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Name of Article: Why Should I Lift Weights in the Off-Season?

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It is always humorous to hear the myriad mythological reasons athletes conjure up to avoid this stepchild of the endurance-training world. From the possibility of weight gain and the decrease of leg speed, to the infamous lack of time and fear of injury, endurance athletes find more excuses for not lifting weights than the means teen-agers can come up with to avoid doing their chores. The irony of the situation is that this simple and relatively painless activity can not only be fun, but may be the critical link for many athletes to have that extra edge that goes so far in enhancing athletic performance once the racing season rolls around.

There are the obvious reasons for incorporating weight training into your pre-season regimen. From maintaining or building up some of that vital lean mass that gets catabolized in the racing season, to gaining the strength necessary to turn over the gears to produce significant power on the bike, weight training produces a plethora of effects that the endurance athlete stands to benefit from. Never mind the fact that weight training can boost the metabolism, help regulate hormonal balance, and improve posture. How many times have you needed that extra kick at the end of the race? Weight training can play a major part in helping the athlete find the necessary power at the end of a fatiguing event that their otherwise lesser-trained competitors may not be able to muster. This slight advantage could mean the difference between the podium and getting dropped!

One of the other, more commonly heard reasons for not heading to the gym is the oft heard "I am a cyclist/triathlete/runner, not a body builder. Why should I lift weights? I do not want to get big and bulky!" This is where having a coach or at least someone vaguely familiar with strength training protocols designed in the current century comes in handy. Just because you lift weights, does not mean you are going to get "big". The truth is, most people do not have the genetics to develop the size and bulk that many body builder types carry around. For those that do have a propensity in this direction, common sense and awareness of proper set/rep/rest and weight schemes come in handy. Endurance sports rely on very specific muscular actions and combinations of functional movement patterns that many of the traditional weight training exercises which do not even necessarily benefit the endurance athlete and can often be avoid entirely. This is where it is important to consult a coach or strength and conditioning professional to get the guidance necessary to keep you heading in the direction of your goals and not wasting time performing exercises that may not only be of little benefit to you, but may actually hinder your performance. A knowledgeable coach or fitness professional can guide you in setting up a strength training program that includes the appropriate set/rep/rest and weight schemes performed over time with progressive resistance that will give you the stability, strength, and power gains that will boost your performance and take you to the next level!

Finally, one of the most beneficial reasons for anyone, but especially for endurance athletes to incorporate strength work into their training programs is one that is rarely talked about in the general public. This not so well known but critically important benefit is the effect strength training can have, if done properly, in correcting muscular and postural imbalances. This is a huge one for endurance athletes. The very nature of the posture found in cycling lends itself to turning the athlete into a hunch back with

rounded, protracted shoulders and a forward head which causes all kinds of dysfunction, like cervical problems, head and neck aches, not to mention making many of us look like hunch backs! Runners and swimmers do not make out much better and often end up with postural abnormalities, muscle imbalances, and strength discrepancies that lead them to decreased performance and often season ending injuries that could have been otherwise avoided by incorporating the proper corrective and preventative strength exercises into their training. The repetitive movements involved in our sport reinforce muscular imbalances like the ones mentioned previously due to overused, hypertonic antagonists and weak and elongated antagonists. The ticket is to be as smart about your approach to weight training as you are to your training on the bike. Using the same principles of specificity and progressive overload, the athlete can work on strengthening what is weak and what is functionally necessary for the movements involved in their sport. They can leave out many of the body building type exercises primarily aimed at hypertrophic (size) gains in parts of the body that just aren't crucial to performance in their sport. The other key element in the off-season is getting involved in a proper integrated flexibility training program to complement the strength work and stretch the shortened overused muscles which make up the 2nd half of the imbalance equation. I agree that much of what is traditionally done in the gym has little to no relevance to what we do in our sports. However, there is much better knowledge out there today and incorporating this in the off-season and some of the in-season can make a huge difference in an athlete's performance and in the longevity of their career by decreasing the likelihood of pain and dysfunction, and performance limiting injuries.

Hopefully, by now, you are at least curious, if not convinced, that getting involved in a scientifically based, safe, and sport specific strength training regimen will help you in your athletic endeavors when the season rolls around. My hope is that any misconceptions you may have had about weight training prior to reading this article are now in question, if not completely dispelled, and replaced by a desire to improve your overall athletic performance by incorporating proper strength and flexibility work into your annual training plan. So step into the 22nd century and do not let strength training be the bogeyman that keeps you from going to the next level this season. Seek out a knowledgeable, certified, and experienced coach or strength and conditioning professional to help you put together an off-season program that will help you enjoy a longer athletic career and reach a peak level of performance this year!

For more information on subjects related to endurance training or for any of your coaching and training needs check out Jeb and the rest of the coaches from the Peaks Coaching Group at www.peakscoachinggroup.com.

*Jeb Stewart has a Master's degree in Exercise Science, is a Certified Strength & Conditioning and Performance Enhancement Specialist, a USA Cycling Expert Level Coach and co-owner of The Peaks Coaching Group.

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