The Opportunities and Perils of Racing Before You're 100% Ready

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Early in the season, many triathletes who are preparing for Ironman or Ironman 70.3 races later in the season have a series of preparation races on their schedules. We all try to plan our training so we're optimally prepared for race days, but sometimes athletes, especially time-crunched athletes, get derailed and lose valuable training time because the kids get sick, work gets out of control, and basically life gets in the way. Or athletes choose to jump into races before they are prepared, just because the opportunity presents itself. Two questions arise from these scenarios: should you bother entering a race if you're not ready for it? And what should you do if you're in a race and it's clear your fitness isn't where you wanted it to be?

Race Or Stay Home?

For the most part I think there is value to competing even if you're not 100% ready. Racing when you're not at your strongest can be very helpful for developing the resilience endurance athletes need to get through rough patches during long and difficult races or miserable environmental conditions. There is always something you can focus on and learn during a competition, and shifting your mentality from a results-based valuation to a learning-based (or fitness-based) valuation can make the event productive irrespective of your final finishing time. However, you should consider your preparedness in relation to the race distance and pace yourself accordingly.

If you're reasonably fit but not on top of your game going into a Sprint or Olympic-distance triathlon – events that will take most athletes less than 3 hours to complete, you'll be slower than normal but you'll get to the finish injury-free. I think you can safely enter these competitions if you're at about 70% of your expected fitness, meaning you have the endurance to cover the distance and maintain proper form/technique, but you're not going to be very fast.

At the half- and full-Ironman distances it's more important to be at a higher percentage of your expected fitness (at least 85%) before competing because the increased duration means your form/technique is much more likely to break down well before the finish. That doesn't mean you've completed 70 or 85% of your scheduled workouts, but rather that your sustainable power output on the bike and sustainable pace in the water and on the run, have reached at least 70 or 85% of your goal output/pace.

Competing With Limited Fitness

The best way to handle racing with less fitness than you'd like is to reframe the competition as a training experience. Go into the event with the goal of using it as a great workout and an opportunity to focus on particular aspects of competition. For instance, this may be a good time to experiment with a different transition setup or a new starting strategy for the swim. Flipping your expectations from "a great race today" to "a great training opportunity for tomorrow" can be very liberating. The fitness you have is all you're going to get for today's race, and beating yourself up about it won't accomplish anything. Allow this mental shift to alleviate the pressure you put on yourself and the guilt about not being completely race-ready.

Do not, however, make the mistake of trying to use nutrition to overcompensate for a lower fitness level. "Calories cannot create fitness." That's what I heard recently as I was passing by the office of CTS Premier Coach Jason Koop. Later in the day I asked him what he meant, and he replied that one of his athletes had jumped into a half-Ironman on a whim, well before he was prepared for that distance. Predictably, the athlete struggled, but afterwards he was still perplexed by the relatively poor performance. He told Koop that he didn't understand why the race was so hard, because, as he said, "I kept eating and eating, but it just didn't seem to help."

What Jason Koop told his athlete was dead-on: Calories cannot create fitness where it doesn't exist in the first place. The athlete's program was on the way to building 70.3 triathlon fitness, but he jumped the gun and entered a race far earlier than planned. His race-day response, though, was as predictable as his sub-par performance; as coaches we regularly see athletes who attempt to overcome a lack of preparation with an overload of calories. Essentially they are mistaking the feeling of exhaustion for the feeling of bonking (running low on blood sugar). The common solution for bonking is to rapidly get carbohydrates, fluids, and electrolytes into the system, and if you recognize the signs (fatigue, trouble focusing, nausea) early, you can often bring yourself back from the brink. But if you entered an event inadequately prepared, you can't make up for a lack of training by eating more and hoping the added fuel will give you greater endurance, power, or speed. The same is true of electrolyte tablets/capsules. Electrolytes are a game-changer for endurance events or for any situation where you will lose electrolytes through sweat. But they don't take the place of training, and won't make you faster or give you more endurance. What they will do is prevent you from nutritionally sabotaging your hard work.

If you're racing on fitness that's not quite where you want it to be, don't resort to stuffing yourself with food. Instead of providing the energy you're looking for, dumping food on the problem is going to be like piling too much wood on a barely-lit fire; you'll smother the very performance you're trying to ignite. When it's your fitness level, and neither calories nor hydration that is the limiting factor to your performance, stick to your original race-day nutrition plan, settle into a pace you can sustain with good form, keep moving forward, and focus on the process of racing instead of your position in the race.