

Strength Training

For Triathletes

By: Jason West

Triathletes are a unique and impressive breed. Taking on three different sports at the same time and races that last anywhere from 1 hour to as many as 17 in an Ironman is a massive commitment. There's only so much time in the day to train, and that means choosing which sports to train and when. It's always a bit of a give and take, and that balance and constant change is one thing a lot of people really love about the sport. Generally, we can't fit in everything we would like to, so that means cutting sessions out and trying to do what gives us the most bang for the buck. One of the first things I see athletes decide to cut is strength training. It seems to have the least direct connection to your swimming, biking, and running, and therefore, not seen as the priority. The more we learn about the body and how it responds to training, the more it seems essential to maintain strength and resistance training in our programs.

What are the benefits?

Injury Prevention- Aside from eating and sleeping, strength training has over and over again been shown to be the best method to prevent injury. Overuse injuries happen when tissue gets overloaded, then tightens up, and then tears. When muscles and tendons are strong, it's less likely for them to be overloaded too much and have that cycle begin. This becomes even more important as you age as your muscles and tendons become less elastic thus making you naturally tighter and less mobile. Keeping those tissues strong will help maintain those great properties to keep your muscles working at their best.

Hormone Profile- Intense endurance training tends to suppress testosterone and inhibit your bodies' ability to recover. Heavy strength training stimulates the release of testosterone and other positive hormones for your recovery which can also improve things like sleep quality. Training only makes you faster once you recover from it, so maximizing your recovery is just as important as maximizing your session itself.

Decrease Imbalances- A 90 minute ride will probably include over 15,000 pedal strokes, and the same goes for swimming and running. Constantly performing in the same motions can make some muscles strong while neglecting others. Over time this can change how some parts of your body are moving and slow you down, lead you to injury, or both. The gym is a great place to identify these and move in ways that you don't in your normal sessions. This will help you maintain good movement, and good movement allows for fast movement.

Neuromuscular Changes- Creating good movement patterns usually starts in the gym. Learning how to activate your strongest muscles in the gym will translate to the other three sports and maximize what you can do. Strength work can also help you activate more motor units, basically more muscle fibers at a time which will help no matter what you are doing.

How to Structure It:

Just like with our other training, going in with a plan is important. There's certain things we want to do, and other things we definitely don't in order to get the most out of our time. Here is how I would structure your strength to give yourself the most benefit:

1. Make sure you are warmed up. I like to head to the gym straight after a session since I'm ready to go, but if you're doing it by itself, look for ways that are different than swim, bike, or run. Try jump rope, a rower, or maybe some light agility ladders.
2. Start with a few large compound exercises like front squat, deadlift, single leg split squat, row, pull down, bench press, etc. Do three or four sets of 5 reps slowly working up to a pretty heavy weight (once you're comfortable of course). Lifting heavy weights for a small number of reps will build the most strength as well as stimulate those hormonal benefits we want. Staying at 5 reps also prevents us from gaining much muscle size, as the best range to grow muscle is working in the 8-12 rep range. That means we either want to stay under that to produce size, or over that to improve strength endurance. Using heavy load for these exercises will also help with that motor unit recruitment mentioned before.
3. Move to exercises that challenge your stability. Single leg squats and deadlifts are great to work on your balance on one leg as well as activate the proper muscles for those movements. Lateral lunges are also great to get you moving in a plane you're not used to and target some imbalances. Just two sets of 10-15 reps of these is plenty.
4. Finish with some smaller rehab/prehab exercises like strengthening your shoulders and rotator cuffs for swimming or doing clam shells to strengthen and activate your glutes.

Here is an example of a strength session that I do often that targets the above points that you could try. It's just 7 exercises that won't take too long but give you a lot of benefits:

- Hex bar deadlift- 3 sets of 5 reps heavy
- Pull ups(assisted if you can't do pull ups- 3 sets of 6
- Dumbbell bench press- 3 sets of 5
- Single leg deadlift- 2 sets of 15 each leg
- Single arm shoulder fly on single leg- 2 sets of 15 each arm
- Monster walks band at ankles- 2 x 20 steps each direction
- Internal and external shoulder rotation w/ band- 2 x 15 reps each direction each arm

Before adding strength training to my program, I always felt like I was breaking down quickly. I felt fragile, like if I played a game of basketball I might hurt myself. But, since I've stuck to strength in my schedule twice a week I feel much stronger and healthier. I recover from sessions faster and know I'm further from injury. Any time I take a break, the first thing I come back to is my foundation of strength. Talk to some fellow workout partners or a trainer who has experience with endurance athletes and you can get started and see the benefits yourself. All athletes need to be strong. Triathlon is tough, but strength work makes you tougher.