

Consistency killers

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As of this writing, Northern Hemisphere athletes are a third of the way through Spring. In January, or February, or March (depending on where you live; your racing schedule; your personal situation) you're engaged in base training. This was **written** about this past January and, in my view, this hierarchy of phases (base before speed) is the expedient way to construct a season.

One nice element of *base first* is the relative ease with which one can generate consistency in one's training regime. Consistency is king. Much better to train slow and easy 5 or 6 days a week than to perform intense, high-HR workouts if, in retrospect, those high-HR sessions exacted a toll in the form of workouts missed.

Yes, studies show the physiological benefits of high-intensity training. But at what cost, if these sessions require you to take many days off? The problem most mortals have is just the lack of training days that accrue to one's campaign toward racing shape. The trick, in the early season, is stringing together enough work at *any* heart rate to constitute a base. Has consistency been a problem for you so far this season?

What constitutes consistency? That depends on the athlete. It might be 8 hours a week; it might be 16 hours a week. For most age-group racers, 10 to 12 hours a week is a healthy number. It might not seem a lot, but just go back and take a peek into your training log. Over the past 6 weeks, how many hours have you trained per week, on average? *Really* trained? Did you get in 12 hours a week? Or was it more like, on average, 4 or 5 hours a week?

Many of us are more likely to have one good week—or a few good days—followed by a string of days of inactivity or sparse activity. What trips us up? The list is legion.

Let's talk about some of those things. Maybe a new set of habits—or a new way to prioritize our tasks; or a reorientation of our days—might make for a training log with fewer blank spaces.

PERSONAL HABITS

If you're like me, you enjoy the finer things. And if you're *really* like me, you pay the price for your indulgences.

You have to make little sacrifices, and the older you get, the less resilient you are if you try to have it all. Me, I'm a red wine lover, and a sucker for a well constructed margarita. But I also have trouble sleeping the night through when I drink even one glass of wine, and I therefore have to be very careful if and when and how much I drink. Unless it's the night before a planned day off (and I don't often plan days off) I'll keep drinking to once or twice a week max—and even then it's one glass or one drink, no more.

Late nights are just verboten in my household. It's to bed by 9PM, and lights out after reading by 9:30 or 9:45. If I wake up groggy, I'm less likely to train early, so, I plan out in advance how I'm going to feel in the morning by making sure I'm completely sober and dead asleep before 10PM.

Yes, this means I can't watch the second half of the Laker game. And I'm a big Laker fan, so this means I bolt to espn.com first thing in the morning to see how it ended. But it's a choice I make: wake up early and fresh; or watch that second half and wake up worn and drug out.

JETTISON THE BALLAST

Are you too busy? I can say with confidence that many of you will answer *yes* because most folks are too busy, especially most triathletes. Do not interpret this as your permission slip to ignore your responsibilities to your family. You still must spend the quality time with your loved ones; perform your share of the honey-do items (and your fair share is probably all the items). And so forth.

It may be that part of what you must jettison in order to properly honor your family and yourself is triathlon. I know folks who, at least for a time, became one-sport athletes because they just did not have the time to be a triathlete. Otherwise, best to consider what's achievable with the time you've got.

For example, the wife and I are wondering whether we ought to try to buy another house as income property. A "fixer." Well, guess who's going to do the fixing? So, while it's a good idea on paper, it's probably a bad idea for my household, if I want to remain a triathlete.

Just as you go through your financial budget with a magnifying glass, cast your gaze on your time budget, and jettison what's killing your time. Maybe it's just a lot of time in front of the TV. Do you really have to watch *Lost*? Is it that important to know who wins *Britain's Got Talent*? Why don't we jettison that, and if we can find you that extra training time, maybe we'll see if you've got talent!

PRIORITIZE

Workouts are never second or third priority. They are either your first priority, or they're your last priority. Either workouts come first, or they're like that thorny file on your desk that keeps getting moved to the bottom of the pile: you'll keep putting your workouts off in favor of other "more urgent" matters. There are always more urgent matters, unless the workout becomes the most urgent matter.

Now, upon reading this the righteously indignant folks might list hypothetical scenarios pitting the "workout" against one or another crisis. *What if you're getting ready to go out on your lunchtime run and your wife calls and says she's going into labor!*

Of course emergencies are excluded from the "workout first" doctrine. The problem is this: if you don't prioritize your workouts in front of everything else, everything else will rise in priority and supplant the workout.

PEER GROUP

The highest ambition for Slowtwitch and everything on it—the Forum, the Calendar, the Training Log—is to create a sense of community; a virtual training enclave. Why were runners so fast in the 70s, and triathletes so fast in the 80s? They didn't have modern equipment, or modern coaching methods, or faster times to aspire to. But what they did have were enclaves.

What makes you do your workout, when you're tired? What gets you up when you want to spend the morning in bed? Or off your bum when you want to sit in the easy chair and watch the news? Maybe the knowledge that your training partner is coming over for a workout? Or at least he expects you to train, and awaits your result!

So join a tri club, or a masters swim team, or both. Reach out, make friends, find out who's training in your area. Take a leap of faith, even if you don't think you're fast enough. You'll probably surprise yourself. Sign up for challenges. Lock yourself in.

TRAINING MISCUES

Yes, there are things you do in training that will cut short your ability to maintain a daily regime. If you can't keep to, say, 75 percent or so of your predicted regime, it's not time to progress past base building.

Rather, one likely reason you're missing workouts is that you're not keeping faith with the intent of base building, which is to sacrifice intensity in order to generate and maintain a regular regime, and accumulate a critical mass of mileage.

One by-product of age is patience. The older one gets, the easier it is to subordinate intensity in favor of constancy. The older you get; the more years under your belt; the more easily you recognize the power of constancy, and the perils of intensity.

By *power of constancy* I mean the fitness, strength, durability, body composition, and endurance you build through daily training, even if that training is at low intensity. During every workout there should be an acknowledgment of tomorrow's workout. Is there anything you're doing now that might imperil what comes tomorrow?

Conversely, by *perils of intensity* I mean the stress you place on yourself via an overhard workout. Reasonable people who study such things can arm wrestle over the precision of terms like TSS, TRIMP, P_TRIMP, but all such metrics place a high premium on intensity. A very hard 45min run isn't just a little harder to recover from than an easy 45min run, it's a *lot* harder.

Of course, that harder run is also a lot more impactful on fitness. The question is this: is the impact on fitness only positive? Or is it negatively impactful on your ability to maintain a regular training regime?

As you seek to moderate your intensity, here's a tip: Treat with care your Masters Swim sessions. Yes, we're big believers in a robust swim schedule (there's nothing like getting out of the water among the leaders). But swimming, though it does not seem so high-intensity when you're engaged in it, is just about *always* high heart rate. I'm a big believer in joining a Masters swim team. Just know that there's always going to be the opportunity to throttle up your swimming intensity. Spend half your pool time actively thinking about keeping your intensity down.

EQUIPMENT

Consistency is not just a matter of finding a stasis in your body, your schedule, your family, your habits. There is also the mechanics of your equipment. The state of your equipment is something to consider. I'm a firm believer in the idea of enough tools, spare parts, spare [new] running shoes, spare goggles, so that you don't lose a workout (or two) because you have to wait for replacement equipment.

What if you break a spoke on a bike ride? How long will this set you back? What if you leave a set of swim goggles at the pool, and you go back to the lost and found and they're lost? Think ahead.

If it were me, I'd buy a second set of cheap training wheels before I bought my first set of race wheels. I'd buy a second set of goggles before my first set of speed laces. You've earned your workout time. Don't cheat yourself out of it.

THE NATURE OF ROUTINE

Finally, let's talk about what happens when you fall off the wagon. The more days off you take, the less likely you're going to feel like restarting your routine. So, I don't plan days off—there are no days off on my training schedule.

Of course, I do end up with days off. Why? Because in my busy life, days off take care of themselves. Sometimes, notwithstanding the placement of training atop my hierarchy of daily tasks, life impinges. Last week my father had surgery, and I was there at the hospital, which meant I wasn't working out. Day off.

This past week, the swim nicked me. My workout days included four doubles, all of which consisted of a swim and a land based activity. The swim workouts were all high heart rate (my mistake), and this forced a day off, which I recognized as a needed day off when I arose that morning. If you take it when you need it, then you only have to take one.

Still, the pressure is on to get back at it the following day. Each day you take off, the inertia is there to take yet another day off. Like water rushing to fill a void, your schedule, your routine, your job, your family, your chores, all rush fill up that void that only yesterday, or the day before, was filled by your training.

If you're not on a good routine now, then just start. Start today, or tomorrow. Get one day in. Just one workout. That gets the inertia going in the other direction. The second workout adds further energy to the flywheel, and the third workout, and the fourth, become easier. Once you've got four weeks, or six, or eight, of base under your belt, it's time to sift in a bit of speed.