

Fit Check

TROUBLESHOOT YOUR WEAK SPOTS: 5 SIMPLE CURES FOR TRAINING BURNOUT

By: Selene Yeager

Even with a new season spread before us like a fresh blanket of snow, many of us will plow the same path we did last year and the year before. For those of us who encounter our share of disappointing results, burnout or injury, it's time to try something new. Whether you're plagued with nagging knees or you're always fried by July, this guide will help you change your ways.

REPEAT OFFENDER: LINGERING FATIGUE

Your legs are heavy, and you need a triple espresso to motivate.

FRESH FIX: EIGHT HOURS OF SHUT-EYE

The average American gets six hours of slumber per night. A University of Chicago study of 669 adults found that most people sleep less than they think because they lose an hour between the time they decide to go to bed and the time they actually get into bed. If you're an active cyclist, you need eight hours for optimum performance. During sleep, your body pumps out the greatest amount of human growth hormone, which is essential for muscle repair, bone turnover, fat metabolism and strong immunity. Studies suggest that routinely skimping on sleep can leave you with broken-down muscles and increased fat stores, and may reduce cardiovascular performance by 11 percent and slow glucose metabolism--a disastrous side effect for endurance athletes.

REPEAT OFFENDER: MIDSUMMER BURNOUT

You crush climbs and win town-sign sprints in March, only to watch everyone blow by you come July.

FRESH FIX: BUILD A BOMBPROOF BASE

Riders with spring fever are scorched by summer. If you're a seasoned rider, spend at least three weeks in spring doing easy to moderate aerobic riding before you start doing serious speedwork and racing. (Double that if you're new to the sport.) Then, during the spring and summer, allow adequate recovery by taking one or two days off the bike each week and scaling back the intensity of your rides one week out of every month.

REPEAT OFFENDER: PAINFUL KNEES

Your legs and lungs can get you to the front, but your rusty knees hold you back.

FRESH FIX: CONDITION YOUR CONNECTIVE TISSUE

It's common for riders who have been lifting weights and riding the trainer all winter to hammer big gears in early spring--a one-two punch that can overload connective tissue and cause injury. Likewise, if you stay fit by crosstraining during the off-season, your knees need time to adjust to the repetitive demands of pedaling. Taper down on strength training as you begin riding more. Keep your early season pedaling resistance low and your cadence high, and spin up hills instead of muscling your way over them. Your long ride shouldn't be more than double your average ride mileage from the previous two or three weeks.

REPEAT OFFENDER: NECK AND BACK PAIN

A study of more than 500 recreational cyclists found that 85 percent have experienced pain from riding, most commonly in the neck and back.

FRESH FIX: PUSH-UPS, PULL-UPS, PLANKS

Many cyclists ignore the need to condition the muscles above the waist. A weak torso opens the door to chronic back, neck and shoulder pain. Do two to three sets of these moves two days a week: push-ups (work up to 25) to build chest, shoulder and triceps strength; plank (support your body on your forearms and toes for up to 60 seconds) to build ab and back strength; and pull-ups (aim for 12) to strengthen upper back, shoulders and arms.

REPEAT OFFENDER: STUCK IN NEUTRAL

You're not getting slower, but you're not getting faster, either.

FRESH FIX: RIDE AS FAST AS YOU WANT TO BE

Many riders consistently train at one speed or intensity, then get bummed when they can't keep up with their fast friends. Two days a week of structured intervals can raise your cruising speed. On the first day, do short sprints--four intervals of 15 to 30 seconds in length at all-out intensity, with 10 to 15 minutes of active recovery in between. On the second day, do five or six intervals three minutes in length at a pace faster than you would ride a time trial, with three minutes of active recovery in between.

Selene Yeager, a USA Cycling certified coach, keeps you fit and healthy.