

Preparing To Tackle Your First 100-Miler

A ten-week training program that will take you from recreational road riding to the start line of your first century.

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Let's just say that you've got 10 weeks to get ready to ride a century with your buddies. They might be able to give you some basics, but with such little time and such a big goal staring you in the face, you need a foolproof plan.

WEEK 10: Find a century. Besides local shops and clubs, go to our listing, our Events Calendar in the Rides section of the magazine every month, or the League of American Bicyclists (www.bikeleague.org)

WEEK 9: Make sure you're eating 65-70% carbs, 20-25% fat and 15% high-quality protein (like grilled chicken, baked fish, turkey and lean grilled beef). This is the optimum fuel mix. Also: fruits, veggies and buckets of water help you recover during training and keep your immune system strong.

WEEK 8: Practice that pedal stroke. Efficiency is important over the long haul. One weak stroke each minute equals 360 sloppy strokes over a 6-hour century. We have no idea what that means, but it sounds bad. Focus on keeping your cadence between 85-100 rpm, and delivering energy to pedals all the way around the stroke.

WEEK 7: Get 8 hours of shut-eye a night--the recommendation of the National Sleep Foundation in Washington, D.C. Training doesn't mean you need more sleep, just that the right amount is more important. Skimp on sleep, and you impair motor skills, judgment and reflexes, memory and concentration. You might also get cranky and unmotivated. Shame on you.

WEEK 6: Practice hills--the totally downhill century is a figment of your fantasies. Push down with your heels and slide back on your seat to use your hamstrings to power you up. Then try using your quads to pull up on the pedals as you slide forward on the seat.

WEEK 5: On your longest rides, begin eating and drinking just as you plan to on the century. Some cyclists perform best when they refuel every 15 miles, some every 25. Don't just experiment with distance--try various energy drinks and bars during the upcoming weeks. Nutella or Fluffernutter? Only scientific testing will tell.

WEEK 4: Practice group riding: Hold a steady line to avoid swerving into other riders. Unweight the bike as you go over bumps rather than careening around them. In a paceline, stay at least 6 inches behind the rider in front of you and look through him rather than fixating on his rear wheel (a sure way to pull yourself into it). And most important: Be sure you have clear air space for snot rockets. A faceful of nose goo will tear apart a group like nothing else.

WEEK 3: Take your bike to a shop for a tune-up after your Wednesday ride. Explain that you have a century coming up and need to pick it up on Friday to resume your training. Why this week? So you have time to make sure all the adjustments are just right.

WEEK 2: Break in any new gear like clothes, shoes, helmets or bar tape. "Upgrades" that happen just a few days before a century can result in saddle sores, blisters and sadly smashed dreams.

CENTURY WEEK:

Lube your chain on Monday, Wednesday and Saturday. Make sure you have a fresh spare. (Don't take a chance on a blown patch.) Eat at least 75% carb to ensure plenty of energy.

THE DAY BEFORE:

Lay out your riding clothes and pack your gear into a bag. This prevents the stress of an early morning search for your favorite shorts--and the horror of leaving one riding shoe at home. Check the weather and adjust your gear--do you need tights, arm warmers or a rain jacket? Finally, fill your water bottles halfway then freeze them and top them off with water in the morning. Cold fluids enter your system quicker than warm ones, speeding rehydration.

THE DAY OF THE BIG EVENT:

*Have a 400-calorie breakfast (cereal, orange juice and a bagel) two hours before the ride. If you eat more, leave an extra hour of digestion time for every additional 200 calories.

*Pre-hydrate: Drink three 8-ounce glasses of water with breakfast.

*Ride at your own pace. One of the most common mistakes is getting seduced into a group you have to struggle to keep up with. You can't hold that pace for 100 miles. Find people riding at your speed.

*Don't stuff at rest stops. Munch lightly and take some to go. Large amounts of food divert blood to your stomach, which weakens your legs. But never let yourself get hungry.

*Stretch. Every 30 minutes, stand on the pedals, arch your back and stretch your legs. Stretch your neck and do shoulder shrugs. It prevents fatigue.

*Spin for 50 miles. Avoid going anaerobic (feeling breathless) on climbs or sprints. This keeps your legs fresh for the last half.

*Stay hydrated. Drink at least one standard-size water bottle every hour you're on the bike. To cue yourself to drink, set your watch to beep every 15 minutes to signal sip time. Or drink whenever you see another cyclist chugging.

*Limit rest stops to 15 minutes or less. More than that and your legs get stiff.