

## THE STRETCHING YARDSTICK

The purpose of this article is to hopefully clear up some aspects of stretching. There is so much confusion about stretching and the proper way it should be done. There's a school of thought that states there is no right or wrong way to stretch. In cycling, at least at the club level, there is little emphasis placed on stretching. The warm up is usually just jumping on the bike and riding and the cool down phase being the walk to the car and the ride home.

Always remember, checking with your physician is important when starting any exercise program to find out if you are able to engage in this activity. Cycling is a great sport but it is not great when it comes to flexibility. Most of us are clipped into the pedals and holding onto the handlebars. This means the only aspect of our body that is moving is our hips, knees, and ankles and then only in limited patterns. The movements that propel us are not equally placing stress on the muscle groups. This creates imbalances that in turn create the tightness or lack of flexibility that we experience. The back and neck are held in tight postures doing isometric holds which stress and irritate these areas. So when is the best time to stretch? The best time to stretch is after the body has broken out in a sweat. When riding, that is not practical. After the ride is over is the best time. At that time the muscles are engorged with blood making them pliable. Here's an example. When you tear a dry sponge it will rip easily. A wet sponge is very difficult to tear. The same goes for our muscles.

Let's take a moment and cover what the core muscles are. First there are the lower back muscles of which there are three layers. Then the abdominals, the three sets of gluteals, the hamstrings, hip muscles, and lastly the quads. Their job is to keep us erect and able to move easily. Weakness in any one of these groups will cause related stresses on the others and make movement less efficient. The object of stretching is to keep the muscles limber and ready to perform the tasks. The abdominals are usually the ones that are targeted as being weak and the controlling force of the body. In cycling they are not used in quite the same way as running and other upright activities. The stress is really upon the lower back and hips. Most of the time little attention is placed on these neglected areas. We are used to stretching from a series of movements that are a compilation of exercises that have been handed down from as far back as can be remembered. During the 1970's a book came out showing people how to stretch. In my opinion this book has done more harm than good. It still remains out there as one of the authoritative books on the subject.

We are born with a certain amount of flexibility. As we grow our bodies reflect our moods and the activities we do. We tend to do certain activities over and over again creating imbalances. Stretching is done to take this stress away. So what is wrong with the stretching that has been done for so long? It simply doesn't do what it is supposed to. It actually makes things worse not better. How you ask? Take a look at the classic runner's calf stretch. As one runs the calf muscles get used over and over again fighting gravity and body weight. The musculatures become large and stronger. The stretch that is said to help this is to lower ones heel off a curb or to lean forward into a wall with one leg straight back and the other with the knee bent. Does this stretch the calves? Yes it does. So why do I have a problem with it? The answer is simple. The stretch restores the normal length of the calf but it has done absolutely nothing to improve the strength of the opposite group. The calf will continue to get stronger and shortened and the stretching just keeps promoting this.

The same goes for the rest of the stretches in the body. How does one stretch the calf in my program? It can be done in any one of multiple positions. One either lies down on their back, sits, or stands and simply pulls the front of the foot up using the muscles designed for that. When done correctly there will be a feeling of stretching occurring in the calf. This simple movement done often throughout the day helps to restore or maintain the normal ratio between the two muscle groups. The movement can also be accentuated by adding some resistance to the movement. One of the tenants of my program is that flexibility comes from strength. None of the movements are difficult and the only requirement for this regime is a yardstick or pole. The yardstick is used as a device for the movements and as a way of gauging how you are doing. A quick measure of how flexible one is at this moment is to stand straight holding the yardstick against one's back using a hand at the head or neck level and the other at the gluteus area. Maintain a normal arch in the lower back and slowly start to bend forward. When you feel the lower back start to lose the arch or the yardstick hits the lower back stop. This is a measurement of the initial flexibility that one has. You can take a measurement and record the distance from a particular spot on your body.

Take the yardstick behind the back again, slowly lowering yourself until the arch is lost or the stick hits the back. At that point slowly squeeze the glutei's and bring yourself up. This should be done between five and ten times. Once one has become proficient at sensing what their back is doing, then the yardstick should be switched to the shoulder level. The movement will not change but the emphasis should be on the hamstrings and glutei's. With time you should be able to add some light resistance and thereby increase strength and flexibility. I hope to be able to do this program at a general meeting and at that time accept any generalized questions. If there are any questions in the meantime I can be reached through the clubs website at [richardchaykin@yahoo.com](mailto:richardchaykin@yahoo.com).