

Road vs. Tri Position



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Can you explain the difference between a road and triathlon bike set-up and the pros and cons of each? As a new triathlete, I'm interested in setting myself up for the best possible success. Thanks!

Chris Lincoln

Massena , NY

Dear Chris,

The biggest variable that distinguishes a road position from a triathlon specific riding position is the use of aerobars. Triathlon bikes are designed to work optimally when the rider is in the aerobars while road bikes are designed to work optimally with the rider's hands resting on the hoods, tops or drops of the handlebars.

If your end goal is to maximize your speed on the bike during triathlon, you will want to build a position and ride products that will help you maximize the amount of time you spend in the aerobars. From an absolute speed perspective, riding in the aerobars, in a triathlon specific position, is undeniably more efficient than riding out of the aerobars. The only exception to this rule is in situations where a climb or descent becomes so steep or twisty that the aerobars cannot be used safely or powerfully – this type of situation exists in very few triathlons for any duration. For this reason, a well set-up triathlon specific bike will be the fastest tool a confident rider can ride for the vast majority of triathlon courses.

This being said, a triathlon specific position can be more demanding from a bike handling perspective than a road position. Why? A properly set up road riding position (without aerobars) should provide the rider with relatively balanced weight distribution between the saddle and the handlebars, helping to create neutral handling characteristics. However, an aerobar based riding position places the majority of the rider's weight further over the front wheel than a road position while also narrowing the rider's arm and hand profile (center of balance). While triathlon bike geometry is specifically designed to enhance stability and predictability in the aerobars, because the weight distribution is significantly further forward, the aero position is usually more demanding to balance (sometimes described as "twitchier") than a road position without aerobars.

How much more demanding is riding an aero position than a road position and should this matter to you? The answer to these questions is as varied as the individuals who ride bikes. If you are coming to triathlon with cycling experience and feel reasonably confident with your bike handling skills, you should do fine riding a properly set-up triathlon/aerobar specific bike. If you have not ridden much, but generally pick up sports quickly and confidently, with a little practice, you should also be fine riding a properly fit triathlon/aerobar specific bike. However, if you have

little riding experience and/or are tentative about riding, consider starting without aerobars in a road position. Once you gain riding confidence and skill, you can start using aerobars.

Who else might want to consider a road bike based position/bike over an aerobar specific position/bike?

1) Riders who own one bike and are looking to use the same bike for triathlon as well as tighter group or in-town riding, where range of visibility and ability to stop and go quickly are important. Road based positions and bikes are specifically designed to provide a wide range of visibility and provide the rider with quick access to the brakes and shifters.

2) Riders who own one bike and consistently have significant climbing, high speed descending or cornering as regular elements in their riding. A road position's more upright stance can provide a better platform for steep climbing while drop handlebars and the more neutral center of gravity of a road position are designed to make descending through tight corners at speed to be as natural as possible.

3) Riders who own one bike and want to race in road races or criteriums. Aerobars are not allowed in road races or tight group rides for one simple reason – they are not safe for this type of riding. The risk of someone running into another rider in a tight pace line or getting an aerobar caught on another rider are too high.

4) Riders who have injuries or other mitigating circumstances that prevent them from being able to ride in a more forward and lower position. While rare, there are people with acute sciatic nerve issues and other medical concerns who may not be able to ride in an aero position comfortably or efficiently.

Ideally, if you are serious about triathlon and maximizing your cycling performance, you are going to eventually want to own both a road and a triathlon bike. Each type of bike and riding position is unique and compliments the muscle development and technique required to maximize your potential on the other. Just like the best runners and swimmers tend to come from running and swimming backgrounds, the best cyclists in triathlon tend to come from cycling backgrounds. Road racing or riding in competitive cycling groups are some of the most effective ways to develop the pedaling technique, muscle development and cycling skills needed to truly ride as efficiently as possible. Many of these skills are difficult to learn by riding on your own or by riding exclusively in an aerobar based position.

Triathlon based bikes are great solo riding and top speed triathlon machines, whereas road bikes are versatile rides that can be great learning, training and technique tools. Regardless of what type of bike you are leaning towards, the best place to start is with a professional bike fitting with a qualified fitter. A fitting session will not only help you start out in a comfortable and efficient riding position, but will further clarify the type of position and bike that will work best for you.

I'm sure that you will find triathlon rewarding and challenging and I hope that you enjoy the ride.

Ian

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