

A photograph of two male triathletes running outdoors. The athlete on the left is shirtless, showing a tattoo on his right shoulder and a small mark on his chest. The athlete on the right is wearing a white and red triathlon singlet with a 'TIGER TRIATHLON' bib. They are running on a grassy field under a clear blue sky.

BY BEN GREENFIELD

TOP 12

RESISTANCE TRAINING ROUTINES FOR
TRIATHLETES

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Introduction

As you may already know, there are literally hundreds of strength training programs for triathletes. You can find them scattered across the web, among the pages of strength research journals, and in popular health and fitness magazines. The benefits of strength training cannot be denied – reduced risk of injury, enhanced force application, higher economy, and better overall health. But unfortunately, many of the strength training programs on the market today are too involved for the average triathlete – too much time, too much complication, too many exercises. In addition, many programs include components that are a waste of time for a triathlete – bicep curls, tricep pushdowns, abdominal crunches, leg extension machines, and a host of other ineffective and potentially damaging exercises.

Over years of training hundreds of different body styles and fitness levels, I have found that simple, multi-joint, functional exercises are a fast and highly effective way for the busy, multi-sport athlete to stay fit. These simple exercises can be created into brief 20-30 minute routines that can then be altered in small ways throughout the training year to follow the model of “periodization”. As I will explain in the instructions, by altering weight, sets, and reps, you can optimize your training.

In the following pages, I outline twelve of the most effective resistance training routines for triathletes – routines that I follow in my own training and prescribe to many of the athletes I coach. Often, a good strength training program is the final link in a triathlete’s physical chain – providing the structural integrity for enhanced speed and training efficiency in swimming, cycling, and running.

Each exercise in this manual is linked to a specific exercise video to assist you with proper form. Simply click on the workout title to go to a video for that specific workout. To jog your memory during the workout, I recommend printing the workout, then viewing each exercise video, and taking notes. You’ll only need to do this once, and it will ensure perfect form! That’s all for now - time to start resistance training!

Basic Instructions

Warm-up

Prior to each routine, it will be necessary to raise the temperature of the muscles. This allows the muscle to produce optimal force. If you are on a “time crunch”, you can simply perform a 500 meter row on a rowing machine, 100 jumping jacks or a 2 minute effort on the bike, treadmill, or elliptical. You’ll be surprised at how warm you can get your body in a short period of time. If you have extra time, 5-10 minutes is a more effective warm-up. You may also perform these routines after a swim, bike, or run. If you do this, I highly encourage a carbohydrate-protein based snack of 150-300 calories if your preceding cardio session lasts for longer than 1 hour. It is better to perform cardio first, and resistance training afterwards, but sometimes what is “ideal” is not “practical”, so do what works for you. The most important consideration is that you’re able to perform the exercises without low blood sugar or fatigue, since that is the quickest way to injury and ineffective training.

Stretching

Stretching is slightly overrated, as many research studies have discovered no decreased risk of injury following a pre-exercise stretch session. Do I stretch? Absolutely. 10 minutes in the morning when I awake, and during race season, 1 yoga session per week. I do not stretch because I’m concerned about rupturing a tendon or muscle during a resistance training session. I stretch to maintain overall joint balance and as a means of stress relief and relaxation. Joint balance simply means that if your hamstrings are excessively tight, they can “pull” your pelvic bone posteriorly and give you low back pain. Or if your anterior shoulder muscles are excessively tight, they can pull your shoulders forward and cause a “slump” in the shoulders. However, you can stretch at anytime during the day, and it is not necessary to precede your resistance training session with stretching.

Weight Selection, Circuits, Rest Periods, Sets and Repetitions

A circuit simply means that you proceed from one exercise to the next with little to no rest between exercises. As soon as you feel recovered, which should take 10-30 seconds, you just move on to the next exercise. You perform as many circuits as are indicated in the workout instructions.

A superset means that you perform the first exercise listed, then the second exercise, then you take a 30-60 second rest. Repeat for as many times as are indicated in the instructions, then move on to the next superset.

You can’t use the same weight and the same number of repetitions all year long without experiencing burnout and decreased performance. Just as you periodize your swimming, cycling, and running, you should also periodize your resistance training. So here are the simple rules (outlined in the table at the end of this discussion):



OFF-SEASON

This is the time to really build strength and muscle mass by performing a high number of sets and circuits, using a low number of repetitions (the number of times you lift the actual weight or perform the actual exercise in any given circuit or set), and using a heavier amount of weight. If a range of circuits is given for a routine, say, “3-5x through”, then during the off-season, you will go 5x through. You’ll also use the low range of repetitions, around 8-10. Choose a weight that you consider very challenging (you should be to failure by the last rep). In my routines, I will use a moderate weight for the first 1-2 circuits, then add 5-10lbs for upper body and 10-20lbs for lower body during the last several circuits.



BASE

increase the number of reps and decrease the number of sets or circuits. Decrease your weight, which will naturally occur, since you’ll be performing more reps. You should have an intense burn, but not be at failure by the last rep, and should really be able to do an extra 2-3 reps if you had to. This will also help you be less sore for those long swims, rides, and runs.



BUILD

Again increase your number of reps and decrease the weight. Some people think that this should be the most “intense” time of lifting, but I’ve found that this actually detracts from the intense swims, rides, and runs you should be doing at this time of year. The goal is to “maintain” the strength that you’ve already built during off-season and base. Follow the same recommendations as base training to choose your weight.



PEAK

Here’s a little twist – you’re going to go back to the number of reps you performed in the off-season, but with much lighter weights and far fewer sets. Very important: make certain to lift explosively and quickly, and this should be easy to do since you be using lighter weights. Basically, you’re enhancing power without doing too much muscle damage during this time. There should be very little burn in the muscles at the end of the set.

→ RACE WEEK

Can be tricky and very individualized. While it's OK to lift for up to 72 hours prior to your low priority races, try to follow these basic rules for your mid-to-high priority races. No lifting for the entire week prior to Ironman or Half-Ironman, only one lifting session on the week of an Olympic distance race (early in the week and preferably core only), and only two lifting sessions the week of a Sprint distance race (early in the week). Remember that it takes about a week for a muscle to really respond to a strength training session, so none of the training you do during a race week is going to help you during the race, it is in fact going to detract from your race performance, and the only reason you would perform it is to maintain some amount of strength if you're racing several times over the course of a season.

Phase	Off-season	Base	Build	Peak
Sets or Circuits	High (4-6x)	Moderate (3-5x)	Moderate (3-5x)	Low (2-3x)
Reps	8-10	10-12	12-15	8-10
Weight	Heavy	Medium-Heavy	Medium	Light

Routine Selection

Your body will respond best when you keep it guessing. This means that you should use as much variation as possible and try to include as many routines as you can in your routine. Ideally, you should lift 2-3x per week, and since these routines are so short, 3 would be best. Initially, as you are learning exercises, you may want to stick with just a handful of routines that you cycle through on a weekly or bi-monthly basis. But eventually, you should include all 12 routines in your programs. The ideal scenarios are:

Routines 1-12 performed on a weekly cycle as follows:

Week 1: 1-3	Week 2: 4-6	Week 3: 7-9	Week 4: 10-12
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then repeat.

Routines 1-12 performed on a bi-monthly cycle as follows:

Week 1: 1-3	Week 2: 1-3	Week 3: 4-6	Week 4: 4-6	Week 5: 7-9
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...you get the idea. This is a better way for you to “memorize routines”, since you get to repeat them a couple weeks in a row.

You'll find that some routines are harder on the shoulders, some are harder on the abs, some leave your legs more sore, etc. Use common sense. If a routine absolutely bombs your shoulders, then don't do it the day before a hard swim session! Or if you know a routine asks your legs to really work, you may not want to plan it on the same day as a 3 hour bike ride.

I literally choose which routine I'm going to perform about 10 minutes before my workout. That way, I can keep my body guessing and I can account for which of my muscles are fatigued and which are fresh. I'll even leave out certain exercises if I know I just won't be able to use good form or if I feel it would overtrain a certain muscle group.

Final Thoughts

- ☑ Try to space your resistance training sessions 48 hours apart.
- ☑ Make sure to prioritize your swimming, cycling, and running. It will ultimately give you the highest benefit.
- ☑ In the notes section for each routine, write your weights and any notes that help you remember an exercise.
- ☑ If an exercise hurts in a bad way, skip it.
- ☑ You can supplement these routines with special exercises if you have a special injury or joint condition. For example, if you have poor tracking of the kneecap (usually pain in the front of your knee), you could do cable kickforwards instead of squats or lunges. Or if you have low back pain, you can substitute more advanced core moves with simple exercises like the six inch crunch.
- ☑ If you've never performed any strength training, then ease into these routines. Just do 1-2x the first 2-4 weeks, then gradually add sets, reps and weights.
- ☑ If you don't want to wait for each high resolution video to load from thestrongtriathlete.com, every video is also available in a low resolution, smaller version at [youtube](#). You can search for the name of the actual workout or search using keyword thestrongtriathlete.
- ☑ Visit our other websites for fantastic free advice, books, DVD's, coaching, testing, training and nutrition advice
 - ✓ [Ben Greenfield Fitness](#) – Free Fitness, Diet and Lifestyle Advice
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Dry Land Strength Training for Swimmers

[\[CLICK HERE \]](#)

1

Straight Arm Cable Pulldowns (use rope, bar, or individual handles, preferably pull down with both arms simultaneously)

2

Cable Chest Press (use both arms simultaneously or one arm at a time, press out while in standing position)

3

Cable Torso Twists (keep your arms straight and twist to one side while gripping cable handle with both hands)

4

Cable Squat and Row (use rope or individual handles, sit down into a squat, then stand and row)



Although the link in the workout title will take you to an instructional video, you can also watch Ben Greenfield doing the workout

[\[CLICK HERE \]](#)

Superset Series 1

complete 3-4x through each superset

[[CLICK HERE](#)]

Superset 1: Flat Dumbbell Chest Press Dumbbell to Med Ball Woodchopper

Superset 2: Barbell or Dumbbell Squat to Standing Calf Raises

Superset 3: Barbell or Dumbbell Deadlift to Overhead Press to Pull-ups or Pulldowns

Superset 4: Cable Torso Twists to Side Planks

[[CLICK HERE to Watch Video](#)]

Superset Series 2

complete 3-4x through each superset

[[CLICK HERE](#)]

Superset 1: Pull-ups to Alligator Walk with Plate (pulling weight plate across floor with feet, while “walking” with the hands) OR 30-60 second Front Plank hold

Superset 2: Cable Kickbacks in Squat Position (AKA Ski Kickbacks) to Suitcase Deadlift

Superset 3: Stability Ball Pike or Pike Push-up to Horizontal Pull-up

Superset 4: Overhead Push Press to Push-up, Squat, Thrust, Jump (AKA Burpees or Rocket Pushups)

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Ben's Body Blaster

[\[CLICK HERE \]](#)

Perform as a circuit, 3-5x through:

1 Hindu Pushups or any Push-up variation of your choice

2 Mountain Climbers

3 Pull-ups or Pulldowns

4 Dumbbell Squat to Overhead Press

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Round and Round

[\[CLICK HERE \]](#)

Perform as a circuit, 3-6x through. On the first circuit, start with the recommended number of repetitions for the phase you're in (off-season, build, base or peak). Then add 1-2 reps to every exercise every time you proceed through the circuit.

- 1** **Dumbbell Swing Squat**
- 2** **30-60 seconds cardio of choice as hard as possible**
- 3** **Super Slow Push-ups**
- 4** **Mountain Climbers**
- 5** **Pull-ups or Pulldowns**
- 6** **30-60 seconds cardio of choice as hard as possible**

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Nifty 50

[\[CLICK HERE \]](#)

This routine breaks the rules. Anytime you perform it, you'll do 50 reps of every exercise in the circuit, no matter what time of the year. Just don't do this routine on a race week. You only complete the circuit 1 time.

- 1** **One Leg or Two Leg Jumps up onto Box or Platform**
- 2** **Dumbbell Overhead Swings**
- 3** **Jump Pull-ups or Regular Pull-downs**
- 4** **Walking Lunges**
- 5** **Mountain Climbers**
- 6** **Low Back Extensions or Superman**
- 7** **Push Press**
- 8** **Deadlift**
- 9** **Somersault Push-ups, Rocket Push-ups, Corkscrews or novel and unique exercise of your choice.**
- 10** **Choose your weakness: cycling or running – finish with 5 minutes as hard as possible on either.**

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Extreme Core 1

[\[CLICK HERE \]](#)

- 1 Alternating Dumbbell Chest Press (preferably on stability ball)
- 2 Single Leg Romanian Deadlift
- 3 Single Leg Layout One Arm Dumbbell Row (stick one leg out behind you as you perform a dumbbell row)
- 4 Single Leg Squat (use bench or ball behind you as a support)
- 5 Alternating Dumbbell Curl to Overhead Press
- 6 Woodchopper or Around the World

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Extreme Core 2

[\[CLICK HERE \]](#)

- 1 Medicine Ball Handwalk (walk hands back and forth over medicine ball, in push-up position)
- 2 Front plank reaches (reach forward with alternating arms while in front plank position)
- 3 Side plank rotations (reach under body then reach toward ceiling while in side plank position)
- 4 Hanging leg raise (optional can perform as a combo exercise with pullup)
- 5 Alternating overhead dumbbell press
- 6 Overhead squat

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Basic Strength 1

[[CLICK HERE](#)]

1 Dumbbell Incline Chest Press

2 Pull-up or Pulldown

3 Deadlift

4 Squat

5 Incline Crunch or Little Big

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Basic Strength 2

[\[CLICK HERE \]](#)

- 1** Dumbbell Push-up to Row OR Stability Ball Push-up
- 2** Squat on Balance Ball or other balance device
- 3** Overhead Press on Balance Ball or other balance device
- 4** Stability Ball Curl-up or Pike OR Bosu Ball Mountain Climber
- 5** Corkscrew or New Abdominal Exercise from magazine, trainer, etc.

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Body Weight Only 1

[\[CLICK HERE \]](#)

- 1 Regular push-up
- 2 Regular squat
- 3 Hindu push-up
- 4 Hindu squat or row squat
- 5 Lateral lunge
- 6 Little big, side plank, or front plank taps

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Body Weight Only 2

[\[CLICK HERE \]](#)

During off-season, hold 60-90 seconds. During base and build, 45-60 seconds. During peak, 30-45 seconds.

- 1 Push-up position hold
- 2 Squat position hold
- 3 Corkscrew or side plank position hold (for each side)
- 4 Lunge position hold (for each leg)
- 5 V-Up, Ab Hover, or Boat Position hold
- 6 Horizontal or regular pull-up position hold

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