

Coach Mel: Improving Flexibility Through Strength - Racergirl

Written by melanie

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I wrote this article for Triathlete Magazine a while back. ☐ I have been advocating a lot of strength work lately for my athletes so this article may be food for thought for a lot of you building your 2012 programs. ☐ Enjoy!

In order to be a good triathlete, an athlete needs to have strength, speed and endurance. When an athlete chooses to race off road, it would be beneficial for that athlete to have agility as well. Agility is a combination of coordination, flexibility, power and speed that would allow a trail racer to pick their way through technical terrain quickly and efficiently. What many athletes are missing when they move to off road racing is adequate flexibility to allow them to stay loose while reacting to terrain. [CLICK READ MORE FOR THE REST](#)

Some new research has shown that stretching may be less effective in improving flexibility versus using strength training. This is a glowing recommendation for both pilates and yoga as both combine strength movements with stretching. Imbalances in muscle groups can develop due to a limitation in flexibility so these exercises can be seen as preventative measures. Focusing on strengthening while lengthening is good for balancing the body and is key to developing power and agility.

Both pilates and yoga combine exercises using bodyweight to challenge muscular strength while leading the body through movements that will also lengthen muscles. Movements that complement the run stride, swim stroke and pedal stroke are important for triathlon and are the focus for this article.

Hyperflexibility is not the goal. Despite the examples of extreme flexibility seen in both yoga and pilates, triathlon is really a sport where functional flexibility is valuable. Focusing on having a loose and relaxed body at rest that can spring into action when engaged is important. Strained or damaged muscles and ligaments from overstretching are certainly not good for performance. Do not go beyond what is comfortable in any of these movements.

Exercises:

1. Cobra pose: Lie face down on the floor with your arms stretched out in front of you. Slowly

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push your hands into the floor, relax your buttocks and lift your head and chest off of the floor with your eyes towards the ceiling. This pose is great for back strength and flexibility. Adding the foam roller to the exercise by resting your arms on the roller will increase the workload for this exercise.

2. Chair Pose: Stand feet together, arms parallel overhead, palms together. Bend your knees attempting to bring thighs parallel with the floor. Hold for 30 seconds to 2minutes. Chair pose strengthens and lengthens muscles in the hips and legs while also stretching muscles and ligaments in the lower legs and feet.

3. Bridge pose: Lying on your back with your feet hip distance apart, slowly lift your pelvis up while supporting your weight with a straight back on your shoulders. Adding the instability element to the bridge pose with a foam roller requires more strength for an already difficult exercise. Start with pelvic tilt and work your way through bridge pose to the foam roller version.

4. Side Leg Lift: Lying with your hip on the roller, lift your top leg up and hold it up. Bring the lower leg up to meet it. Then drop both legs. This exercise increases hip flexibility and strength. Again, if you are strong, add the roller underneath your hip to increase the challenge to all of your stabilizing muscles.

Beginners: Start with one set of 8-15 repetitions of each exercise without the foam roller.

Intermediate/Advanced: Do two sets of 10-15 exercises. Slowly introduce the foam roller to further increase the difficulty but be careful to take your time relearning the exercises with the roller.

Your back and core is the first place to start as all extremities generate power from here but as with all exercise, consult your doctor before starting any new program.