

How to Warm Up Correctly for Your Next Bike Race or Ride



by Fred Matheny

Get your body ready before you ask it to perform.

Why have a consistent warm-up routine? Why isn't it sufficient merely to spin easily for the first few minutes of a ride?

A structured warm-up accomplishes several important things:

- **It raises body temperature.** Sweating means that your muscles are warm, loose and relaxed. There's some evidence that higher body temperature thins bodily fluids, lessening strain on joints and the heart.
- **It reduces initial levels of muscular stress.** If you've ever had to go hard on the bike without a warm-up—like when a group ride rages out of the parking lot—you know how your legs burn for the first couple of minutes. A good warm-up, on the other hand, alerts your systems that it's going to get harder soon.

- **It conserves glycogen.** Fast-from-the-gun workouts or races dip into your precious supplies of glycogen, your muscles' primary fuel. A slower start allows you to begin by burning a higher percentage of fat, conserving glycogen for when you really need it.

- **It opens capillaries.** A warm-up dilates the capillaries that allow your blood to bathe muscle cells with oxygen and nutrients. More blood flow means more fuel and a better- performing engine.

- **It compensates for aging.** The older you are, the more you need a warm-up. When we were kids, we could go full speed right off the couch when a friend wanted to run pass routes in the back yard. That's not how it works as we age, and we're more apt to get injured, too. The quality of our training suffers if we don't prepare for hard work.

For all these reasons, the warm-up is a vital part of each ride.

TIP! Because many cycling training workouts and even group rides require high intensity that approaches race effort, a warm-up is crucial to help you perform well and avoid injury. Get in the habit of using the same warm-up routine before every hard workout. I include a sample protocol below.

Shorter Warm-Ups May be Better

For years, I used a fairly long warm-up routine before time trials and short road races. I patterned it after what I understood top riders do. I'd spin around for 20 minutes, ride a few hills hard, do some sprints, and top it off with several minutes at TT pace.

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But sometimes this made me feel drained for the event itself. When the crunch came in a road race or I needed a strong final 10K in a time trial, there wasn't enough in my tank. I'd used too much energy in my warm-up.

Then I read that England's Chris Boardman, a past world hour record holder, had switched from hour-long warm-ups to a focused routine of 15-20 minutes.

I tried it and developed an abbreviated routine like the one described below. It worked great and left me plenty of energy for the race itself.

Most riders do long warm-ups for the wrong reason. In fact, warm-ups are often used to calm pre-race nerves. Riders get to the race early and register, but then they're too antsy to sit calmly in the car and review their race strategy.

Instead, nervous energy pressures them into a long, "pro-style" warm-up. Too often it's unfocused and mainly burns precious reserves. When they get to the starting line, they feel flat rather than fiery.

A Warm-Up For Training and Racing

Here's a 20-minute warm-up routine that you can use for any event. Practice it during the first 20 minutes of each training ride that will include hard efforts or long distance. By beginning tough workouts with the same warm-up, your body will become accustomed to the routine and what's coming next.

| Time (minutes) | Technique |
|-----------------------|---|
| 0-4 | Spin easily in a low gear. Begin at 75 rpm and gradually build to 90 rpm. Keep heart rate below 70% of max. |
| 5-11 | Gradually increase gear and effort. Shift up every 2 minutes. Keep cadence at 90- 100 rpm. In the last minute you should be breathing steadily, sweating lightly and your heart rate should be about 80% of max. |
| 12-14 | Do 3 controlled sprints. Using a moderate gear, stand, accelerate to 110 rpm, sit, and spin up to the point where your hips begin to rock. Then gradually slow until back to 90 rpm. This sequence should take about 20 seconds. Repeat 3 times with 40 seconds of easy spinning between sprints. |
| 15-17 | Do a 3-minute interval: Use a gear that you can turn at 90 rpm without pedaling all-out. Stand to accelerate, then sit and hold 90 rpm for 3 minutes. Power output should be equal to a training time trial of about 30 minutes. Your heart rate should rise to your lactate threshold in the last 15 |

| | |
|--------------|---|
| | seconds. |
| 18-20 | Spin easily in a very low gear. At 20 minutes, your heart rate should be down to 120 or lower, with breathing stabilized and legs feeling lively. |

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Although this warm-up is based on the successful routines of top riders, it won't be ideal for everyone. Warming up is highly individual. You may need a 60-minute warm-up to perform at your peak, but most cyclists will do better with a significantly shorter session. Experiment to find the length that works for you.

CAUTION! Don't use this routine at the start of recovery rides. It requires too much effort. Instead, gradually increase cadence and gearing until your heart rate is about 70 percent of max. Don't go any harder than that.

Advantages of Warming Up on a Trainer

At some events, particularly city criteriums, the surrounding roads can be so traffic-choked that warming up on them is dangerous or ineffective. The solution is to warm up on a trainer. This may even be required by the race promoter.

For example, years ago, organizers of the Colorado time trial championship faced opposition from residents of the small town where the race was to be held. The locals could tolerate riders on the road chosen for the TT, but they objected to us warming up on town streets. So, we had to use trainers or risk losing the race venue.

Most of us complained at first. How can we get a good warm-up on a trainer? But once we tried it, the benefits became obvious:

- There's no risk of a flat tire from road debris.
- You never leave your car, so help is right there if you have a problem.
- If the start time is changed for some reason, you're within hearing distance of the PA announcer.

- You can use headphones with inspiring music, something that's dangerous while riding on the road.
- You can cope better with weather. If it's cool, there's no windchill on the trainer. If it's hot, cold drinks are as close as your ice chest. Raining? You can wear a poncho as you warm up, or pedal under the tailgate of a van or SUV. At least you'll stay dry until the race starts.
- The warm-up routine outlined above can be done just as effectively on a trainer as on the road.

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Cooling Down is Important Too

The final few minutes of training are important, too. After a hard ride or race, don't immediately hop off your bike, panting and sweating. Instead, reverse the initial 5 minutes of the warm-up routine.

I live in a small town, so when I cross the city limit on the way home, I shift to the small ring, take a few deep breaths and spin through the residential streets. There's a small hill half a mile from my house, but I resist the temptation to do just one more hard bit over the top. In fact, I often choose a street that goes around the hill in order to cool down more effectively.

Some riders live atop climbs that make cooling down difficult. One example is my 1996 Race Across America teammate, Pete Penseyres, whose house crowns an 800-vertical-foot hill in southern California. He cools down by standing and "walking" up the hill with a slow cadence in a low gear, keeping his heart rate relatively low.

When RBR cofounder, Ed Pavelka, lived in southeastern Pennsylvania, his house was on top of a wall that he came to call "the final indignity." After scaling it, he'd stay in low gear and spin easily for the final 200 yards to his house.

Add in a warm-up and a cooling down routine to your rides, and you'll be glad

that you did.

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