

TRAINING TIPS from Carmichael Training Systems (Week 3 of 12)



Time to get some skills!

By Carmichael Training Systems

As you get rolling toward your goal of riding the Tour de Cure, it's time to talk about your skills on the bike and how to ride safely and confidently.

When you start riding a bike as an adult, you soon realize it isn't the same as it was when you were a kid. You need to be able to handle the machine in a wide variety of conditions, in traffic, and often around other riders. And if you haven't been on a bike since college, you may be unfamiliar with some of the technologies on new bikes, like how to use all those gears! While it's important to gain the fitness to be able to complete and enjoy the Tour de Cure, your skills on the bike will also help you save energy, go faster, and enjoy your day on the bike.

Not to worry – while at first glance it appears there's a lot to learn before getting used to being on a bike - cycling will be both a breeze and a joy once you get a handle on the basics. Here are some tips to help you become more comfortable and confident on the bike.

1. Know Your Gears

Most bikes these days come with a lot of gears. Your gears in front (by the pedals) are used to make really big shifts from the high range of your gears to the low range. For example, if you come to a big hill you'll want to access the low range of your gears by using your left-hand shifter to move the chain onto the smaller chain ring. To go faster down a hill, you'll want to use your higher range of gears, so shift into the big chain ring. The gears in back (by the rear wheel) are the "fine-tuners"; you use these when you need to get into a slightly different gear in order to go faster or make the pedaling easier. These gears are controlled by the shift mechanism on the right-hand side of your handlebars. If this whole idea is foreign to you, get out on an open stretch of road without much traffic and practice shifting your gears (both front and back) to see what they can do.

2. Use Your Gears

A big problem many beginner cyclists experience is that they don't use their gears effectively. When on a climb, you want to make sure you get into an easier gear so you can keep your pedals turning quickly enough that you don't wear out your muscles too early. On the other hand, you don't want to wear yourself out and get nowhere by using too easy a gear on flat ground or while going downhill.

3. When Shifting, Plan Ahead

Avoid shifting at the very last second. Look at the terrain ahead and plan in advance what gear you'll need to be in if the terrain changes. When you get to a hill, shift to the gear you need just before you get there, not when you're on the hill. When you wait too long, you lose momentum and put so much pressure on the chain that it's harder for the bike to shift into the appropriate gear.

4. Braking

The brake on the right-hand side of your bike controls the rear wheel, while the brake on the left-hand side controls the front wheel. Your front brake will provide

more stopping power, but it is for precisely this reason that you don't want to use it aggressively on its own – that's a sure way to pitch yourself over the bars! On the other hand, if you only use the rear brake, you'll have less stopping power and you'll skid the tire. Again, check out the terrain ahead and moderate your speed in advance if you need to slow down so that you can avoid having to hit the brakes hard. Use both brakes fairly evenly, particularly if you need to stop suddenly.

5. Cornering I – Look and Plan Ahead

When you head into a turn, look through the turn to where you want to go, rather than right into the middle of it. Your bike will go where you're looking, so if you look at the curb you don't want to hit, you'll probably run right into it. If you need to slow down going into the corner, brake before the turn rather than right in the middle of it.

6. Cornering II – Lean Your Bike, Not Your Body

As you head into the turn, push the handlebar that is closest to the inside of the turn very slightly so that your arm straightens a little bit. This will lean your bike into the turn. At the same time, keep your body relatively upright; don't lean as far into the turn as you lean the bike. Make sure your outside foot is pushing hard down into the pedal at the 6 o'clock position (so your inside foot is at the 12 o'clock position); this keeps your weight properly distributed over the bike and will ensure that you don't scrape your inside pedal or lean the bike too far.

7. Going Downhill

Control your speed by using your brakes judiciously rather than having to hit them hard at the last second. Keep your weight over your saddle; if the descent is very steep, scoot your butt towards the back of the saddle to keep traction on your rear wheel. Keep your focus ahead of you, rather than right in front of your wheel, so that you can plan ahead for changes in direction or obstacles in the road.

8. Pedal Smoothly

Think about turning circles with your pedals rather than just pushing down on them. You don't actually apply positive force to each pedal all the way through the stroke, but visualizing circles can improve your pedaling efficiency. Imagine wiping mud off the bottom of your foot every time you come to the bottom of your pedal stroke, and kicking your foot forward over the top of the pedal stroke.

9. Practice Riding on Different Terrain

A good way to improve your handling skills on your road bike is to ride on gravel trails or even grass. Your speed will be slower, but you'll learn how to navigate around obstacles and over little rocks, which will help you when you ride on roads with traffic and debris. At our cycling skills camps we have cyclists perform drills in the grass so they get a better feel for the bike, at a lower speed, and with less of a penalty for failure if they fall over.

10. Riding in Traffic

Pay attention all the time. Work under the assumption that the cars often won't see you, so you need to be defensive. Make eye contact with drivers. Ride in the shoulder or bike lane when they are available, and when they're not, ride as close to the right side of the road as is safely possible. Use your arms to signal your turns, and obey the traffic signs so that your movements are predictable to drivers.

Carmichael Training Systems Founder and Head Coach Chris Carmichael is the 2012 National Spokesperson for the American Diabetes Association Tour de Cure. This article is part of a series of articles prepared by Chris and the coaches at CTS to help you prepare for your Tour de Cure event. For more information on CTS and to sign up for our free newsletter and a chance to win a signed copy of "The Time-Crunched Cyclist" book, visit www.trainright.com/register.