

# **Cycling: How Do I Become Better?**

## **Part 1 – Assessing Your Cycling Abilities**

*By Coach Al Lyman, CSCS*

It doesn't take long to get excited and anxious.....maybe you've been riding recreationally for a few weeks, a few months, or even a few years. One day, out of the blue, you say to yourself: "Geez, I really do enjoy riding the bike. But, I'm still having a really hard time climbing that one hill.....I wonder what I need to do to get better and be stronger...."

Every cyclist at one time or another has had that conversation with him/herself. We all want to improve and we all know deep down inside that with some improvement and added strength, our enjoyment of cycling will also go up. But, we're not always sure how or what is the best way to go about improving....

It's often said in cycling circles that for beginning riders, the best way to improve is to "ride the bike, a lot." Sounds simple enough, doesn't it? Ride more - be better! To a certain degree, there is a lot of truth to it. There's nothing like a little more saddle time for increasing one's capacity for riding, and comfort level too.

However, beyond simply riding more, perhaps the best way for a cyclist or any endurance athlete to improve, is to objectively look at what our potential strengths and weaknesses, and then venture into some structured "training" that will help develop our weaknesses, and maintain our strengths! If we can do that, we're sure to emerge better and faster.

But that being said, how do we objectively determine what our weaknesses are? In other words, how do we really know what we need to "develop" vs. what we are already pretty good at? And once we begin to understand what may be a strength or weakness for us, how do we approach training to improve it?

## **Assessing Your Strengths and Weaknesses: How do you know what is a weakness or “limiter” for you?**

In the opinion of some experts, the best way to objectively determine what your strengths and weaknesses are as a cyclist is to perform a series of “power profile tests”<sup>1</sup>, or conduct some *Critical Power* testing.<sup>2, 3</sup>

However, for most of us, a practical (albeit subjective) assessment is a great place to start as we strive to learn more about ourselves as cyclists and how we can improve.

To this end, I created the chart on the next page of this guide that contains a summary of information to help determine your strengths/weaknesses and potential “limiters.”

Start by looking at the left for a general description of a particular cycling “ability,” and then look at the right hand column *for some important questions that you can ask yourself* that should help you determine where you stand.

- *This is a subjective assessment. Remember that when evaluating yourself as objectively as you can, compare your ability ONLY to those training partners, team members, or friends whom you consider to be of comparable talent and ability. Avoid comparing yourself to elite riders unless it is appropriate to do so. Also, prior race results can work very well in assessing your abilities on the bike.*

The basic abilities that will be addressed in the chart include:

- Endurance
- Speed Skills
- Force
- Muscular Endurance
- Anaerobic Endurance
- Power

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<sup>1</sup> Allen and Coggan, [Training and Racing with a Power Meter](#), pp. 61-71

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.ultrafit.com/library/Bike/Training\\_With\\_PowerGordo.doc](http://www.ultrafit.com/library/Bike/Training_With_PowerGordo.doc), and Friel, [The Cyclists Training Bible](#), pp.38-39

<sup>3</sup> Allen and Coggan, [Training and Racing with a Power Meter](#), p. 47

Cycling Ability	Basic Definition	How Do You Know If It Is a Limiter?
<b>Endurance</b>	The ability to continue a ride at an <i>aerobic</i> effort level without the onset of undue fatigue. This is specific to an event, and is the most basic and important ability.	<p>Do you finish your longest rides easily, or are you struggling to finish them?</p> <hr/> <p>If you do, then you need a greater level of basic endurance and stamina, and may need to spend more time "base building."</p>
<b>Speed Skills</b>	The ability to move the pedals quickly and efficiently, while being totally relaxed.	<p>Is your pedaling action smooth and effortless? Do you struggle with a high cadence and feel that you are wasting energy, or mashing a big gear?</p> <hr/> <p>If you struggle with a high cadence, you need to develop greater skills and efficiency through the pedaling drills and high cadence spinning contained in our Off-Season plans.</p>
<b>Force</b>	The ability to overcome resistance, as in climbing short steep hills or turning a bigger gear, or riding into a head wind.	<p>Are you among the best when it comes to climbing steep hills with the fastest riders or do you drift back, or even get dropped on the short steep climbs? Do you struggle whenever you have to ride into a head wind?</p> <hr/> <p>If you struggle with short climbs, you may need a higher level of strength and force producing ability. You may also need to improve your power to weight ratio.</p>
<b>Muscular Endurance</b>	The ability to sustain a high muscular effort for a sustained or prolonged period of time, as in a time trial. This is a combination of force and endurance.	<p>Can you ride for extended periods of time at a high effort level that may approach your lactate threshold, or z4 intensity? Or, do you find that after about 10 minutes at that intensity, you are quickly falling off the back and are unable to sustain the effort?</p> <hr/> <p>If you find that you are not a good time-trialist because you seem to struggle with maintaining a high level of effort over a sustained period of time, then you need improvement in your muscular endurance.</p>
<b>Anaerobic Endurance</b>	The ability to resist fatigue while turning a high cadence in a bigger gear. A combination of speed and endurance.	<p>Do you find that when you want to, you can bridge a gap to a group up ahead with relative ease? Or, do you struggle when it's your time to "pull" in a group ride, or feel that you are dropped quickly when the speed picks up quickly? Do you struggle when the group "surges" for a short periods?</p> <hr/> <p>If you answered YES to these last three questions, you need a greater level of anaerobic endurance.</p>
<b>Power</b>	The ability to apply maximum force in the shortest time possible! A combination of force and speed!	<p>Do you consider yourself a strong sprinter, or do you struggle and nearly always finish last or near the back during sprints?</p> <hr/> <p>If you find that you're always last on the "town line" sprints, or that your maximum power output is low, you need more power! (Hey, who doesn't?) ☺</p>

Once you have answered some of the above questions, the first thing that you should do is commit to one day per week of riding (a "training" day!) where you

can do something on the bike that will address that particular weakness. Stay tuned for part two of this series for some specific ideas on what types of “training” you can do for each specific weakness or “limiter.”

Good luck, train safe, and train smart!

-Al

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*Coach Al Lyman, CSCS, is certified with USA Triathlon and the National Strength and Conditioning Association, and is the founder of Pursuit Fitness, a coaching resource company for endurance athletes ([www.pursuit-fitness.com](http://www.pursuit-fitness.com)). In addition to coaching athletes of all levels in the U.S. and abroad, he is also a 8-time Ironman Triathlon Finisher including 3 Hawaii Ironman finishes, and has a 10:29 IM distance PR, a 4:32 Half-iron PR, and he also holds a 2:39 Boston Marathon PR among his over 20 marathon finishes.*