

## Strengthening Your Abs And Back For Recreational Cycling

By Lorri Lee Lown



**Tricep Extension**



**Seated Bicep Curl**

**M**any recreational cyclists complain of back and neck pain related to their riding. Sometimes this is an indicator of poor bike fit. For example, with many of my clients, especially women and men with narrower shoulders, I've found that riding with a bar that's too wide can contribute to pain in the shoulders and upper back. A good rule of thumb here is to ride a bar that's no more than one inch wider than your shoulders (measured from the acromioclavicular (AC) joint on one side to the AC joint on the other side). But once you're certain that your bike fit is perfect, you may still find pain or discomfort when you ride. By following a basic strength training program, you can prevent injury, minimize pain, and reduce fatigue while riding.

Since cycling requires that you maintain a posture of flexion at the waist and extension at the shoulders, it's extremely important to strengthen the core muscles of the back and abdominals to support this posture. If you were to sit with your arms extended in front of you, not holding onto anything, you'd find that your shoulders & back would fatigue very quickly. Now imagine doing this on the bike, with only minimal balance points for your hands and seat, for an extended period of time. The need to strengthen the core muscles of the back and abdominals (along with the contributing muscles of the neck, chest and arms) becomes more apparent as you increase your daily & weekly mileage.

In proper riding posture, you should bear most of your body weight on your legs, with support from the core muscles (primarily back and abdominals) and with balance points at the bar and saddle. When you ride longer distances, you may find that you feel discomfort in your back, neck, shoulders, arms, hands, and seat. This is a good indicator that you're placing too much pressure on either the bar or the saddle. You should try to maintain a relaxed posture on the bar, not riding with a white-knuckled grip, but rather balancing

# The Core Of The Matter

your hands on the bar and flexing at the elbows, except during technical riding. You should also change hand position as needed to relieve primary muscle groups and switch the emphasis to secondary muscles.

Upper body and core strength is also very important as you ride more aggressively. For example, as you stand to climb a hill, you use core strength to lift your body out of the saddle. Yes, we do use our arm strength to help lift our bodies, but to maintain a safe technique without pulling up too much on the bar, it's extremely important to execute this stand utilizing the muscles of the back and abdominals.

**Resistance training** is one way to strengthen these muscles. By following a simple weight training program, you will strengthen these muscles and be able to ride more comfortably for a longer period of time. With my cycling clients, I'll typically recommend a training program that includes exercises for the arms (triceps and biceps), shoulders (deltoids, trapezius, latissimus dorsi, levator scapulae, rhomboids, infraspinatus, and subscapularis), chest (pectoralis major & minor), back (erector spinae, trapezius, and teres major), obliques, and abdominals.

A sample program, performed twice a week, might include:

- **Arms** – biceps curl and triceps extension.
- **Upper body** – chest press (triceps, anterior deltoids and pectoralis), lat extension (latissimus dorsi, teres major, posterior deltoid), seated row (rhomboids, trapezius, posterior deltoid, and biceps), lat pull-down (latissimus dorsi, teres major, posterior deltoid, rhomboids, trapezius, levator scapulae, and biceps), scapular elevation or shrugs (levator scapulae, trapezius, rhomboids), and internal & external shoulder rotation (infraspinatus, teres minor, and subscapularis).
- **Core** (abdominals, obliques, and back) – crunches,



**Inverted Crunch**



**Seated Row**

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**Trunk Extension**



**Roman Chair Leg Raise**

reverse crunches, lateral crunches, trunk rotation, leg raises (on a roman chair), prone opposite arm and leg raises (superman), and trunk extensions.

If you have never participated in a resistance training program, this may seem overwhelming to you. To get started, you could work with a personal trainer for a couple of sessions to learn how to perform these exercises safely and effectively, and to help you develop a training program that fits your needs, background, and schedule. If you prefer to work out at home, most of these exercises can be performed with your own body weight, dumbbells or barbells, and resistance cords or bands. For those of you who like the very basics, push-ups, pull-ups, sit-ups (crunches) and back extensions are great substitutes for the exercises detailed above. Performed twice a week, these exercises will help you gain essential core strength and will directly relate to your comfort and performance on the bike.

Another alternative (and one that's extremely popular right now) is the study of **Pilates**. Pilates is a form of exercise utilizing mat and specialized equipment which delivers optimal strength, flexibility and endurance, without adding muscle bulk. Pilates has been studied for decades by dancers and actors, but now is very popular in the fitness community as well. Many health clubs, fitness studios, specialized Pilates studios, yoga studios and personal trainers offer Pilates exercise as an alternative to resistance training to build core strength and stability, lengthen muscles, improve balance and body awareness, increase flexibility and functional performance, strengthen the muscles supporting your joints, and as a complement to other training programs. If you'd like to try Pilates, many facilities offer free or inexpensive introductory sessions. There are also numerous Pilates videos and DVDs available if you prefer to study at home.

A third alternative, and one that can easily be practiced at home, is a series of core strengthening exer-

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cises using a **resist-a-ball**. A resist-a-ball is a large, inflatable rubber ball which can be used for a variety of fitness activities. The greatest advantage to exercising with a ball, is that you build core strength and balance. To begin, I typically recommend ball-assisted crunches, obliques, and back extensions. You can also perform shoulder, back, and chest exercises (using dumbbells or hand weights) while sitting on the ball, adding an element of balance and engaging your core muscles. Many fitness retailers offer an introductory video or DVD along with your ball purchase, so you can learn how to exercise in a safe, effective, fun way (and in front of the television)!

Whichever method you choose, adding core strengthening exercises to your fitness routine just twice a week will improve your comfort, performance, and endurance on the bike. And the better we feel about riding, the more we'll inevitably ride.

*Lorri Lee Lown is a USACycling Licensed Coach, an ACE-Certified Personal Fitness Trainer, and a Johnny G. Certified Spinning® Instructor. She founded and coaches the Bay Area Velo Girls™, the only women's cycling club in the San Francisco Bay Area.*

*Lorri never participated in any sports or fitness activities until her early thirties. She discovered cycling when she registered to participate in the California AIDS Ride in 1999. She's completed three AIDS Rides (one in Alaska), a cycling tour of New Zealand, too many centuries to count, and has recently started racing.*

*Lorri has a BFA in Theatre Arts Management from Ithaca College and an MBA in Organizational Management from Syracuse University. For thirteen years, she managed not-for-profit professional theatres, and also taught theatre management at the university level. After a two-year stint with an international financial services corporation, she made a life-changing career move and decided to dedicate herself to sharing her love of fitness through teaching and coaching. She returned to school full-time to study personal fitness training and adaptive fitness, and received a certificate from Foothill College in California.*

*Her life mission is to empower others (especially women) to challenge themselves to do something they never thought possible. This may mean riding a bike for the first time, completing a ten-mile ride, climbing that first hill, completing a century, or racing.*



**Resistance Cord Bicep Curl**



**Ball-Assisted Crunch**