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## **Training with Aerobars**

### **Lance Watson, Head Coach (National Training Centre, Canada)**

One of the things that traditionally sets triathletes apart from ordinary cyclists, and makes them identifiable at a glance, is the set of aerobars usually attached to the front of their bike. Although the use of aerobars has spread beyond the world of triathlon, they are firmly entrenched in triathlon culture and lore.

Popularized by Greg Lemond's use in the Tour de France, aerobars were actually originally dreamed up by triathletes looking to shave some time off their bike splits. Since their first crude forms in the 80's, aerobars have transformed into the sleek works of art they are today. However, aerobars aren't just about looking good, or even being comfortable for that matter (even though these are important considerations) – they are about speed. Using aerobars lets you ride faster while expending the same amount of energy.

Aerobars work because they create a more aerodynamic position on the bike – hence their name. Position on the bike is an important aerodynamic factor, as it can cut down on wind resistance by changing the flow of air around the rider and his/her bike. Aerobars achieve a more aerodynamic position by placing the upper body of the rider in a lower position, with their arms extended out in front of the body. Studies have shown that 20-40 seconds are saved over 40km because of the more aerodynamic position that aerobars create. That is a time saving that most people would love to have without having to train any more to achieve it.

However, for this more aerodynamic body position to be effective it must not affect the way the body transfers power to the bike. Your aerobars should be fit to you and your bike when you purchase the bike, to ensure that they put you in the proper position. If your aerobars are acquired after your original fitting, you need to make certain that they are helping rather than hindering you.

I have listed a few basic tips below, but it is still best to consult your coach or a local expert.

- Correct saddle position must be determined before pad placement
- The elbow pads should be placed at the proper height, width and distance from the seat.
- The proper height insures that the rider has a flat back minimizing frontal area of the body.
- The correct distance from the seat occurs when the elbow is comfortable on the armrest and the elbow is close to the knees during normal riding.
- Your knees should be close to top tube Keep your hands in narrow - holding your hands wide will allow air to go thru and hit your stomach, increasing the parachute affect
- Keep your back flat but don't be so stretched out that you tend to pull forward on the seat
- Keep your elbows in narrow but don't constrict breathing - A good rule of thumb is to have your elbows directly in front of your thighs.
- Ride with your head up as that creates a smooth flow of air – your chin should be in line with your wrists

### **When to use your Aerobars**

Your training must resemble the activity you want to perform. This is the principle of “specificity of training”. The position your body is in while riding in aerobars is different than it is when riding on normal handlebars, which means that you will be straining your muscles in a different way. In order for your muscles to get efficient and adapt to this position, you need to train in that position. Thus, if you are going to race with aerobars, you need to train with them. Studies have confirmed this fact, as they have shown that cyclists who trained with aerobars regularly received a greater time saving when using them over cyclists who did not train with them.

It is apparent that almost all triathletes should have aerobars and should be training with them. The question is how much of your riding should be done on your aerobars, and how much should be done without using them. Unfortunately there is no simple answer to this, as it varies depending on the type of racing you are doing, the type of riding you do, and the terrain you ride on.

The more time you will be racing on your aerobars, the more time you need to spend training on them. Someone doing Ironman, and expecting to ride most of the 180km on their aerobars, needs to put in a lot of time training on the bars so that they are comfortable with this position. Someone doing Olympic distance or shorter events still needs to spend time on their aerobars, but for them it is more important that some of this time is at race intensity as well as longer and easy sessions. Once again, this is the specificity principle at work, as your muscles need train in this position at the workloads they will encounter in order to be fully prepared for it come race day.

Additionally, it is important that you ride on your aerobars over similar terrain that you will be racing on. Although, their use may be obvious for flat rides, everyone has a slightly different feel for their aerobars on hilly terrain. Using them on hills during training will allow you to discover when it is best to stay on them, move to a more traditional position, or stand for climbs.

Finally it is important to note that specificity and variety are not mutually exclusive.

Variety is a mental necessity, and you need to vary your workouts to ensure enthusiastic training. Too much of one form of training is boring, and boredom in training will cause you to lose effectiveness in your workouts. This is why switching one of your road rides to a mountain biking session, or riding with a group can be helpful to maintain sharpness. It also alleviates strain to any specific area (your back, shoulders, and neck may thank you for getting off the aerobars every now and then) that repetitive use brings on. So although, aerobars are a useful tool in your quest to ride faster, remember you shouldn't necessarily spend every minute of every ride using them.

### **When not to use Aerobars**

Although there is no doubt that aerobars have their place in cycling, there are times when their use needs to be avoided. This is because the aerobar riding position can be dangerous in certain situations. The position doesn't allow quick access to brake levers, and is less stable than the traditional position. Quick avoidance manoeuvres are more difficult to initiate with aerobars, and its "heads down" position can limit forward visibility. Generally this means that aerobars should not be used when riding in a group or on bumpy terrain where it is easy to lose control, and your reactions compromise other person's safety.

The main purpose for aerobars is aerodynamics. This being the case, you don't need to use them in a group because you already get a greater aerodynamic effect from being behind the other riders than you do from aerobars. When you are riding in a group, you should have confidence that everyone is riding for the good of the group and that no one will behave in such a manner as to put the group in danger. The braking, visibility, and control problems that aerobars cause make you more susceptible to causing a crash while riding in a group. The only time it is acceptable to ride your aerobars in a group is if you are pulling at the front.

Riding with aerobars is pretty much a given for all triathletes these days. However, in order to maximize the benefits it is important to have your bars fit properly to your bike and body so that you are getting the maximum aerodynamic effect without sacrificing comfort and power.

Additionally, it is important to train on your aerobars for the time, intensity, and terrain that your race requires so that your muscles are specifically prepared for what they will face on race day.

The proper use of aerobars will lead to significant time saving off your bike split, so get out on your bike and get aero.

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