

The Lost Art of Balance: Roller Myths Deconstructed

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Balance. A word casually bandied about by people from all vocations and avocations. We are all trying to live a balanced life, eat a balanced diet, balance our checkbook, our portfolio and align our chakras.

In addition to its overtones as a life ethos, balance carries a very literal, and *physical*, meaning for us as cyclists: The first order in riding a bike is to be able to balance on two wheels. While this might seem self-evident, and a problem easily overcome by a 4 year old barreling down the sidewalk with uneven training wheels, once you make the step into the world of carbon bicycle parts, fancy shoes, and riding with other folks, the importance of keeping the rubber side down takes on a whole new dimension.

Leaving the theoretical physics of balance to the guys at MIT, cyclists have a very visceral relationship with balance and its nemesis, gravity. Most of us who have been riding for a long time can take a quick glance at our elbows, knees and hips and find the all-too-real evidence of our fight to stay upright in a physical universe that wants to pull us toward the earth. And if you don't yet bear battle scars from the war with the tarmac or the trails, you're probably aching to know how to best avoid marring both your skin and your bike. Well, there is no clear solution to the problem of crashing, but there are certainly ways that we can improve our chances of leaving the anti-bacterial cream in the first-aid kit. One time-tested method is, lets say it without wincing...riding rollers. Yes, originally made of wood and almost as old as cycling itself, rollers pre-existed today's fancy fluid and computer trainers by as many generations as Maurice Garin preceded Bernard Hinault¹ (or at least by as many that separate "The Lost Generation" from "The Me Generation"), and they have stood the test of time.

Now that we've gotten our collective shudder of fear and intimidation out of the way, let's take a closer look at the three-drummed wonder machine that will both give you strong dose of humility while sharpening your bike handling skills in ways previously only dreamed of.

They are very simple, really, almost innocuous; three cylinders – two for the rear wheel and one for the front -- position themselves as a smoothly humming mock tarmac in between parallel metal rods that set the boundaries of your road. Find the sweet spot on those drums, and you've got a smooth indoor ride that gives you more "road feel" than any other piece of indoor equipment. Ride over the boundaries, and you might as well have fallen into a ditch. And that is where the resistance to rollers creeps in – eating it and finding that your bike has merged with your coffee table into a nice piece of installation art and, with hope, you are not part of the new and unplanned modern art wing in your home. We've all heard the stories: "I was hauling on the rollers and they launched me across the room" and the like. The mythos of roller riding heroism and triumph, humiliation and defeat, runs deep in our collective consciousness. First, let's go about the task of dispelling those myths. If you still stubbornly cling to your belief in the existence of Santa Claus, Keith Richards's liver, the Tooth Fairy, and a dude who was 60-feet tall and hung out with a large blue ox and made the Great Lakes out of his footprint, stop reading now. For the rest of us;

Simply put, a bicycle on a set of rollers cannot create enough potential energy to propel you either forward or backwards. Riding rollers uses the same forces that keep you upright on the road *without* the forward propulsion. You are riding *as if* you are moving forward. Unless you decide to practice pop a wheelies while riding on them, if you fall off of a set of rollers, you will tip to the side. That's it. No

¹ Maurice Garin won the first ever Tour de France in 1903. Hinault, "The Badger", won five Tours de France in 1978,'79,'81, '82, and '85.

more, no less. Not so bad, huh. And once you get to the point where you are past tipping, it's all upside. So how do we get to the point that we can reap all of the potential benefit from riding a few slabs of aluminum sandwiched between, well, more aluminum?

Once you've bought yourself a quality set of rollers – and it is worth paying a little extra to get the quality for both longevity and enjoyment of use – set them up in a doorway or narrow hallway. Somewhere where you have *stable* support on both sides (so, not your bookcase, refrigerator, or shelving holding your collection of fine china and rare antique ceramics from Bali). Put any water bottles or items that you need next to you. Place the bike on the rollers. While holding onto the doorjamb or wall, use a footstool or sturdy box to help you swing your leg over the bike. Clip one foot in, prop yourself in the saddle (still holding on!) and then clip in the other foot. Start pedaling. For the first few rides, keep one hand on the handlebar tops while the other keeps hold your support. You will naturally lean, and therefore move the bike, in the direction of your support structure. And here is your most important lesson: Where your hips tend is where your bike will go. Pelvic and core stability are key to riding a bike well. The practical application of countless crunches begins here. As you are pedaling and trying to stay upright while holding onto the doorway or leaning against the wall, position your hips so that you stay *centered* in the drums and the bike is straight up and down. Your hip/pelvis is your center. If your center is strong, you will be to. Keep your eyes *focused* about three to five feet ahead of you *at all times*. Try not to look down at your front wheel or at the TV positioned off of your left shoulder or (true story from one of my clients) turn your head when your daughter yells “Daddy,” she'll be just fine. Just like when you are riding outside, where you look is where you will go, so look ahead.

Once you've started to get the body position down and the pedaling is coming along, it's time to take the leap of faith. Take your hand off of your crutch and place it on the bar top. Remember to keep looking ahead and keep your hips centered. Try not to “steer” the bike. Ride with your hands on the bars for as long as possible. Try to make minor corrections from your body without having to rely on your “support crutch”. Once you feel that you can no longer control the movement, put a hand back on the wall or doorjamb. Slowly, you will get to the point where you no longer need your support and you can hop on and pedal away with ease. With practice, you will progress to the point where you can change hand positions, grab a bottle from your water bottle cage, sit up, change jerseys, stand, and so on. (Bear in mind that I did not present these feats in random order).

Now that you've gone through this process, what do you have other than a neat circus act that will doubtless impress your friends and win you dates? Because you have trained yourself to balance in an unstable environment (the rolling drums), and in so doing have taught your body how to balance a bike from its center and from your center (again, your hips and pelvis), when you are out on the road, your control over your bike will be markedly greater. With increased control comes increase confidence, so when you are faced, as we all inevitably are, with the unexpected piece of road debris or the sketchy dude next to you who clearly does not ride rollers, you will have the innate ability to balance avoid making friends with the pavement.

The rollers force you to pedal smoothly, with control, and most importantly for many of us, with *style and grace*. If you wonder how the pros make riding a bike look effortless, look no further than your rollers. Plus, we've all spent mind numbing winters slogging away on our trainers without paying heed to technique. The rollers will add excitement, a bit of spice, and depth to your indoor training plan. Have a bunch of power intervals to do? Warm up on the rollers, hop onto the trainer for your intervals, and finish the ride on the rollers. It'll keep your form solid and your mind focused.

You say that you seek balance? While they might provide you with the answers to the hidden secrets of the universe or solve the problems of existence, riding rollers will give you the balance to keep it upright when everyone else is going down. So throw away Grimm's tales of roller doom and hop on.