

THE CASE FOR REAL FOOD

Beth Lamie, Team Pegasus Triathlon Coach



In my role as a triathlon coach, I create [fueling plans](#) for my athletes who are training for endurance events: marathons, ultra-marathons, and triathlons raced in extreme conditions, and/or of half-ironman distance or longer.

Because these events are *races*, getting adequate nutrition while riding and running at high speeds, in tough conditions and with a relatively high heart rate can be challenging. Compounding the challenge is the body's inability to completely replace the amount of calories being spent. However, athletes racing events lasting anywhere

from 5 to 17 hours will only be successful if they can complete the event before they've exhausted their muscles of glycogen.

It is incumbent upon these athletes to practice their race day fueling over and over, so that they rule out foods that won't work for them, and so that they train their bodies to absorb quick-acting carbohydrates, fluids, and electrolytes. The science of engineered race food has transformed racing, and coordinated with a properly prepared fueling plan, more and more athletes are able to race ultra-distance races without risking catastrophic stomach distress or even organ failure.

So what does this mean for the athlete who is preparing for B2B? First, you have to start with a plan. And the first step on your plan is to

KNOW YOUR SWEAT RATE

It is critical to know how many pounds you lose per hour to sweat, and that you replace as much of that fluid as possible with an electrolyte containing beverage. As I've mentioned in previous articles, dehydration, or over-hydration with plain water - has detrimental and sometimes fatal consequences. During last year's B2B, I worked the massage tent and saw dozens of cramped-up athletes who were conscientiously loading up on water because it was such a hot day. Unfortunately, these athletes had washed most the electrolytes out of their bodies and were rewarded with intense muscle spasms.

KNOW HOW MANY CALORIES YOU WILL BURN AND WILL NEED TO REPLACE

Riding at 100 watts, an athlete burns 6 calories per minute; or 360 calories per hour. If it takes this athlete 9 hours of riding to complete the B2B, this athlete will burn 3,240 calories. But unless you have a watts meter on your bike, this information is interesting but useless. However, your Garmin can give you a fairly reliable calorie count during your endurance-paced training rides and when cross referenced with the results of your sweat rate test, will give you a pretty scientific basis for crafting your plan. (Note: this plan will ONLY be successful if you stick to the same pace or slower than your training rides for B2B).

START LAYING OUT THE PLAN

So now that you know how many calories you need to replace, you can start investigating fuel sources and adding up how much food you will need to bring (and how you will carry it!). Because you only have so much space to carry your food, (pockets and a bento box), you could make a case for fueling up with these small packets of concentrated carbs. And if you are training for an Ironman, this might be a good opportunity to practice your fueling. However, if the idea of formulating a plan that includes 9 hours of consuming blocks and gels – especially if you are not training for any Ironman – sounds distasteful, let's get creative.

The key difference between B2B and an Ironman, is that B2B is a RIDE not a race. The smart rider will do this ride at much lower than race intensity, and if they have done enough long rides, they can enjoy the ride at 50-65% of their threshold watts and still make it to the brewery in Vermont before the sweep vehicles start circling. In addition, there are three rest *stops* and athletes are permitted (in fact, *encouraged*) to stop along the way to stretch and refuel. This opens up the opportunity to use real food as a fuel source, which is not only more palatable; it is also easier to make adjustments for dietary preference or food allergies.

Having said that, I want to be clear that this doesn't mean that your fueling plan should include a smorgasbord of your favorite junk food! A common misconception among athletes doing endurance events is that because you will be burning a lot of calories, you can eat whatever you want. I could tell you horror stories of crazy eating during endurance events, but I'll spare you that and get right to

WHAT NOT TO EAT

- Avoid or strictly limit fat, dairy and even protein. Fat and protein are both difficult to digest and will slow the absorption of carbohydrates. Dairy can also be difficult to digest, and even if you don't usually have problems with dairy, during a long and strenuous effort problems can emerge. TRY THIS: Cinnamon raisin bagel with honey. NOT THAT: Peanut Butter & Jelly sandwich.
- Avoid high amounts of sugar and sodas. Although there is nothing like a Coke when you are 100 miles into the ride, having nothing but soda in your water bottles is asking for digestive problems. Carbonation and sugar are both very acidic, and riding for hours in a crouched position alone can compromise digestion enough to cause riders to suffer heartburn. TRY THIS: Pretzel pieces and licorice bits. NOT THAT: Gels and sugary candy.
- Avoid plain water! An occasional bottle of water will help when you can't stomach the thought of another Gatorade, but don't try to get by with water alone. TRY THIS: Water with NUUN tablets, Ironman Perform or Gatorade Endurance Formula. NOT THAT: Water only.
- Finally, keep an eye on caffeine, ibuprofen and other supplements. As the day wears on whatever you are ingesting repeatedly starts to add up. It's not unusual to see an athlete have a large coffee on the ride to Boston, a coffee at Harpoon while waiting to leave, several caffeinated gels or blocks on the ride, and a Coke or two later in the day. By the time you get off the bike 10 hours later you have a queasy stomach (or you are jittery!) and can't figure out why. The same goes for foods and supplements that contain vitamins and/or pain killers. (See my article on 5-Hour Energy Drink).

So what SHOULD you think about having in your bento box? Traditional goodies include:

- Fritos (corn, corn oil and salt) and Pretzels. Fritos are a great source of extra salt and something I tend to crave on long rides, and at the right pace, the amount of fat in the chips won't hinder digestion. Pretzels and baked chips are tasty additions to the plan.
- Pop-tarts. Yum! Easy to carry and a decent source of carbs. Avoid getting too much sugar by opting for unfrosted pop-tarts.
- Fig Newtons are a great traditional fuel source and will be digested even faster if you go for the fat-free version.
- Banana. What can I say? Nearly perfect food for the event. Convenient wrapper, good source of carbs and potassium, lower in fiber than other fruits, and fairly filling.
- Boiled potatoes. You read that right. Especially popular on cold rides, a couple of small salted boiled potatoes wrapped in foil will fit in the back pocket of your jacket, vest or jersey.
- Licorice, jelly beans and Pay-Day Bars. The Pay-Day bars are precursors to Clif Mojo bars: less sweet and a little saltier than traditional bars. At races, licorice has been replaced with Shark bites and Clif Blocks; and jelly beans with "Sport" Beans, but check the labels and practice during your long rides. You might be fine with the real thing!

So now you have some 'real' food ideas for starting your nutrition plan. Remember to read labels and take all ingredients into consideration, and don't underestimate how much food you will need for your ride. Don't guess! You still plenty of time during your training rides to practice eating and to learn what foods will provide convenient energy for the long day.