

A man in a blue shirt is lifting a kettlebell with his right arm. The kettlebell is dark and has a circular base. The man's face is in the background, slightly out of focus. The background is a bright, light blue color.

# RAISE THE POWER BAR

You might think that strength training is an optional extra, but adding it to your schedule will make you a better triathlete

WORDS: NICOLA JOYCE

It's hard work being a multi-sport athlete: if you're reading this, you probably have a couple of swims, some bike sessions and a few runs planned this week. And next week. You know you should include more stretching and you've a sneaking feeling you should be doing something with your core, too. So anyone who has the nerve to suggest you also need to fit in some serious strength training ought to do so from a safe distance.

However, your righteous fury, though understandable, is unnecessary, because by setting aside just 30 minutes twice a week you could improve your posture, slash your race times and guard against injury.

Surprising as it seems, there are ways to build strength and conditioning (S&C) into your routine without sacrificing any of your key sessions. Triathlon engages the entire body: your legs, core, shoulders and back all have to work hard. Training gives you enviable endurance but does little for absolute strength. Pat Fox is Head of Strength and Conditioning at London South Bank University's Human Performance Centre ([www.lsbu.ac.uk/sports/hpc](http://www.lsbu.ac.uk/sports/hpc)), where triathletes can receive S&C coaching and be tested for V02 max and lactate

## "STRENGTH TRAINING PROMOTES MUSCLE BALANCE AND STABILITY"

threshold (the point at which lactate begins to accumulate in the blood, which is the beginning of the end of an intense training session). He points out that greater levels of strength translate to better efficiency and faster race times.

"Strength does two things: it means athletes need less effort to maintain a set pace, letting them conserve energy for bursts of speed at the finish line, and it allows them to work at a higher pace." Strength is key to endurance. S&C isn't about becoming a gym-bunny, it's about stabilising joints, increasing performance and encouraging greater efficiency.

### STRONG POINTS

Tim Smith, a Bupa Wellness ([www.bupa.co.uk/wellness](http://www.bupa.co.uk/wellness)) sports physiotherapist, age-group triathlete and BTF triathlon coach says, "Triathlon training gives a great all-round workout, but it's not enough. Strength training helps target areas more specifically to promote muscle balance and stability, build power and guard against injury. It helps the body's tissues become used to higher levels of loading so they can cope with your key sessions. It can correct postural issues and improve »

PHOTOS: TOM MILES  
MODEL: JACEK JAGOKA AT W ATHLETIC

efficiency. And it boosts fatigue resistance, helping you maintain training intensity.”

It's all sounding good, but there's still the tricky issue of rearranging a packed training schedule. If you're looking to build strength, try three S&C sessions a week of around 30 minutes (to include a dynamic warm-up and post-session stretches). If you want to maintain strength, twice a

training. In triathlon season, they will take a back seat but need to be maintained. Mark Pharaoh of Warwick University Triathlon Club is a BTF level 2 coach and raced at the World Olympic Distance Championships in 2005. He's certain his regular strength sessions have a positive effect. "I think S&C is critical for everyone," he says, "particularly those with a slighter

## "I'M CONVINCED THE INCREASE IN PHYSICAL STRENGTH FROM WEIGHTS REALLY HELPS PERFORMANCE"

week will be fine. Like any training, S&C works best when it's periodised. Consider doing an 8-10 week block of three sessions a week, then reduce the number of sessions to maintain strength. Do more in the off-season, to build strength and prevent injury.

During your pre-competition phase, these sessions can provide power-based

build. I'm convinced the increase in physical strength from weights really helps performance; I've found that after three or four weeks athletes feel stronger."

Julie Dibens, triathlete, coach and Xterra World Champion ([www.driventotri.com](http://www.driventotri.com)), agrees. "I'm a big fan of S&C," she says. "My focus has mostly been on injury

prevention or rehabilitation, working on using the right muscles at the right time. Along with this, I focus on functional strength: becoming stronger in exercises that are more specific to running, cycling and swimming. For example, instead of regular squats, I do lots of single-leg squats on a box or step. I do these in a controlled manner to ensure I use the correct muscles, building up to three or four sets of 20 reps. At different times of the year I introduce specific strength work for running, including plyometrics [exercises designed to produce fast, powerful movements]. The downside to these exercises is that they are quite high risk, so easy does it."

### MUSCLE BOUND

The best S&C session for triathletes is one that ticks several boxes, getting you in and out of the gym with no hanging about. Look for exercises that work the body across multiple planes of movement and target more than one set of muscles at the same time. Personal trainer and S&C coach Charlotte Ord ([www.charlotteord.com](http://www.charlotteord.com)) is a big fan of kettlebell training. Kettlebells are cast-iron weights that were first used in Ancient Greece, Russia or Scotland, depending on who you talk to. "Kettlebells are great for triathletes because the moves are compound, targeting lots of muscle groups at the same time, and dynamic, providing an added cardio effect," says Ord. "Performed correctly, it can be more intense than running but less demanding on the joints. And because kettlebell training gives such a great all-round strength and cardio workout, it cuts down the time you need to spend in the gym."

### KETTLE CALL

Kettlebell movements are functional, using the core and legs to power through the moves while focusing on joint integrity and encouraging strength through the posterior chain (lower back, glutes and hamstrings) – essential for triathlon. When Ord trains triathletes, she recommends they focus on key kettlebell moves, including the swing, clean and snatch. "These ballistic drills demand you fire one set of muscles while relaxing another, making them perfect for multi-sport athletes," she says.

It's clear you don't need to spend an hour in the gym, memorising dozens of exercises and weight combinations, to feel the effects of S&C. Fox goes a step further, suggesting triathletes need only one strength exercise: the clean. "In triathlon, one key movement underpins everything: triple flexion (at the ankle, knee and hip) followed by triple extension," he explains. "This makes it easy to put a triathlete's

S&C programme together, as there's only one movement to mimic." Cox advises that triathletes learn and perfect the dead lift or, ideally, the clean. Both exercises engage the core and replicate the components of the cycling and running movements as well as helping to strengthen the shoulders and upper back. "If a triathlete wants to work the shoulders further, he or she could add in some rotator cuff work," says Cox. "But for a biomechanically sound triathlete, the clean or dead lift is enough." He suggests completing 5-7 repetitions to make one set, then repeating the set up to six times (resting for a couple of minutes between sets). With a dynamic warm-up to get the muscles prepared and some static stretching to cool down, the entire session should take no longer than 30 minutes.

### THE WEIGHTING GAME

Weight choice and technique need to be taught, so make sure you seek the advice of a coach or S&C-trained personal trainer. If you're new to S&C, the gym can seem an alien environment. There are free weights, machines, cables and pulleys. You need to learn what's best for you. Machines tend to limit movement to a single plane, but the body ought to move through multiple planes. Some machines are useful (for instance, the lat pull-down) but you should mostly stick to free weights (dumbbells or barbells), cables and pulleys. Always enlist the help of a personal trainer or coach who understands your background and goals, and ensure you understand the technique of each movement before you start lifting. Seek out good advice, make S&C specific to your needs and be consistent: you'll be amazed at the results. **TV**



You don't need to pile on the weights

## "I don't want to" is not good enough

Plenty of triathletes don't do any dedicated strength and conditioning work. And they always have a handy excuse – sorry, convincing reason

**I hate the gym:** Perhaps what attracted you to triathlon is outdoor training. That's fine: a dislike of the gym isn't a barrier to strength training. You could do a circuit in the park, using flat areas, steps and benches. Or invest in a set of weights and resistance bands to use at home.

**I don't want to bulk up:** It's very difficult to bulk up (whether you're male or female), particularly when you're also doing high-intensity interval training and long cardio sessions. You won't become bulky. You will become strong, lean and fast.

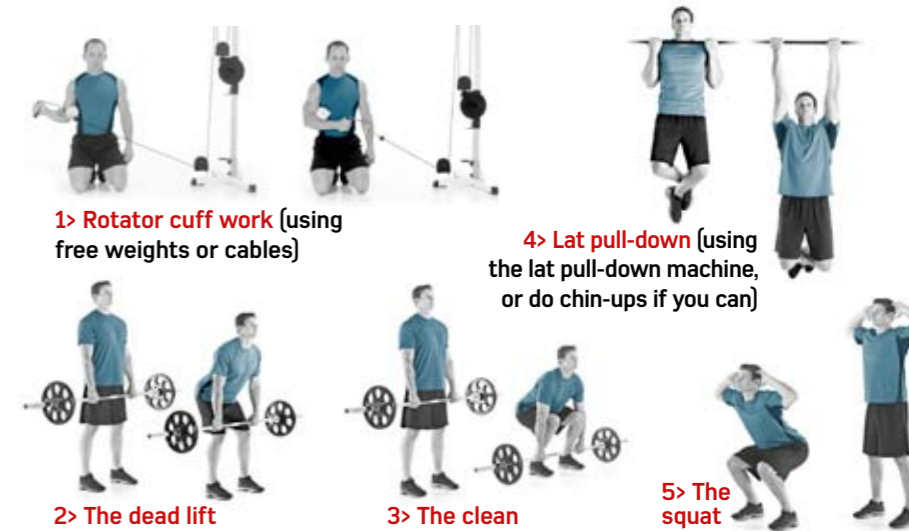
### I'll be too tired for my main sessions:

If you select the correct weights and perform the movements properly, you shouldn't experience any greater level of soreness than you would from a tough swim, bike or run. And aches will lessen as you become used to the sessions. A gentle run or light spin on the bike will help with Delayed Onset Muscular Soreness (DOMS). Do leg weights before a swim session or a rest day, and upper-body weights before a bike. If you're racing at the weekend, keep S&C sessions to Tuesday or Wednesday.



## TOP FIVE S&C EXERCISES FOR TRIATHLETES

Strength training doesn't have to take long. Our experts agree that 25-45 minutes twice a week is sufficient to build and maintain the level of strength that will boost your performance. There's no need to include dedicated core work, as all of these exercises, if done properly, incorporate core strength. If you're more advanced, ask a coach to help you incorporate some balance work – using a Swiss ball, BOSU (both sides utilised) ball or wobble board – into your routine, as this will add interest and engage the muscles further. The key exercises to master are:



1> Rotator cuff work (using free weights or cables)

4> Lat pull-down (using the lat pull-down machine, or do chin-ups if you can)

2> The dead lift

3> The clean

5> The squat

PHOTOS: THOMAS MACDONALD