

# Spring Cycling Tune-Up

by Darlene White Natale

**Y**ou notice the stacks of salt bags have given way to cypress mulch as you fill your gas tank. It's a sure sign spring is here! So, you get your bike out of the garage, oil the chain, and adjust the brakes. You are ready to hit the trails?

Hold on! There's something you may have forgotten – you aren't 20 any more and just jumping into cycling or other spring activities following months of hibernation in Pittsburgh can take its toll on your body and even sideline you.

In most endurance sports, the fit participant prevails. Bicycling is no different. To make it up those hills in North Park or the steady grade on the Rails-to-Trails requires some preparation, flexibility and training. You may have worked diligently all winter preparing for shifting gears with rapid channel changes and awesome video game maneuvers, but now is the time to flex the larger muscle groups.

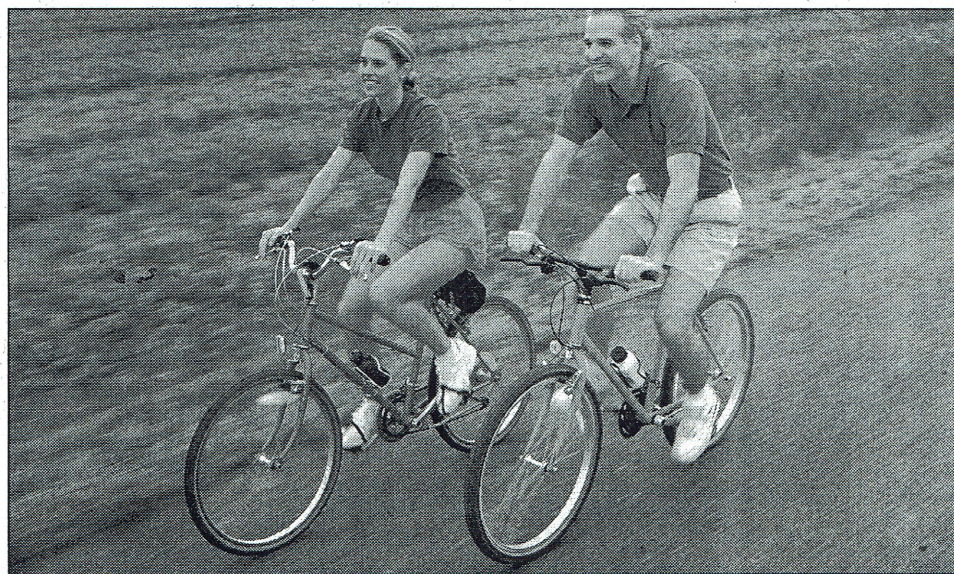
You've heard it a million times, "Start slow!" But as soon as there is sunshine, Burghers get impatient to enjoy their beautiful city!

So to jump start your spring fitness program, I spoke with Holly Gatto, an American Council on Exercise (ACE) certified personal trainer at Oxford Athletic Club in Wexford. Gatto trains triathletes and road cyclist and has been a competitive mountain bike racer herself.

She said that flexibility, balance, hydration, and stability are key to bicycling, but you have to start out with some stretching.

Gatto said to stretch the Achilles and hamstrings by sitting on the floor with your legs extended and pulling your toes toward you. A simple quadriceps stretch can be performed standing on one foot and pulling the heel of the other toward your buttock. She recommends a "Pretzel stretch" for the glutes. Lying on the floor with one knee bent up, cross it with the ankle of the other leg.

Gatto said that off-season strength training is very important in cycling



because of the demand on the quads, hamstring, glutes and calves.

"They (leg muscles) need to be able to withstand high levels of lactic acid, the byproduct of muscle contraction," said Gatto. She explained that when you work your muscles hard you use carbs and proteins resulting in a build-up of lactic acid and its incumbent pain, fatigue, and cramping. Gatto said your muscles could adjust and tolerate the higher levels of lactic acid if you build them up through training. Proper hydration and Vitamin C will help stave off some of the effects of the lactic acid.

"Muscle cramps are also a sign of inadequate fluid replacement and electrolyte loss, particularly calcium and magnesium," explained Gatto. As the environmental temperature and exercise intensity increases you need to drink more and may want to switch to a quality sports drink. "Cool beverages are absorbed better than room temperature or warm beverages," Gatto added.

Gatto said that she successfully trains cyclists, soccer players, and other athletes at Oxford Athletic Club emphasizing core stability and flexibility.

For cycling, she strongly suggests starting with 15 slow repetitions, for 2-3 sets, of leg presses and hack squats with your legs a pedal-width stance apart.

Another good exercise for cyclist is to stand in a squat position, then sidestep

onto an elevated platform and then off the other side, the whole time maintaining the squatting form with the legs flexed. She recommends starting at 15 reps, for 2-3 sets, and after building up to begin timing yourself one minute and up in 15-second increments.

Gatto said lunges are great biking fitness exercises. She said a good twist on the normal lunge is to do it on a step or platform. "Nice and slow – up and down," advised Gatto.

In bicycle turns balance is key. Gatto suggest a Bosu Ball like the one she trains on at Oxford. The Bosu looks like a plastic all-purpose ball was dissected and mounted on a disc. With the disc on the floor, you should attempt to balance on the ball section.

Gatto demonstrated doing squats on the ball and then a quick 1/4 turn jump and more squats. After you perfect the squats and turns, she suggests holding dumbbells while executing the balance training. I think I will just try to balance on the ball!

For stability, she suggested doing abdominal exercises like crunches on an exercise ball.

So stretch those muscles out and try to find a group to ride with at or just above your ability level. Riding with others who are more fit than you will help increase your skills. Riding with friends will encourage you to go out more regularly

and feel good about it.

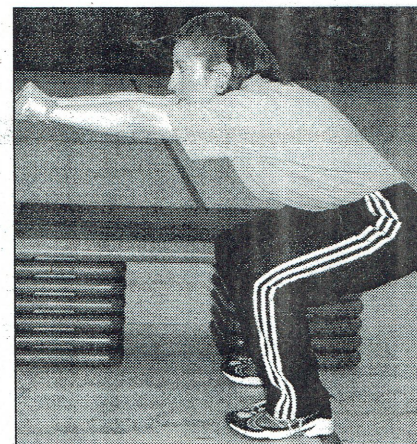
Next year, you may want to consider off season training at a gym that could include stationery cycling, spinning, yoga, weight training, swimming or volleyball. Remember that with help from trainers like Gatto, we boomers won't just be getting old, but fitter and stronger.

Have fun on the road and keep a look out for Pennsylvania's state flower – the blossoming pothole!

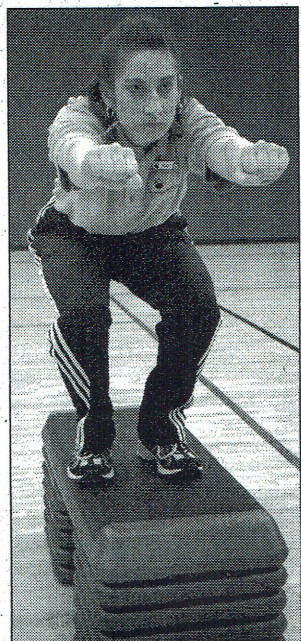
Holly Gatto is a certified ACE Personal Trainer at Oxford Athletic Club in Wexford. Gatto is available to provide in-depth information on hydration, nutrition, and bicycle racing. She is also a certified Pilates instructor. She specializes in post-rehab training, sport-specific training, weight loss and management. She can be reached at (724) 933-1911 ext. 245 or ledhead1944@yahoo.com.

Rails-to-Trails Conservancy may be reached at (717) 238-7566 or [www.rails-trails.org/pa](http://www.rails-trails.org/pa).

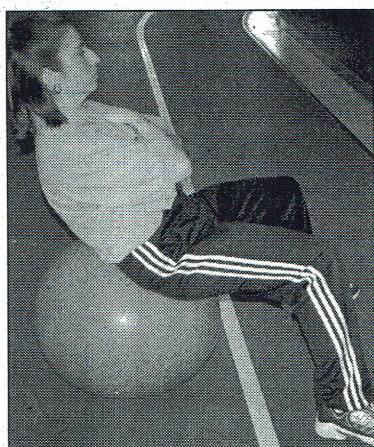
Darlene White Natale is a freelance journalist from Middlesex Township. She can be reached at (724) 713-1079 or [DNatale@Zoominternet.net](mailto:DNatale@Zoominternet.net).



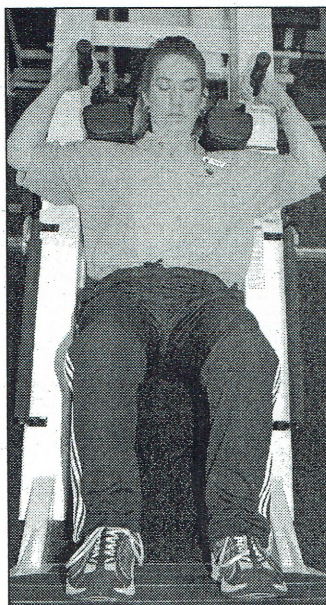
**Gatto demonstrates the starting stance for a squat to an elevated platform. Stepping forward onto the step puts less stress on the knee.**



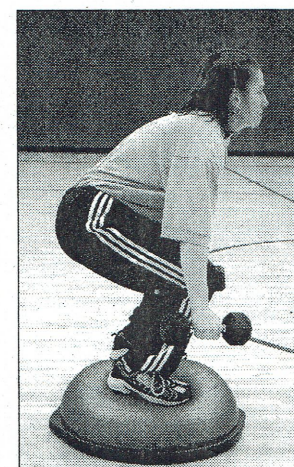
**Proper form on platform. Then step down on side opposite of start and then back up slowly, holding the squat stance.**



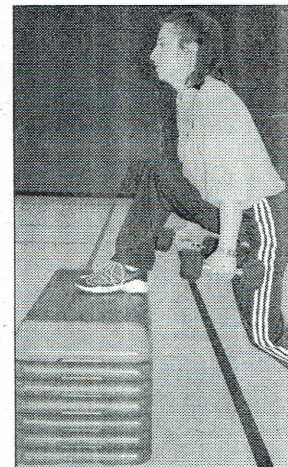
**For stability try crunches on an exercise ball with a 30-40 degree movement.**



**On the Hack Squat (shown), place your feet a pedal width apart with a 90-degree knee bend from hips, any lower can damage your hips and knees. Lower yourself slowly for 3-5 seconds and then back up slowly. Never lock your knees. On the leg press machine, place your feet at pedal width. Lower the platform until your thighs are perpendicular to the floor. Any more than this angle of bend could cause damage to knees and hips.**



**Practice squats on the Bosu ball and advance to jumping 1/4 turns from squat position, and after mastering the squats, add dumbbells.**



**Step slowly up onto a platform and then back down. Add dumbbells as you gain endurance.**