

SAILING FIT
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LOWER BACK STRENGTH

In response to the last article I wrote I received an email inquiring how to increase strength and flexibility in the lower back. The concern here is that hiking is such a crucial part of Laser sailing and the part of the anatomy used to do this is the lower back. It seems that for most that this is the part of the body that gives out first.

To create a stronger and more flexible lower back you should start with the basics and build up on that. First you should start with your posture. No matter if you sit at a desk all day, stand all day or are actively moving all day you should be aware of your posture. Many of us have a tendency to slouch forward. This creates a strain on your back. Try to be aware of how you are holding yourself even when you are walking. You can imagine trying to balance a book on your head. I know it is an old cliché, but it works. As your posture improves you will notice less overall back pain and your muscles will become stronger.

Next you will want to properly stretch the muscles of the lower back. Stand with your feet together and your arms at your sides. Starting with your head slowly roll your spine down toward the floor. Try to imagine each vertebrae rolling forward one at a time. Roll all the way down until your hands are as close to the floor as they can get. Stay rolled over for about 30 seconds and then roll back up to the upright position. Again imagine each vertebrae rolling up. When you are in the middle you will feel a pull in your lower back. This is normal. Many of us rush through these stretches and therefore don't really stretch the intended muscles. Remember to go slowly and if you feel any pain don't go any further. You may want to practice this when you wake up in the morning and/or before going to bed at night. By keeping these muscles loose it will allow them to stretch further each time and therefore increase in both strength and flexibility. You may even do this in the shower. The water will relax the muscles and make the stretch a little easier.

Another stretch that is very effective is also a very simple one. Lie flat on your stomach on the floor. Stretch your arms out straight over your head with your palms lying flat on the floor. Keep your head facing down toward the floor so your spine is in a completely straight line. Now lift your right arm straight up off the floor about 1-2 inches as you lift your left leg straight off the floor the same distance. Hold for about five seconds making sure you don't bend your arms or legs, but rather keeping them straight. Return to the starting position and do the same with the left arm and right leg. You can start with either the right or left arm it really doesn't matter. When starting out do 8-10 on each side and work up to 15-20.

The best way to create a stronger lower back is to create strong abdominal muscles. The two sets of muscles work together and are only as strong as the weaker one. Crunches are

a great way to strengthen both the lower back and abdominals. While most of us are familiar with a basic crunch many are not aware of the hundreds of different variations. One of these is called a reverse crunch. This is one of my favorites when concentrating on the lower back. In this exercise you need to lay on your back with your arms at your sides. Lift your legs straight into the air so your feet are pointing up toward the ceiling. Now bend your knees so they are at a 90-degree angle. This is the basic starting and ending form. Now roll your back so your knees come toward your shoulders. Try not to break the form. During the whole exercise keep your lower back touching the floor. You can think of pulling your abdominals inward and upward to keep your back flat on the floor. By doing this you will be tightening the abdominals and creating a tension on them. Generate your movement from your abdominal muscles never releasing the tension you have on them. When you roll your knees toward your shoulders inhale and when you return your legs to the 90-degree position exhale. Do this exercise in a slow and controlled manner. Start by doing 8-10 of these every other day. Then work up to everyday. Increase the amount that you do, as you feel comfortable. If you feel fatigued take a break from doing them. Be sure not to tense up your neck, but to keep it loose.

Now to put some of these exercises together you can simply go for a walk. Walking at a moderate pace is a great way to work all of your muscles. Make sure you maintain good posture keeping your back straight and shoulders back. Keep your abdominal muscles pulled in. Walk with your feet pointing straight in front of you and not turned out to the sides. Picture your body forming a straight line from head to toe. This doesn't mean that you have to have a stiff military walk. Let your arms swing freely and enjoy yourself.

Last but not least practice hiking! After all isn't this what the main goal is. To be able to hike like there's no tomorrow! Once you start working on strengthening your lower back hiking will become easier. However hiking is an exercise in itself and requires practice. The more you do it the stronger your back, abdominals and hiking ability will become.

Once again if there is a topic you would like me to address or you have any questions/comments please feel free to email me at meka@sailfit.com.