

GET BACK IN THE GAME

You've been a runner for years, you love it, it's your sport. But injuries have been piling up like 5:00 traffic, you're spending more time icing than running, and now you're on a first name basis with your surgeon.

"Don't be stupid."

That's what my surgeon's look said when I asked him when I could resume running. This was after he'd arthroscoped my left knee for the second time to clean up cartilage damage. What he actually said was, "Do you have to *run*?"

I wasn't ready to throw in the towel. I bumbled on, running on grass, cutting my mileage, until I tore the cartilage in my good knee. Then I was ready. But what to replace running with? I tried walking, but the slowness got to me. And if you walk really fast, well, you look weird.

Finally, I dragged out my old blue Schwinn and thus started my conversion to cycling.

If you've been a longtime runner, you may get to this point too where your knees are shot, and you must reinvent the athlete that's still in you. My recommendation: Try cycling. Here are a few suggestions to help you make the transition.

Go Ahead, Hammer

You'll quickly find, like I did, that you can ride hard on your bike, and the next day, nothing, no leg soreness! In running the impact on your legs is 2 to 3 times your body weight, whereas cycling is non-weight bearing and therefore much kinder on the legs.

If you want to do workouts on your bike, you'll have virtually no learning curve. Like training for running, you alternate hard days and

recovery days. Hard days typically mean intervals—a series of fast, intense stretches of 2 to 4 minutes, followed by rest stretches of similar duration. Recovery days mean easy, low distance rides.

Get Equipped, Slowly

If you like shopping for sports gear, you'll love cycling. Just don't buy it all at once. By waiting until you encounter the need for a piece of equipment, you'll be a smarter shopper. You'll find you want to check your speed, so you'll get a bike computer. Your hands will ache, so you'll buy cycling gloves. You'll discover the need for extra padding, so you'll get riding pants. Now you've entered the world of spandex, something my kids can't get over and my mind still resists.

The day will come when you lust for a newer, faster bike. At the bike shop you'll experience a brave a new vocabulary of Shimano brakes, carbon forks, and FSA cranks, none of which matters nearly as much as the test ride. Just like when buying a car, give several bikes a good workout. You'll quickly find which one feels best. The mechanic should do a precise fitting, adjusting the frame, saddle, and handlebars to your size. Then savor that first ride—it will be like taking a Porsche for a spin after ditching the family station wagon.

Attend to New Muscles

Did I say you could hammer as hard as you want on a bike and not get injured? That's not exactly true. One day, after doing a hill workout, I felt as if someone was pinching my butt. A masseuse informed me this was the piriformis muscle, which in all my years of running I'd never heard of. The injury took weeks to get over (at my age, all injuries take weeks to get over). Nothing I tried helped much, although the massage sure felt good.

Lesson learned from this injury: The runner-turned-cyclist must pay attention to some different muscles. The hips and butt are much more involved in this sport. The cyclist must stretch and apply ice when necessary to the hips and butt as surely as the runner pays attention to feet and knees.

Find a Mentor

You'll have plenty of questions as you begin this sport. What's that squeaking sound from my bike chain? Where are the best bike routes? How the heck do these clipless pedals work? The fastest way to learn is to find a "coach," who can be anyone who knows more than you about cycling. I lucked out and found a colleague at work who was a top local cyclist and racer and who could answer any dumb question I could throw at him. His best advice so far: Keep your eyes on the road. It's when you don't that accidents happen.

Jump in a Race

If you ran road races in your former life as a runner, then you'll soon be looking for a bike race. Forget it, there aren't any. Cycling has nothing quite like the popular road race where everyone starts together and gets a finish time at the end. Instead, there are "rides," where you start whenever you want and finish whenever you want. If that's not exactly the challenge you're looking for, then there are criteriums, timed races where everyone starts together on a street circuit closed to traffic. But unless you've mastered riding and turning only inches from other cyclists—and you're in top riding shape—I'd save criteriums for later when you're less of a threat to yourself and others.

After some searching, I eventually found the race I was looking for. In cycling the time trial is called the "race of truth" because you are on your

own—the race is just you, your bike, and the stopwatch, no drafting, no strategies. I found an indoor time trial where riders put their bikes on stands, which regulate the resistance and are connected to computers. Two or more riders start at the same time and race, usually a 10K, facing a giant screen that shows each rider as a colored graphic moving across the screen like horses in a horserace. You also see various stats displayed, including your miles per hour and elapsed time and distance. To me, this is a race of beauty, a true test of your conditioning.

Get a Hero

To inspire you and get you out the door on days when you're dog-tired, look to the cycling gods. Several years ago, when I was becoming a convert, you'd have to be living under a rock not to know about Lance Armstrong. His miraculous victory in the Tour de France after nearly dying from cancer was all over the news. I read his book *It's Not About the Bike*. The cycling hook dug deeper. Here was a guy who had started as a runner and triathlete. He loved the harsh demands of any long-distance contest, "the suffer-fest," as he calls it. My sentiments exactly. And his epic comeback, well, what athlete who's ever been sidelined by injury or illness and close to quitting, could not relate? Up until then my heroes had all been runners.

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