

CLIMBING STRATEGIES



**I wish there were some secrets of climbing I could pass onto to you but it's a discipline that only responds to hard work. To be a better climber you simply need to ride more hills and have a good power to weight ratio.
Or is there more to it? Well, slightly...**

To be a good climber you need to build a foundation of strength. **Strength** is the component of fitness that allows you to climb faster. You many have heard of “**strength endurance**” (**SE**) **intervals** before. SE intervals are performed at a slow 40-60rpm cadence for 10-20minutes. I like to do sessions of 2x20mins sets, but many people prefer to do 4x10min sets. Either way, you’re building your climbing strength. Once you start to get some good strength in your legs you’ll be able to spin at a more **optimal cadence** (~90rpm) and go faster for longer up those hills.

Now, when you find yourself climbing in a race (it only takes 2 for it to be a race) there are some strategies you can do to neutralise or smash your opponent – even if you’re not the fastest climber.

Don’t Start Out Too Hard

I see it time and time again from inexperienced riders. They’ll flex their muscle and start out a long climb going balls out. Let ‘em sink I say. You can usually tell by his body language if he’s going out too hard. If you’re much out of your comfort zone then just let him ride away. There’s an 90% chance that he’ll blow up and you’ll pass him going 20km/hr quicker.



Going Into the Red

There are times you want to go into the red, and other times you want to stay well out of it. If you know that the climb has a period of respite approaching and all you need to do is get over the next pitch with the group before you can rest, then I'd recommend going into the red if it means making staying in contact. If the climb flattens out and you have a chance to recover from redlining then it's worth suffering to make it to that section.

If the climb keeps going upwards for many km's and the pace is too fast, don't be afraid to lose contact with the group. I guarantee you'll start picking off some of the guys ahead of you when they've had a nuclear meltdown. If you own a power meter you'll realise how little wattage you're pushing after you've blown (however, it'll still feel like you're going as hard as you possibly can).

Positioning

Try to enter a climb in the top 25% of the group. This will give you a buffer to drop back as you need. It only takes a few seconds to take you from '*nearly blowing*' to '*recovered*'. Dropping back a few places will give you those precious few seconds to rest those legs.

If you know a steep section of the climb is approaching try and move up a few positions as described above. If you're not off the back, you're still in the race.

Out of the Saddle

Standing up while climbing is a more powerful way to get up the hill, but much more inefficient. It requires different muscle groups and uses more upper body strength to pull on the bars. Through specific training you can get better at riding out of the saddle.

Resist the temptation to get out of the saddle when the rest of the group does. If you don't need to get out of the saddle, then don't waste your energy. It's contagious. Once one rider gets out of the saddle then everyone else does. If you look at your speedometer when standing up you'll often notice that you're riding 1-2km/hr slower because your cadence slows. Be conscious to keep your cadence up or shift into a bigger gear.

I'm not saying that you should never climb out of the saddle. Alternating between sitting and standing is a great strategy to stretch out and rest your seated climbing muscles. Just do it on your own terms if you can help it.



Ankling

I've talked about ankling before (*ankling 1, ankling 2 and ankling 3*). This is a pedal stroke I employ in only 2 situations:

- 1) When I want to put the pressure on the others
- or
- 2) when I'm in trouble and I'm hanging on for dear life

In both situations it's such a smooth pedal stroke that once you have it perfected no one suspects that #1 is coming or #2 is happening. It employs much more hamstring and calf muscles into your pedal stroke and is a deadly weapon.

Attacking

When I see someone who is hurting and I want to get rid of him I'll rarely attack. There's no quicker way for me to go deep into the red than attacking on a hill. Only pure climbers can unleash an attack at a high pace and stay away in the hills.

Instead what I'll do is start to put on the pressure slowly. I won't stand up and make it obvious. Let me tell you, there's nothing more demoralising than when my mate Andy does this to me. He's the master putting on the pressure slowly and he's won many races by doing this. It's very deceiving.

Cycling isn't always about who is the strongest rider. Much of it has to do with how your efforts are timed. Patience comes to those who wait.