

Winter Cycling

Winter in Minnesota probably doesn't bring 'bicycling' to mind for most people but this is a great time to build strength for next spring, shed some holiday pounds and polish your cycling technique so spring's first ride is a joy and not a punishment. There are really three options for cycling in winter: riding outdoors, riding your own bike indoors either on rollers or a stationary trainer or riding a stationary bike at home or at the gym. All three have their pros and cons.

Riding outdoors may seem a little foolhardy at first but it's really just a question of dressing for the weather and then using the adversity of the conditions to your advantage. With the lack of snow we've seen this is a great time to get out the mountain bike and explore. Riding over trails and back roads with sometimes limited traction can hone your bike handling skills and pedaling technique. It is, however, often difficult to keep your heart rate and cadence up. For those skills we need to move indoors.

The biggest advantage of riding indoors is that, away from the distractions of road hazards, you can concentrate fully on the fitness goals you want to achieve. Whether riding a stationary bike or riding your bike on a trainer or rollers, the biggest complaint has always been boredom. People have tried reading books, listening to music or watching TV to make the time go past but two things will do that better than any of these: keep your workouts short and do intervals. Exercising at a lower aerobic heart rate will burn a higher percentage of fat for the number of calories burned but it takes longer periods of time to burn a given number of calories. Interval training, short bursts of high effort interspersed with low effort recovery periods, will burn a higher total number of calories, build strength (which will raise your resting metabolism), strengthen your cardiovascular system and has two very important advantages for a cyclist. By pushing your body's limits, it becomes better at absorbing and using the oxygen you breathe and your muscles become more tolerant of the lactic acid produced during high effort periods such as climbing hills or bucking a headwind. When I'm on my trainer doing intervals I'm watching my heart rate, my cadence (the RPMs I'm pedaling), the smoothness of my pedaling and watching the clock to know how long to do each segment, when and to what gear to shift for the next segment ... I'm just too busy to be bored!

While the workout you get from riding on a trainer or on rollers and riding a stationary bike can be very similar, each has its own advantages. Riding on rollers takes some practice. The bike is not attached in any way; you are just riding in place. You still need to balance as well as keeping the bike on the rollers while riding and when starting and stopping. The biggest advantage of rollers is the balance and smoothness it requires to stay on them, skills you will carry into the next season's rides. Both rollers and a trainer have one great thing going for them; you're riding YOUR bike. The seat, pedals, handlebars, shifting, your body's position on the bike are all the same as when you're out on the road. Reacquainting your bottom with your bicycle's seat each spring becomes a thing of the past and being able to use the winter months to try different positions or components or fine tune body position can make springtime rides much more enjoyable and productive.

Stationary bikes have some convenience advantages that trainers and rollers do not. If you're riding your own bike indoors, it's going to be in your home taking up space. While you may opt for a stationary bike at home, any gym will have one and many have different types as well. You can use an upright, a recumbent or a spinning bike for different types of workouts working different muscle groups for a more rounded fitness picture. Many also have upper body workout features that riding your bike will not give you. Most machines now have preprogrammed workouts to let you do the type of workout at the right level by just pushing the right buttons.

Whatever route you choose to take, having a heart rate monitor and knowing how to use it is one of the best ways to insure you are reaching the goals you've set. Determining your maximum heart rate and the percentages of your maximum that correspond to your various exertion levels (aerobic, anaerobic, lactate threshold and VOmax) will let you monitor your workout and your progress. As with any activity that pushes your fitness limits, the first step in your program should be a thorough evaluation by your doctor.

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