

## **A weighty issue**

By Kendra Wenzel

As much as cyclists obsess about training, they obsess nearly as much about their body weight. As a coach, advising riders working to lose and maintain optimal weight can be one of the most gratifying, challenging or delicate issues on a rider's training plate.

Like it or not, cycling is a gravity affected sport. The leaner and fitter you are, to a point, the greater your strength to weight ratio. This applies whether you are climbing a hill, starting a kilo, or making the jump in a field sprint. Most riders will have a narrow range of weight which allows them to perform best for their developed strengths and marginalize their weaknesses. Of course, there are limits on either end of an optimal weight for each individual. The difficult part is finding this range and maintaining it.

### **Finding your optimum weight range**

First, you must know your basic body composition relative to typical cyclists. Are you naturally skinnier, broader, more muscular, or right in the middle? Are you a climber, all-rounder or sprinter? It's common knowledge that climbers tend to have slender, naturally thinner builds, while sprinters can be stockier or more muscular. All-rounders can lean either way, but tend to be built closer to climber builds. While there are certainly exceptions, this is the general reality. What this means is that the optimal weight range for a particular height may not be the same for a climber and a sprinter. The reasons for this are not only natural build, but also the physiology that supports strong sprinting or extended climbing. The sprinter who becomes lean enough to climb with the first chase group but sacrifices the explosive power in her final sprint may compromise her strongest winning card, while the climber who puts on muscle mass for sprinting may be left behind on a mountaintop finish before the final sprint among climbers. That said, each rider won't find out what happens to her sprinting or climbing ability without trying. She might find with weight loss that she becomes more of an all-rounder.

### **Committing to a target weight**

You may have an idea already of which weight has or hasn't been working for you in racing. For those even with the finest medical and coaching resources, finding optimum weight is still partially a process of trial and error. Done right, the error portion may not have to be reached for long, if at all. One way to cut down on the trial and error process is to use the weight ranges of successful cyclists to guide your way.

Losing weight for cycling performance is a choice. The ranges in the tables below for elite racers aren't necessarily healthy weights, as might be suggested by the tables for ordinary people who exercise regularly, but they are ranges for riders with proven results nationally and internationally. They are created using real data for most common heights; and for heights, in which data is scarce, extrapolations average Body Mass Indexes for the categories of climbers, all-rounders and sprinters were used. I use these as a guide when advising developing elites, only because it's good to have an initial target weight for any athlete embarking on weight loss.

Most elites will perform best somewhere toward the middle of each range. With the understanding that the elite do not perform at weights below what's listed, it's less tempting to continue down the path of weight loss once the rider is in the target zone and performing favorably. Having an upper range also gives a rider who may be not be performing up to his own expectations a wake up call as far as where his weight lies in the comparison to those who are winning races nationally and internationally. Again, the tables are only guides, and they do not apply directly to junior and master riders. However, weight ranges for these groups will not be too far away from these figures on the whole for those who are serious athletes.

### **Limits**

We are all aware of the dangers of going well under an optimum weight. We've seen the photos of celebrities who have slipped into the abyss of anorexia or bulimia, but for cyclists who are so lean already, it's sometimes difficult to tell visually when an athlete has gone too far. Some short term effects of under eating are lack of power, lack of energy, irritability, lack of concentration, light headedness, and loss of menstruation in women. Long term effects can include osteoporosis, hormonal imbalances, and neurological problems.

Avoiding the behaviors that lead to eating disorders lies in having concrete weight loss goals, positive support, constant monitoring, and an understanding for your triggers. Even then, certain riders may be more prone to self defeating behaviors.

### **Getting started and continuing from there**

Better fuel, lean weight, and performance go together. If you follow a disciplined and balanced diet and train regularly, you **will** lose weight. It's as simple as that. To pretend that there's any secret to it would be a lie. The habits that make up a disciplined diet form over years and not immediately. For that reason it's imperative to have patience. Developing elite riders will find that eventually their race weight from their first years of racing will become their off season heavy weight, and that by traveling and living with other disciplined riders they will settle into better habits. Even simple changes can make a difference, depending on where you start from, such as cutting out fast food, substituting more veggies for the potato dish, or going from downing an entire pint of Ben and Jerry's several times a week to just a scoop every couple days. Even just cut down on the bread. Choose a path that's gradual for you.

Keep a food journal and track of your daily calorie intake and expenditure, as well as the makeup of your diet, including carbohydrates, fat, and protein. It's easy to underestimate how much you are consuming otherwise. Control portions for each meal by serving yourself less food to start with than you might prefer. Then if you are still hungry you can go back for more. If you have had enough, you can stop without running into the habit of finishing your plate just to avoid wasting food.

Focus your weight loss efforts when you are off the bike rather than when you are on it. Get the calories you need to fuel your rides and recovery and eat less on your days off and easy days of training. Though you may be just as hungry on your days off, see if you can get by

with less. If you relate your calorie intake to expenditure, cutting down food on off days is a natural choice.

Weight loss during the off season is wisest, as during the season calorie demands can be much greater around constant racing, and cutting calories can result in poor recovery. Think of it this way: Even at this point in the year, with about six to eight weeks until most road seasons go into full swing, a relatively painless loss of a half pound per week would result in three to four pounds of weight loss. It's all about refining your habits.

Height/Weight Range Approximations								
Height in Inches	Men				Women			
	Climber		Sprinter		Climber		Sprinter	
	Min	Max	Min	Max	Min	Max	Min	Max
62					99	111	105	124
63					102	115	109	128
64	110	131	122	142	105	118	112	132
65	113	136	126	146	109	122	116	136
66	115	140	130	151	112	126	119	140
67	119	147	134	155	116	130	123	144
68	122	147	138	160	118	134	127	149
69	125	150	142	165	121	138	130	153
70	129	152	145	170	125	142	134	158
71	135	155	149	174	129	146	138	162
72	139	160	153	179	136	150	142	167
73	143	171	159	184				
74	144	176	162	188				
75	147	181	165	193				
76	151	185	169	198				

The above are taken from height and weight data of professional cyclists with national or international wins. Data for heights lacking sufficient data samples are extrapolated from Body Mass Indexes (BMI) of other climbers and sprinters.

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