Stealth fitness

Commuting can be slow and easy, but for some cyclists it's free time for fitness training. Coach **Joe Beer** explains how to get the most from multi-tasking

Even commuting at a casual pace can get you to work faster and happier than those using fossil fuels. You'll slowly get fitter as a side effect too. For some cyclists, however, getting fitter is just as important as getting from A to B. By making fitness the focus of your commute, you'll kill two birds with one stone and get fit faster. But you need a plan.

That plan shouldn't be riding flat out for 30-60 minutes each way. Full cycling kit and showers are advised; exhausting yourself every day is not. You can simply extend your commute on the way home, and more time on the bike like this will help. A more focused plan will help even more. It's crucial to measure your progress: what gets measured gets done.

There are a few key pointers to bear in mind when you're looking to get extra fitness from your commute rather than just riding to and fro.

1. Take into account other road users. You cannot ride full-bore when traffic is too dense or road conditions are too dicy.
2. Be flexible, depending on how you feel and the working day you've had. It's no use being exhausted and trying to do four hard hilly 8-minute efforts. Delay a day and eat like a champion instead.
3. Heart rate, power or perceived exertion: you chose how to measure your effort but keep things simple and get them written down each day.
4. Work out, don't work yourself over. Build your workouts as you get stronger. Don't just aim to put the hammer down all the time.

It's not only about the riding, either. Recent studies in the area of sports nutrition suggest that by manipulating the levels of carbohydrate you consume, you can gain more fitness from your riding (see Deplete repeat, below). Be mindful that if you don't have time to eat at work, you may need to feed during rides to get extra calories in. And do ensure you are hydrating adequately.

Get to work on your fitness

1. Power ups (homeward)
After riding a 10-15 minute warm up, and taking into account the road ahead, change to a higher gear (one or two sprockets higher) and do an 8-10 second burst. Leave it a minimum of two-minutes and repeat. Aim for one or two sets of eight efforts. These develop power, but due to their brief nature they do not cause excessive damage or tiredness.

2. Lactic bath (homeward)
After at least 15 minutes of steady riding, pick a hill of at least three minutes in length and ride it as fast as you can. Look to be breathing very heavily by the top, then gear down and spin. Repeat on one or two other hills but leave at least five minutes of steady riding between efforts. This overloads the lactate system, developing climbing power, recovery and will power.

3. Progression regression (inward)
Starting with a low cadence as you roll out from home, aim to raise the revs by 10 or so every 3-5 minutes until you cannot stay seated or keep on top of the cadence. Back off to a low cadence and then start again. This challenges the nervous system and improves your ability to ride smoothly.

4. Deplete repeat (outward-inward)
On your homeward journey do a combination of power-ups and some lactic bath efforts. Make this a longer ride, ideally over an hour, consuming only water. Eat a low carb evening meal. Next day, ride without breakfast, aiming to keep a fast tempo for at least 30-40 minutes. Ride home at an easy pace that evening. This teaches the muscles to eke out carbohydrate from your body's reserves.

Photo: Martin Breschinski