

Speed Skills

© 2006 by Joe Friel

Of the six racing and training abilities I discuss in my Training Bible book series, the least understood and most neglected is speed skills. Most athletes could make significant improvements in their race performances by devoting more training time to this ability. And the beauty of it is that speed skill training is easy compared with improving the other abilities (endurance, force, muscular endurance, anaerobic endurance or power).

So what are speed skills? The “skills” portion of this ability refers to being able to make the movements of the sport in a fluid and efficient manner. For example, can you pedal the bike in smooth circles or are you a masher? Do you run with a flat footstrike or do you land on your heels? When you ride technical trails can you maintain a decent speed and easily maneuver around and over obstacles? Do you waste lots of energy by creating a froth around your body while swimming or do you knife through the water effortlessly?

“Speed” refers to being able to produce skilled movements at race speed. This doesn’t necessarily mean body speed, but rather body *parts* speed—how fast your arms and legs move. The skill isn’t mastered until you can, for example, pedal efficiently at a high cadence. Pedaling efficiently at a low cadence is just the entry-level when working on speed skills.

Skills are generally best learned by breaking the complex movement into smaller segments and then practicing them in isolation until it becomes habitual. This will take some time. The more complex the skill is the longer it will take to develop. Continuing with our example of pedaling a bike, one of the key skills is being able to transition the foot from upward and backward movement to forward and downward movement at the top of the stroke (“10 to 2 o’clock”). One way to separate out that critical skill is to pedal with only one leg. By doing so you will quickly see what the challenge is and soon learn to correct it at a slow cadence and in isolation from all other skills. You may also isolate in other portions of the same workout the skills of unweighting the pedal on the upstroke and transitioning to upward and backward at the bottom of the stroke.

Until you have good speed skills there is little reason to work on the advanced abilities of muscular endurance, anaerobic endurance and power. You’re simply wasting your time if you do. This would be much the same as a poorly skilled Olympic powerlifter trying to complete a clean-and-jerk movement with a heavy load. Even though his strength may not change, he would be able to lift more weight if his speed skills for this movement were well-developed.

In the Base period of training I devote at least one workout weekly to speed skills in each sport and ask the athlete to work on them daily when developing other Base period abilities. When it comes to speed skills, frequency is key. Your skills

will improve quicker if you work on them for short periods frequently. When it comes to speed skills training, a little bit every day is better than one long workout done occasionally. Do not allow yourself to get sloppy in training—ever! Do not sacrifice efficiency for velocity.

Improving speed skills means you will ultimately be more efficient. A 10 percent improvement in efficiency is as good as a 10 percent increase in aerobic capacity—and is a heck of a lot easier to achieve.

Joe Friel is the author of the Training Bible book series and the founder of Training Bible Coaching. He may be reached at jfriel@trainingbible.com.