

Yoga program can build a cyclist's strength and endurance and introduce flexibility to chronically tight muscles.

By Baron Baptiste and Kathleen Finn Mendola

Rudi Altig was a man before his time. In the 1960s, the German Tour de France bike racer known as the "yellow dwarf" was a yoga enthusiast. Before and after his arduous races he used yoga to relax his muscular body. Maybe he instinctively knew that yoga—with its ability to usher athletes through other dimensions and angles—is the perfect foil for bicycling, a one-dimensional sport.



As a bicyclist travels through one plane, he or she repeatedly overtaxes some muscles and underutilizes others. Watch a cyclist coming toward you, and you can read the imbalances. Rocking side to side signals that one hip is compensating for the other's weakness or inflexibility. Hips are the core of movement for the cyclist. If the core is weak, then the upper body has to work harder, and this can lead to back strain.

Likewise, if a thigh or knee flares out from the bicycle seat due to weakness or chronic tightness, that side of the body is doing less work. The hips, thighs, knees, and ankles should all be on one track—pointing straight ahead. If these body parts are off track, cyclists run the risk of wearing down ligaments and tendons, and developing imbalanced muscle groups. And in cyclists, the quadriceps are often overdeveloped. To compensate for this, the hamstrings shorten, tighten, and thus weaken.

The posture a cyclist conforms to astride a bike also contributes to muscle tension and imbalance: A bicyclist's spine is in a constant state of flexion, hunched over the handlebars. In order to achieve overall flexibility and balanced muscle groups, a biker needs to incorporate balancing, counteracting movements—for example, backbends, which stretch and elongate oft-used hip flexors and quadriceps. A yoga practice can help restore balance, first by taking the alignment principles of yoga and transferring them to how you sit on your bike.

### **Does Your Bike Fit?**

Jon Bridenbaugh, a Portland, Oregon-based bike racer, took up yoga as part of his training as a bicyclist fitter. He attributes an improved sense of balance and endurance, and a subtle awareness of his center, to his weekly yoga classes.

Not only has Bridenbaugh seen improvement in his riding, he has also noticed a clear link between the tenets of yoga and bicycle positioning. A bicyclist's success and comfort level depend on how well he or she is fitted to his or her bicycle. Fitting specialists such as Bridenbaugh take the alignment principles of yoga and apply them to how a bicyclist relates to his bicycle.

After positioning a bicyclist on a stationary cycle, fitters take riders through a body alignment checklist:

**Arms & Wrists.** Your arms should be placed at right angles to your torso, in line with your shoulders. Your wrists should be in line with the shoulders or just slightly wider than them in order to distribute upper body weight evenly. If your arms are spread too wide, you can strain your shoulders. Too narrow a hold can collapse the chest, though for racers, a narrow stance improves handling when going downhill. To strive for this alignment, practice a modified [Cobra Pose](#) (Bhujangasana) with the arms bent, or a modified [Downward-Facing Dog](#) (Adho Mukha Svanasana), with the forearms flat on the floor, approximating the angle of your arms on your bike.

**Torso.** Your spine should be in a neutral position and your chest should be open so you can lean forward without strain. A strong, neutral spine allows the chest to open, which in turn facilitates oxygen intake. Tight hamstrings will limit how far the back will bend before forcing the chest to close. Try the standing forward bend *Padahasthasana* or the seated forward bend *Janu Sirsasana* to achieve this neutral feeling in the spine.

**Hips & Pelvis.** The angle between the torso and the hips should not be hard or sharp—there should be adequate space for the hips to move freely. Warrior Pose (*Virabhadrasana I*, [II](#), & [III](#)) can give you a sense of this open connection between the torso and the hips. Your saddle should be essentially flat-tilted slightly, to a maximum of three to five degrees. Just as the proper angle of your pelvis in Downward-Facing Dog allows you to distribute your weight evenly through your hands, arms, legs, and feet, a seat tilted too far forward tips the pelvis and adds undue pressure to the hands and wrists.

Finally, the entire body should be relaxed. A tension-free upper body is vital to a cyclist's comfort and endurance. Tension sucks up the power you can put into pedaling. French bike racer Bernard Hinault puts it this way, "You should feel like you can play piano while riding your bike." In other words, no death grips on the handlebars. Just let your arms hang loosely from the shoulders. For full body relaxation, think of how your body lets go of effort in [Savasana](#) (Corpse Pose) before getting aboard your bike.

### **Get into the Flow**

Alignment will help you economize energy, allowing you to ride longer, more comfortably, but there are other yoga principles and practices that will also serve you well on a ride:

**Flow.** At the bottom of your pedal stroke, your knee should be straight and your foot parallel to the ground. Strive for the smooth strokes of professional cyclists, who are able to apply power throughout 360 degrees of the rotation instead of pedaling in squares, abruptly thrusting pedals up and down. Before your daily ride, try warming up with Sun Salutations to introduce the smoothness you're trying to achieve in your pedal stroke. This flowing series allows you to work out kinks in your movements, which over time translate to fluid transitions from one pose to another, the kind of continuous, flowing action you want in your pedal stroke.

**Extension.** Get as much extension as possible from your bike seat. A fitter will raise your seat until you have to rock side to side to reach pedals, then lower it until you don't have to rock anymore. You can practice the extension principle in any number of yoga poses. In particular, *Padahasthasana* and *Uttanasana*, both forward bends, best approximate the feeling of extension you are striving for as you stretch from your pelvis.

**Breath.** Don't leave your breathwork at home when you ride. Even in intense effort, you want to connect the rhythm of your breath with your pedal strokes. As in yoga poses, breath is vital to reaching those tight, restricted muscles that are in need of oxygen. So transfer your pranayama practice and your awareness of the breath in postures to your biking, where muscles undergoing physical exertion are especially in need of oxygen.

Bicycling, like other linear sports such as running, hiking, and swimming, calls out for the counterbalancing benefits of yoga. Not only do poses aid in elongating and strengthening overtaxed muscles, but applying the finer nuances of yoga alignment will help you establish a new relationship with your bike, one of comfort and ease.

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