



Add Strength Training to Better Your Endurance Performance

Endurance athletes are a pretty simple bunch. No matter the level of participation, nearly everyone is aiming to improve his or her performance and hoping to see noticeable gains in speed or power from all that hard training; that is, after all, part of the joy of sport. Unfortunately, in their pursuit of excellence, this desire leads most athletes just to focus on their core sport with such frequency the results don't usually balance out with the effort applied.

If you take a step off the beaten path of more traditional training approaches, beginning with simply viewing your training a little differently, you might actually reap the rewards you desire. Focusing on your *functional strength* is a great place to start to achieve that power, speed and endurance you are seeking. Unfortunately, it is often the case that, while many understand the need for gaining functional strength, identifying how to achieve it can be difficult.

Let's begin with what it is *not*. A proper functional strength program does not entail hours of heavy lifting at the gym with traditional exercises such as bench press, leg press and bicep curls. While this type of activity has a place in health and fitness, it is debatable as to how it benefits endurance performance. Many athletes can achieve proper stimulus and benefit from simply using their own body weight.

Functional strength is also not simply a series of static abdominal exercises and core work performed on a mat. Exercises should directly correlate to movements you will make in your core sport(s). Movements should be dynamic and teach you to engage the prime movers in the exercise in conjunction with the core muscle groups that make up your abdominals and lower back. To be truly effective, functional strength training should include the following characteristics:

Lateral and Stability Training

Exercises should work on the stabilizing muscles in the lower back, abdominals and hips, with plenty of focus on lateral movement. With most endurance activities being primarily linear in nature, training with lat-

eral exercises will help provide support, prevent injury and allow continued proper form when fatigue sets in. Side leg lunges, "skaters" (gliding side-to-side), and shuffling from side-to-side are a few examples of lateral training exercises.

Graded Unstable Environment

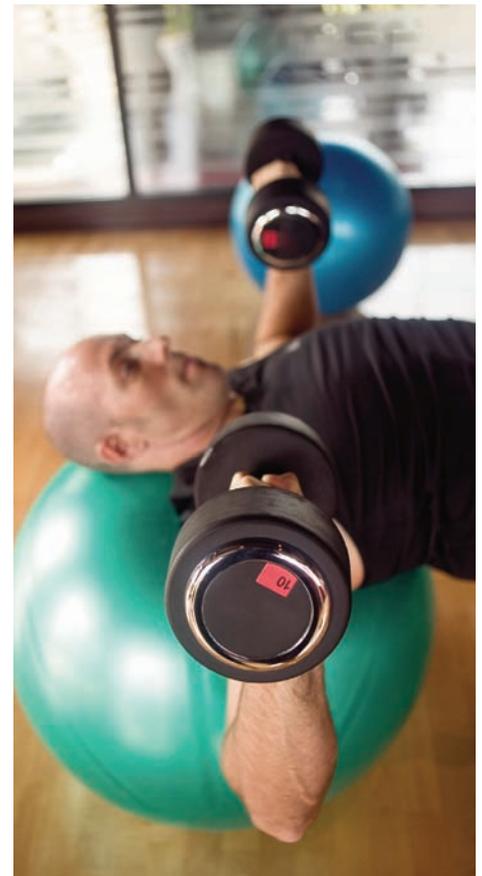
As you progress in any exercise you should be able to evolve the exercise to be in an increasingly less stable environment. Simply engaging muscles in a stable movement pattern will have nowhere near the training benefit or correlation to the real world as being functionally strong does.

It is critical to progress only when you have mastered the proper movements in the more stable environment. I am often amazed at how so many people are keen to complete the most advanced exercises before mastering the more simplistic ones. Many basic exercises such as push-ups, sit-ups, plank poses or squats can become more challenging, or unstable, by balancing on one leg, using a TRX training system, or balancing on a fitness or Bosu ball.

Mobility

In endurance sports it is not simply about pure strength. Functional strength should include exercises that aid in strength through movement patterns correlating to the core sport, as well as aiding continued improvements in mobility and range of motion at the joints. A perfect example is the anchor of running – the hips. For runners and triathletes hip mobility is a central focus, with the aim of maintaining and improving strong but mobile hips. Too much strength can lead to decreased mobility and flexibility. To achieve proper muscular recruitment and biomechanics, the hips have to move freely without restriction. A proper functional strength program will provide specific strength, but also improve mobility in the process.

Stretching and various yoga poses are great ways to enhance mobility. While it is best to dedicate a light or even recovery day to these types or exercises, it is also impor-



tant to make sure you always properly warm-up and cool-down.

You can add tremendous benefits to your training and performance by creating space in your training schedule for at least two functional strength sessions a week. Notice I did not say add in two sessions. These sessions should be as much of a priority as your core sport, and the long-term gains are huge.

Avoid focusing on volume when you're training. Take a step off that beaten path and start to include real functional strength into your training. You will see improvements in your day-to-day activities as well. <<

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