The Fastest Ways to Improve Your Climbing

There's a special, gilded esteem that all cyclists attribute to a good climber... the one who vanishes up the road like a vapor. Coach David Heatley gives us his tips on climbing better.
I had a client approach me. He told me the story of how he used to be stronger than all his cycling buddies, but over the course of about a year, they had got the better of him and now each and every ride he did with them he was being smacked over by them. All of them.

His buddies started talking about going over to Europe and riding some of the stages of the Tour de France while it was on. He loved the idea of going over there and riding some of the classic climbs. On one hand he was inspired by the idea and on the other, he had just 12 weeks and was filled with a great deal of trepidation at the thought of getting there and being left behind on the climbs.

In this article I discuss some pointers to help your hill climbing.

**DEVELOP YOUR CORE STRENGTH**

Improving your overall biomechanical function will make a big difference to your riding. With many of my clients being desk bound it’s become even more important in recent years. It helps with all aspects of your cycling, but it impacts the most on your ability to be able to put out sustained power efficiently over longer climbs.

There are many “core strength” exercises around, but the ones that you’ll want to look for are exercises that are performed when you are face-down or facing forward. These mimic the position that you are in while riding. Exercises that are performed face-up, while still good core strength exercises, do not replicate the position that you are in cycling so, therefore, don’t usually translate well in helping you develop good hill climbing strength.

Here is a list of things to look for in core strength exercises:

- Exercise that provide forces that load you diagonally across your body
- Exercises that are done with free weights rather than machines
- Exercises that involve standing on one leg
- Exercises performed with your face down or facing forward
- Exercises that are done using multi-joint movements

Do a search for Matt Brindle Functional Strength training for cyclists for more in-depth information.

**GET A GRIP**

There are two hand positions that we use for hill climbing.

The first position is called ‘on the hoods.’

The second position is called ‘on the tops’ with the thumbs wrapped around under the bars.

As simple as it seems, it’s really important to get these two positions right as they form the foundation for developing a sound and stable base in which to develop solid power and great form while climbing.

Both positions help you to open up your chest, ensuring that you can breathe as deeply as possible and can oxygenate your blood to maximise your climbing speed. Out of the two positions, the ‘on the tops’ position provides the best position for opening up your chest.

**TAKE A SEAT**

Climbing in the seated position is more efficient than standing. The reason for this is that you use fewer muscles when seated on the bike than when you are standing.

On longer climbs, it is best to stay seated as much as possible to be efficient. It’s also the preferred climbing style for women; no disrespect intended, but generally women aren’t as strong in the upper body as men to support long stints out of the saddle.

**PLEASE BE UPSTANDING**

Standing is used when you need to develop short bursts of power. I recommend that you stand when you have to punch over short climbs and through short, steep sections of a climb.

If you are lightly built like me, standing while negotiating short sections of a climb is no problem; you’ll be able to dance on the pedals.

But if you are carrying more weight than necessary on your upper body, you’ll struggle to stand for anything longer than a few minutes.

**SPEND TIME WORKING ON YOUR TECHNIQUE**

If you are riding hills flat out all the time, you’ll be riding far too hard to focus on your form and
The benefits of climbing can literally be awesome.

[[ Too much big chain ring work is like doing too much weight training at the gym. ]]
fatigue on your body on climbs helps you to maintain your climbing speed for longer.

You can adjust your position on the saddle and by doing so, you can emphasize some muscles you use while relieving others.

By moving to the rear, you can accentuate the strong gluteus muscles in your butt and push the pedals forward as well as down.

When you’re feeling too much muscle tension, tightness, or soreness, slide forward towards the nose of the seat. Now you can engage the quadriceps muscles in your thighs, and you can increase your cadence, and your gluteus can recover.

Sliding back and forth like this fights fatigue and makes the most of your energy. It also changes pressure points to improve your saddle comfort.

**CADENCE**

One of the most effective ways to get the most out of your cycle training for endurance events is to keep your cadence high. What I’m talking about here is maintaining your cadence around 90–100 rpm on the flat roads while keeping it above 65 rpm on hilly roads (where your gearing permits).

By doing so, you’ll help build your cardiovascular fitness and reduce the amount of fatigue you’ll get during your ride. This is the first thing we get all our clients to do when they start on our coaching programs.

Now, the physiological reason for a high cadence is very simple. As you increase your cadence, you rely more on your cardiovascular fitness and your endurance muscle fibres (that are designed to work all day) to drive the bike.

As you lower your cadence below 80 rpm, you rely more on your muscular strength using your strength muscle fibres. While these strength fibres deliver more short-term power than your endurance muscle fibres, they also fatigue more quickly.

**SLOW IT DOWN TO BUILD STRENGTH**

Ground yourself on the seat, stable hips, locked core, strong full-stroke pedalling action focusing on the top and bottom of the stroke. Start out with your cadence at 80. Then, over time, drop it to 70, and then 60, then 50, then 40 rpm over time.

The best way to do this is to find a hill around five minutes long at a gradient of around 4–7%. Start out doing around six repeats on it at 80 rpm, once every week for two weeks. Then drop your cadence to 70 rpm for another two weeks ... I think you get the pattern. Over time, you’ll develop your strength.

Remember that during this phase of your training you may find that you’ll start to slow up. It is also important to balance this big chain ring cycling power training with high cadence recovery bike rides.

Too much big chain ring work is like doing too much weight training at the gym. You will trash your legs because you don’t give them the chance to recover properly, and it will slow you down. Try not to do much big chain ring work and certainly don’t spend hours grinding away on the pedals.

Big chain ring work can also be done on the home trainer. Anything that has intervals with cadences of 70 rpm or lower is great. We have a heap of these video sessions that I pass out as part of the training programs so my clients get the best from their trainer and improve their technique and climbing speed.

Well, I hope that provides a few pointers to help you climb better. If you have any questions, you can contact me at support@cycling-inform.com. All the best with your hill climbing. ☯

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[Don't sacrifice good form for speed, and it will serve you well in the long term.]]

**ABOVE:** Lastly, dig deep.

**LEFT:** Concentrate on spinning, even when out of the saddle...