

Raising the (Aero) Bar

Three considerations for finding the perfect system.

By Christopher Kautz

Aerobars are arguably the defining characteristic of a triathlon bike. While aerotubes and the geometry designed to accommodate aerobars are certainly important elements of a tri bike, the aerobar is where it all begins.

In setting up a tri bike, you begin by positioning the bars and work backwards. This is why understanding the fit characteristics of aerobars is important and proper bar selection is so critical.

There are three primary concerns with aerobar selection. The first part is determining whether you want a one-piece bar or a basebar and clip-on. The second is the shape of the extension. The third is the height of the pads relative to the basebar, or what is called the aerobar's "stack height."

TYPES OF AEROBARS

One-piece aerobars are an integrated unit, made up of at least a basebar of some type, arm pads and extensions. In some cases the stem is also built into the unit.

One-piece bars are preferred by many elite-level riders as they generally provide more aero benefit than a clip-on bar. The extra aero benefit of a one-piece bar is not in the position it puts the athlete in, but rather is a result of the bar itself being made up of more aerodynamic shapes than standard basebars, such as bullhorns or drop bars.

Clip-on aerobars are bars that bolt onto a separate basebar. When using a clip-on bar you will have three separate components to select: the stem, the basebar and the aerobar. Clip-on bars are more common than one-piece bars, particularly among age-group athletes.

ADVANTAGES; DISADVANTAGES

There is a number of advantages and disadvantages to using either a one-piece set-up or basebar and clip-on combinations. One difference is cost. A clip-on bar is less expensive than a one-piece bar, especially if you already have a basebar and stem and simply want to add a set of aerobars.

The second difference is adjustability. Clip-on bars are often more adjustable and versatile than one-piece bars. Within the category of one-piece bars there are individual models with differing amounts of adjustability.

The Hed one-piece bar is adjustable in nearly all parameters. Others, such as the Zipp Vuka and Profile Carbon-X bars, have very good, but not complete, adjustability. Still others, including the VisionTech TriMax bar, have virtually no adjustability.

Clip-on bars, on the other hand, normally allow for adjustment in terms of width, extensions and the elbow pads, as well as tilt of the aerobar independent of the basebar and length of the aerobar.

The third difference is aerodynamics. A one-piece bar will generally be more aerodynamic than a clip-on with a basebar, and can save precious seconds on the race course. For athletes looking to maximize their aero advantage, a one-piece bar makes sense. This helps explain why most elite-level athletes use one-piece bars—to them every second is precious.

CHOOSING EXTENSION SHAPE

The second piece of the puzzle is deciding what shape of extension you want on your bars. While some bars, such as Zipp, Hed and Oval Concepts, have removable extensions allowing you to swap them out independently of the mounting hardware, others are fixed. There are many shapes of extensions from which to choose and the variety is continuing to grow.

The most common shapes are ski-tip, S-bend and straight, and there is a number of iterations of each of these three varieties. A fourth category, the W-bend, for wrist relief, is the newest and may be found on bars such as Syntace and Blackwell Research.

The type of extension you choose is highly personal and there is no one right answer. Ultimately, you need to find a bar that fits your riding style and allows you to settle in to your position comfortably.

S-bend bars tend to be favored by athletes who like to use their aerobars for leverage. They are popular among elite athletes, but are often found to be less comfortable by athletes who like to relax into their bars. Most age-group athletes tend to find ski-bend or W-bend bars more comfortable, especially for longer events.

Straight extensions are the least prevalent among multisport athletes and more commonly seen on pure time-trial bikes.



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