

Power bursts: These are the first phase of power training. Using a high cadence and resistance, pedal as hard as you can for 10 seconds. At the end of the interval, your legs should be very fatigued and ready to quit on you. Recover for 10 minutes and repeat four to eight times.

Power intervals: These are more sustained and build aerobic capacity. Using a high cadence (over 100 rpm) and high resistance, pedal as hard as you can for one to four minutes. Recover for an equal length and repeat three to six times.

Speed intervals: These have limited recovery and train your body to buffer lactic acid. Use a high cadence and resistance, pedal for 30 seconds to one minute. Recovery is the same length as the interval. Repeat eight to 20 times.

Speed Training

Speed training is simply training your muscles to fire quickly and to pedal efficiently at higher pedal speeds. Low resistance is used, unlike in power training, and form should be the focus. Speed training is good for lighter days in which you don't want to overstress the body.

Progressive fast legs: Start at 90 rpm and increase your cadence by 5 rpm every 30 seconds until you reach your maximum sustainable cadence. Your max cadence is the point at which you begin to lose form and bob in the saddle. Hold for 30 seconds, then recover for several minutes; repeat four to six times.

Endurance spinning: Perform this at 5 rpm below your maximum sustainable cadence and hold your cadence for 10 to 60 minutes. You may need to start off with a shorter duration and increase each workout.

Spin ups: Spin up quickly to your maximum sustainable cadence and then let it drop 20 rpm. Repeat this eight to 12 times.

Working out on a stationary bike is not the best way to train in a perfect world, but you can break down portions of your cycling and work on them effectively. Most of these workouts should be performed in the base and general preparation phases of training. As you get closer to your goal race(s), try to spend more time on the road and as little time as possible training indoors.

Matt Russ has coached and trained athletes for over 10 years around the country and internationally. He currently holds licenses by USAT, USATF, and is an Expert level USAC coach. Matt has coached athletes for CTS (Carmichael Training Systems), and is an Ultrafit Associate. Visit www.thesportfactory.com for more information.