

Balance Bike Recommendations

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Through pilot program, research and development, Special Olympics New Jersey has compiled some recommendations and resources for Special Olympics chapters interested in integrating balance bikes into their program options. Below are some basic ways to get started. Please refer to *The Basics of Balance Bikes* (from SONJ) and the *Strider Transition to Competitive Cycling* guide (located on the Special Olympics website) or reach out to Jennifer Hansen jhansen@specialolympics.org to connect with Strider bikes or for further information.

Balance Bikes are Not Just for Young Athletes or for transitioning to pedal bikes

While the original Strider bike, a type of balance bike, was designed for toddlers, Strider now makes balance bikes that come in sizes that are suitable for athletes of all ages, including adults. Balance bike training is also not just about transitioning athletes to two-wheel pedal bikes.

Training on Strider bikes offer individuals with ID opportunities to

- Improve balance and coordination (there is research to support this)
- Overcome fear of bicycles or that may have developed when trying to learn to ride
- Learn a lifelong skill that enhances physical and mental health
- Participate in exhibition races in the sport of cycling
- Connect with family and friends

Don't Be Afraid of the Ramps!

Regardless of the age of the athlete, the ramps and other obstacles provide fun and function.

Function:

- Going down the ramps lets athletes feel how speed will assist in balancing and encourage them to lift their feet and begin gliding
- Many athletes enjoy the sensory input from going fast down the ramps
- Athletes receive different sensory input as they transition from riding on a flat surface to a slanted surface, which helps to develop balance and coordination

Fun:

- Ramps and other obstacles offer variety and motivation to training
- Using ramps and obstacles during balance bike training can encourage athletes to ride on other surfaces in parks and playgrounds
- Ramps used during exhibition races in cycling events offer exciting challenges to the sport of cycling and help to generate interest in the sport

The SONJ resource *The Basics of Balance Bikes* and the Strider resource *Strider Transition to Competitive Cycling*, contain progression and training templates that can be applied to the following options.

Cross Training

Local training programs in any sport can introduce balance bikes into practices balance bikes are proven to help people with ID improve balance and coordination. All you need is 2 – 3 bikes and helmets. Set up a station at your practice where, with coach supervision, athletes can practice sitting on the bikes, riding straight or curved pathways and over or around obstacles. For some athletes simply sitting on the bike and lifting one foot off the ground for a few seconds can be a challenge.

Cycling: Training, Exhibition Races and Transitioning to Two-Wheel Pedal Bikes

In 2018 and 2019, Special Olympics New Jersey included exhibition balance bike races at our state level cycling competitions. Two races were featured: 150 meter with 2 ramps and 250 meter with 3 ramps. Athletes ages 8 – 32 trained with local cycling programs and then raced in the events. Several of the athletes transitioned to two-wheel pedal bikes and sanctioned SONJ cycling competitions in the following years while some continue to train and race on the Striders. Coaches that utilized balance bikes in their local programs saw athletes make progress in foundational skills such as balance and coordination, gain confidence and learn how to ride a two-wheel pedal bike.

Clinics and Camp Shriver

Bike riding clinics or offering a Bike Camp during Camp Shriver are great ways to introduce athletes and coaches to balance bike training, transition athletes to two-wheel pedal bikes and build cycling programs.

Things to consider when planning a bike clinic or camp:

- How would you adjust to athletes who are ready to transition to two-wheel pedal bikes?
- Will you be offering the clinic or camp as an opportunity to gauge interest in cycling, start or grow your cycling program?
- What age range of athletes will you accept?
- What size bikes will you need and how many?
- Will you supply helmets, or will the athletes be expected to bring their own?
- How many athletes can safely participate in the space you have available?
- Will you offer this experience indoors, outdoors or both?
- Will you have two-wheel pedal bikes or other adaptive bikes available?
- What would be the duration of a bike camp if you were to offer one (for example, 1 or 2 weeks)?

The answers to these questions will help you plan for the experience you wish to offer. Be prepared to do a combination of both off bike and on bike activities. Sitting on a bike for extended periods of time can be exhausting and uncomfortable. Off bike activities should include balance, core strength and leg strength conditioning.

Young Athletes

Balance bike training supports the Young Athletes skill of Balance & Jumping skill. Coaches can have a Strider bike station (with helmets and helmet spray) or run a session focused on Balance & Jumping using Strider bikes.

Progression for Young Athletes on Strider bikes is similar to other athletes without the focus on transitioning to two-wheel pedal bikes unless the athlete shows interest and seems ready.

Considerations for introducing Strider bikes in Young Athletes:

- Some athletes will not like the sensation of wearing a helmet and have adverse reactions. For athletes that are uncomfortable wearing a helmet, in Young Athletes, athletes can learn to tolerate the helmet prior to getting on the bike.
- Safety is the most important consideration. Make sure coaches are available to facilitate steering and stopping.
- Athletes may walk while standing over the bike rather than sitting on the seat while walking at first.
- Allow athletes to decide how long they want to stay on the bike or not. Do not force athletes to ride longer than they want or enjoy.
- Do not be afraid to use obstacles and ramps.

Unified Champion Schools

Balance bikes are a perfect fit for the three Unified Champion Schools components!

Unified Sports/Physical Education:

- Used in a Unified PE setting, Strider bikes offer athletes and Unified partners a way to connect while getting fit and learning new skills
- Strider bikes "All Kids Bike" program offers school packages including bikes, helmets and curriculum to teach all children ages preschool through first grade how to ride
- Balance bikes can be used in any grade level and allow for inclusion for students who may not typically be able to participate
- Unified PE classes with older students can assist PE teachers in instructing and modeling balance bike riding for younger students

Inclusive Youth Leadership:

- Schools can start a Unified Biking Club
- Unified clubs at the middle and high school level can help teach Young Athletes and elementary students how to ride or host a Unified Bike Rodeo

Whole School Engagement:

- Schools can host a Unified Family Bike Night introducing families to riding and educating parents on the benefits of biking for fun and fitness
- Schools can host a Unified Bike Rodeo where students of all abilities can be successful at riding

Strider Adventure Zone Courses at Special Olympics State Events

Set up ramps, cones and many other obstacles as an Athlete Experience. Make sure to have helmets, helmet spray and plenty of volunteers to help fit athletes on bikes and monitor for safety.