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## Riding the Indoor Cycle to Become a Better Runner

*Stationary cycling is a popular cross training technique for many runners.  
Here's how to maximize saddle time to get faster.*

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JONATHAN BEVERLY ([HTTPS://WWW.TRAILRUNNERMAG.COM/BYLINE/JONATHAN-BEVERLY/](https://www.trailrunnermag.com/byline/jonathan-beverly/))



Many of us have already embraced at-home indoor training ([https://www.podiumrunner.com/collection/indoor-training-hub/?\\_hstc=164026400.e02f11e4355044b2ecfdfe76d190cd0.1642691879843.1659295821554.1659383126648.85&\\_hssc=164026400.2.1659383126648&\\_hsfp=2878017643](https://www.podiumrunner.com/collection/indoor-training-hub/?_hstc=164026400.e02f11e4355044b2ecfdfe76d190cd0.1642691879843.1659295821554.1659383126648.85&_hssc=164026400.2.1659383126648&_hsfp=2878017643)) more due to the pandemic — a recent survey (<https://runrepeat.com/fitness-trends>) found that the number of American adults who see at-home fitness equipment as the best way to achieve fitness goals in 2021 was up 218% compared to last year at this time. For some athletes, incorporating regular cross training is also a key tactic for preventing injury.

One of the more popular pieces of indoor exercise equipment is the stationary bike. It's easy to master, low stress, and smaller, quieter and relatively less expensive than a treadmill.

But will it make you a better runner?

### Sweat Time

Ultra champion, coach and [NordicTrack](https://www.nordictrack.com/) (https://www.nordictrack.com/)-sponsored athlete Jeff Browning thinks so. In addition to the chance to sweat without putting on three plus layers and worrying about frostbite, Browning sees the indoor bike as primarily a great way for runners to put in extra volume, taxing the body in different, low-impact ways that spare running muscles and joints while still building aerobic fitness.

Browning will use the bike when he can't run, or when running becomes questionable. "It's always my go to whenever I'm injured, or when fighting a niggler — when I need to take a few days off from pounding," he says. "First thing I go to is spinning."

But he's equally enamored when healthy, as a way to bump up his aerobic activity time with little stress. "It is always there — ready to jump on for 20 or 30 minutes as a little bit of extra volume," he says. He even multitasks on it: "During part of a coaching call, I might be spinning for 20 minutes." Or, like on a recent frigid day when he's got a long run, he'll spend a half hour on the bike, do his long run on the treadmill, then cool down on the bike — adding to overall effect without trashing his legs more. And, it reduces the boredom, especially when he joins an iFit (https://www.ifit.com/) workout on his NordicTrack bike and virtually tools along in a group over undulating terrain in beautiful (warm) places. Browning also uses the bike as a warm up before a strength session.



Jeff Browning spinning on his NordicTrack in his garage. Photo: courtesy Jeff Browning

## Spinning Legs

As a bonus to the chance to boost volume, Browning finds that the bike can help runners up their cadence ([https://www.podiumrunner.com/training/3-ways-to-increase-running-cadence-for-speed/?\\_\\_hstc=164026400.e02f11e4355044b2ecfdfe76d190cdo.1642691879843.1659295821554.1659383126648.85&\\_\\_hssc=164026400.2.1659383126648&\\_\\_hsfp=2878017643](https://www.podiumrunner.com/training/3-ways-to-increase-running-cadence-for-speed/?__hstc=164026400.e02f11e4355044b2ecfdfe76d190cdo.1642691879843.1659295821554.1659383126648.85&__hssc=164026400.2.1659383126648&__hsfp=2878017643)). "One thing I like about the bike is to use it as a tool to work on turnover," he says. "Because, in zone one or zone two heart rate, you can spin at a higher cadence on the bike than you can run your speed work in run training... You're dialing musculature to turn those legs around at a high, high cadence — higher than you would do speed work, way higher than easy runs — but you're still in zone one, two heart rate."



When you return to running, Browning finds that those neuromuscular signals carry over and he and his clients find themselves running with a quicker and lighter stride. He does note that the mechanics of riding are different than running, and runners who use the bike often need to keep on top of their mobility and strength work — particularly for the hips and core.

## Standing Hill Interval Training

If, however, you're looking for more of a workout than easy spinning, it is possible to simulate running quite nicely on a bike, and use it to boost your speed as well as your endurance. The secret, says Tom Miller, Ph.D., coach and author of *Programmed to Run*, is to get out of the saddle and do high intensity intervals, or what he calls “Bike S. H. I. T” (Standing Hill Interval Training).

Miller proved the effectiveness of this training method during his doctoral dissertation back in 1994. In his study, runners who added the standing bike intervals to their training once a week for six weeks lowered their 10K times by an average of 4 minutes — a whopping 9 percent improvement. Miller has used the method as a coach and in his own training, which, even in his seventh decade, is going strong: He's won the 75–79 age group at two of the last three XTerra Trail Running National and World Championships.



*Photo: NordicTrack*

Here's how to do the workout:

After a 10 minute warm up of easy pedaling, increase the resistance enough so you can stand on the pedals but can still crank fast — between 75 and 90 revolutions per minute.

- Maintain high intensity for 30 to 60 seconds. At first, start easier with a few 30-second intervals, then add more and longer reps as you get stronger.
- Lower the resistance, gradually reduce your turnover, sit down, and pedal easy for a 75-second recovery.
- Repeat for 6 to 10 intervals.

Make it interesting by doing the pyramid workout Miller's test group of experienced runners used: Start with 2 x 30-second intervals, advance to 2 x 45-seconds, then 2 x 60, before dropping back down the ladder for 10 reps total.

The standing posture is key to making the workout running specific, Miller says. "You really want to get in the position that you feel yourself running when you're standing up. So the range of motion through the major joints — ankle, knees and hips — is mimicking the running motion."

Make sure you're far enough forward and standing tall so that you feel your glute muscles in your butt kicking in to drive the leg back, as opposed to just the quads on the front of the leg doing all the work. "The main function of the quads is to straighten the knee, whereas when the glute extends the hip, that's to thrust the upper body forward when running," Miller says. "If you get in the right posture, however, they can actually fire together, and that's the tipping point, when you can feel them both working together."

Finally, Miller emphasizes, "You want to do them fast. Speed may be as important as resistance." Don't bog down and grind away. The form and rhythm are central to the workout. "Dance on your pedals," Miller says. "When you lose it, sit down, even if you didn't make it as long as you wanted to go. It is not doing you any good to train when you're pedaling poorly."

An additional benefit: Given the lack of pounding, many runners can add a standing bike session to their current workload and not get beat up and overtired. While you're still working muscles and lungs, your joints and connective tissue are actually resting, compared to running. "By promoting healing and recovery, cycling workouts can lead to more consistent, high-intensity, injury-free training," Miller says.

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