

Musing McKinney

Return to Your Summer Form – eight ideas to help you get “on form”

By: Scott McKinney

Do you remember how fast you rode in August and September? Have you tried to go that fast lately? I'll bet it hurt like blazes and you nearly lost a lung – and you still didn't go very fast.

A few years ago, a friend said he had plateaued and asked if I had any ideas. As a self-coached rider and writer, I have a lot of ideas on training -- some even make sense. So I wrote down my thoughts and sent it along. Upon reviewing it a year later and assessing my own (lack of) form, I discovered that I should consider my own advice. Each year since, I've busted this out, re-read it, polished the writing, and added a few ideas. I hope you find something useful you can use as well.

1. Volume Matters. There's no substitute for distance. The big boys lay down 500+ training miles a week. As an amateur, 200 miles per week (more if I'm tuning up for the Death Ride or a double century) is the bare minimum to be marginally competitive. Whether you keep a log or not, you should be able to estimate your weekly mileage (e.g. Sunday to Saturday) to the nearest 10 miles in your head. I keep a running, mental tally of weekly miles to date.

2. Build Deep Base. Big weekly miles wear you down -- particularly after a long, winter layoff. Early in a training phase, your average speed may actually decrease as mileage goes up -- at first. The payoff is you're building an enormous base upon which you can draw later in the year. I usually require 2 to 4 months of high volume to move beyond fatigue into serious endurance. This is the hard part of "stress and rebuild" which you will encounter whenever you push your body beyond it's comfort zone. So, if you want mid-summer form before your buddies, build deep base in December.

3. Go Long. A lot of fit riders (even some racer types) die at distances over 60 miles. Mixing in regular 100 milers (5 to 6 hours) every week will give you needed endurance for the end of your race, century or double. There's a lot more to gain here than fitness. Every year I have to re-learn many lessons of long-distance riding – hydration, eating, mechanicals, degree of effort and how to dose it over a long distance, where good stores are, and what your body can tolerate.

4. Make It Count. I aim for one of six types of training rides:

- Base (varying efforts below 80% of Max HR). Some argue that base should never exceed 75%.
- Tempo (specific, sustained steady state effort between 75 and 85% for a fixed duration – e.g. 79% for 1 hour to 1:30 depending on conditioning, rest and willpower).
- Hill Repeats/Intervals (3 to 5 repeats of 10 to 15 minutes at 85 to 90%). Hills of every manner are a cyclist's best training tool. Whether you're on your local training hill or an

epic climb, gradients help you hit and hold a specific training state. Intervals take other forms as well. Try a set of 5-minute spinning intervals at 120 RPM (to smooth out your stroke). Form sprints improve your economy of motion. Get creative on intervals to break up the training and improve overall form.

- Recovery (HR under 100 beats per minute or about 50%). Staying under 100 BPM is more difficult than you might imagine. It's a nice goal. The point is to trick your body into thinking it's working so that it will put the extra effort into recovery thereby building your riding muscles. It's also a good opportunity to enjoy the day or involve your family in your sport.
- Long Distance and Group (mix of base, tempo, hard effort, recovery, hills, epic climbs, group/pace line skills).
- Sprints (95% +) are a good skill even for recreational riders. Use it to make it through a stop light, out run a mean dog, or leave other riders behind (like when there's a mean dog is around).

5. Recover/Rest. The corollary to making every ride count is that you need to plan your recover days – both on and off the bike. That's when muscles actually get stronger. On the bike, stay in the small chain ring and spin. Keep your HR really low (I aim for less than 100 BPM but no more than 120). The trick is that your body thinks it's going to work so that it puts itself into recovery mode even though you haven't broken down muscle tissue. As you get more fit, make a greater differences between your fastest rides and those targeting recovery (even slower). If you can't make a ride count, don't waste your time. You'll benefit more from a day off the bike. It's a good mental break, valuable as recovery time, and is an opportunity to mow the lawn.

6. Weight. This is about body fat not carbon bling, so put your wallet away. Strength-to-weight ratio is a huge issue on any hill -- particularly on the epic climbs that separate men from boys. Long-distance rides burn body fat. Do more of that. Diet makes a difference too (cut portion size and seconds; use a small plate; limit desserts and beer to special occasions). If you get serious, there are good books by reputable nutritionists. I suggest you read one of them.

7. Mix it Up. Riding with different groups provides the opportunity to learn different skills, styles, tips, tricks and routes. Group rides can make training more fun and mentally engaging. It makes you commit to a ride time. And it can challenge you. Find a group (or rider) that is a little better than you and try to keep up. I often work 5% harder on hill repeats when I have competition. Group rides, however, can also stall training and develop serious dependency issues. Riding with the same group every time invariably results in "bullshit riding" -- riding slowly or standing around to catch up on news and gossip rather than focusing on your training objectives. At the other end of the spectrum, there's no point in tackling Cat 2's if you're a recreational rider. You'll finish solo every time (I've proven this several times). That said, do ride solo. I ride most of my Base and Tempo by myself because I can control consistent efforts and durations. Furthermore, I don't constrain others with my daily workout goals. Finally, when I ride solo, I never stand around talking to myself (that I'll admit to).

8. Bike Commute. It may not work for everyone, but it's the only way I reach my target weekly mileage. I get a minimum of 24 miles nearly every day that I wouldn't get any other way. It takes a car off the road, saves gas, builds deep base, and it's (usually) a relaxing way to unwind after work. BTW, "Commute" can mean more than to and from work. Ride to the in-laws, or between points on a trip, or to the start of any group ride, etc. If you consider yourself a bicyclist, then cycling should be a way of life. That's the core of bike commuting.

There's probably another list of 8 ideas that are just as important (have fun, ride at night, ride in the rain, learn technical skills, lift weights, cross train, build core strength, race, heart-rate training,

"B.E.H.A.G's," ride journals, visualization, etc.). The bottom line is the only real magic bullet is to commit to a training plan and follow your plan.