

Back to basics: Killer Recumbent Bike Workouts to Burn Fat and Sculpt Legs

By Jill Coleman

As a reformed “cardio queen,” I have to admit, I never considered the recumbent bike a respectable piece of equipment. It never seemed as hard-core as running or doing the stepmill or taking a group cycle class. However, after a weight-bearing injury left me flat on my butt, I found myself on the recumbent bike, using it as a low-impact alternative. Forced to create my own intensity, I pushed through some seriously tough workouts, torching fat and sculpting my legs like a never dreamed.

Why Pedal

The *recumbent* bike is a piece of cardiovascular equipment that places the user in the seated position with the feet forward and back against a pad, as opposed to the upright bike which is more similar in orientation to a regular bicycle. For a biomechanical perspective, it is advantageous to use the recumbent bike to take pressure off the joints of the lower body. The recumbent has traditionally been recommended by doctors and physical therapists to patients whose joint conditions require them to get activity through *non-weight-bearing* exercise. As a trainer, I found another use for it: leg burning device to generate real leg-shaping results with my clients.

Because of the orientation of the bike, the movement loads the glutes and the quadriceps predominantly, paying particular attention to the area right below the glutes referred to as the “glute-hamstring tie-in” by many fitness professionals. The glute-hamstring tie-in is a notoriously stubborn place of fat storage for many women and also one of the first places on the body take on cellulite with age. The beauty of using the recumbent bike is that it helps burn fat all over, while also eliciting a localized burn in the legs, attacking both the glute-hamstring tie-in and the lower part of the quad near the knee (referred to as the “tear drop” and the “sweep”). Traditional fat-burning *anaerobic* exercise done via high-intensity interval training (HIIT) creates a hormonally and calorically favorable environment to lose inches, while aerobic pedaling using heavy resistance generates a similar effect to that of weight training, thus shaping the leg. If the resistance and speed combinations are enough to elicit a strong lactic acid burn in the legs and glutes, the result is a fat-burning, leg-sculpting effect.

Protocols that Burn Fat

Trainers know that 95% of clients want fat loss. Most female trainees will point to various hip and thigh areas and want to get rid of localized fat. Luckily, since the recumbent bike only works the lower body, the trainee can channel all exertion to the legs and glutes to create powerful pedal strokes through the fat-burning protocol. We know from recent studies that HIIT burns more fat than low-to-moderate intensity aerobic exercise, as was shown via stationary bikes in an article published in the journal *Applied Physiology, Nutrition and Metabolism* (Dec 2008). In the study, untrained individuals participated in thrice weekly HIIT sessions for 6 weeks. Each HIIT session was 60 minutes in duration, and alternated 4 minutes of exertion at 90% VO2 max, with 2 minutes of rest (repeated 10x). Each participant’s fat oxidation, VO2 max and other parameters were measured at the beginning of the study and at the end of 6 weeks (18 total workouts). Fat oxidation increased 60% from baseline. This means that even though they were doing the same workout, they became more efficient at fat burning and were able to pedal harder for longer. Even though the recumbent bike utilizes only the lower half of the body, the metabolic effect created by interval training on the bike generates a universal fat-burning ripple effect.

Workout #1 – 25 minutes: Traditional HIIT workout done on the bike. Encourage your client to pedal as hard as possible for the “working” segments and move the legs very slowly during the “resting” segment

in order to recover and be able to generate the same force for the next working segment. Go for intense, all-out peaks of exertion (to the point of breathlessness), followed by low valleys of rest and recovery. Avoid moving faster during the rest segments even if your client can; a more pronounced fat-burning effect is generated with a large differential between working and resting. Remember, it is not about duration, but instead about intensity.

Put your client on a recumbent bike whose highest level is 20. Choose the Manual program and adjust the level throughout the workout according to the time and segment lengths listed here.

Time	Level	RPM	Segment Time
0-5	8	90+	5 min
5-6	15	80+	1 min
6-6:30	1	50+	30 sec
6:30-7:30	15	80+	1 min
7:30-8	1	50+	30 sec
8-9	15	80+	1 min
9-9:30	1	50+	30 sec
Continue to alternate 1 min @ Level 15, and 30 sec @ Level 1 until you reach 20 minutes			
20-25	8	90+	5 min

Workout #2 – 25 minutes: This workout forces your client to work a little harder by adding an upper body component. Grab a set of lighter weights (perhaps 5-8 lb dumbbells for women and 12-15 lb dumbbells for men) and get your client moving on the bike, warming up. The protocol is similar to Workout #1 in that we are incorporating intervals, however, in addition to pushing the legs hard during the “working” segments, you are going to hand your client the dumbbells and ask them to perform upper body movements at the same time. Full-body movements like this can feel awkward, but will only exponentiate the fat-burning potential of the workout. By recruiting more muscle groups, the trainer forces the client to challenge not only their aerobic capacity but their muscular endurance too. The result is breathlessness, burning and an overall feeling of exhaustion. Throughout the working segments, the client may have to rest the upper body, which is ok, but encourage them to keep their legs moving the whole time. They can rest the upper body for a few moments, keeping the legs going, then add the upper body movement back in when they feel ready.

Begin on a Manual Setting and adjust the levels as you progress through the workout. The upper body movements involved are also listed. During the client’s “resting” segments, take the dumbbells from them so they can recover more efficiently. Hand the dumbbells back when it is time to push again.

Time	Level	RPM	Segment Time	Upper Body Movement
0-2	8	80+	2 min	Punches (across the body)
2-4	10	70+	2 min	None
4-6	12	60+	2 min	Shoulder Press
6-7	4	70+	1 min	None
7-9	9	80+	2 min	Side Raise

9-11	11	70+	2 min	None
11-13	13	60+	2 min	Alternating Shoulder Press
13-14	4	70+	1 min	None
14-16	10	80+	2 min	Front Raise
16-18	12	70+	2 min	None
18-20	14	60+	2 min	Upright Row
20-21	4	70+	1 min	None
21-25	8	90+	4 min	Alternating Biceps Curl/Triceps Ext.

Improve Muscular Endurance and Shape the Leg

Another useful approach when attacking the recumbent bike is to take your client through a protocol that elicits more of a muscular burn in the legs. The segments are a little longer and focus on a slow, deep aching in the glutes and quads to make those muscles pop. Try this protocol with your clients as an alternative to a light weight-training workout or add it in at the end of a heavy leg day.

Workout #3 – 25 minutes: Throughout this protocol, you will have the client build on their resistance and slow the pace to the point of burning. Choose Manual Program on the bike and change the levels as called for. This type of working will really get the glutes burning; advise your clients to think about the muscles being worked and squeeze them to get the full effect. This should feel similar to resistance training for the legs.

Time	Level	RPM	Segment Time
0-5	8	90+	5 min
5-9	11	80+	4 min
9-12	13	65+	3 min
12-14	15	50+	2 min
14-15	2	50+	1 min
15-19	12	80+	4 min
19-22	14	65+	3 min
22-24	16	50+	2 min
24-25	2	50+	1 min