

## Breakthrough Performance Training

In this article I want to talk about an area where I have been fortunate enough to have had some significant coaching experience: Training adults to go from ordinary, to extraordinary athletic performances. I have had the unique opportunity to work with and train under some of the top coaches and elite athletes in the sport of triathlon, as well as in the sports of swimming, cycling and running.

Although as a kid, I was more likely to be found in the library than on the playing field (with the singular exception of riding my bike everywhere, even after I got my license). So my passion for triathlon and all things associated with it are somewhat unexpected. But this fortunate find has been part of me for over 15 years now, including more than 10 years of coaching. Below are some random thoughts that I and my fellow coaches have noticed over the years.

- Surprisingly, if you are someone who never thought of themselves as an athlete, or if you are an athlete who is over 30 and is looking for a sport where maturity can be an asset, **triathlon can be a fantastic find**. This is a single sport comprised of three individual sports, a lot of equipment, and a number of variables that all need to be mastered to pull off the perfect race.
- **January is the month where we can come up with bad ideas**. #1 - the desire for an "intensity block" - nearly always from an athlete who's been sick, or injured, or a.w.o.l. in the last few weeks. It must be an occupational hazard that triathletes dream up crazy stuff when they are flat on their backs. #2 - requests for performance validation by training at higher intensities. To those athletes I'll remind you that "you can only sharpen the base that you've created" (@alan couzens) and heart rate is a proxy for stress.
- **If you want to 'improve your performance' (vs. winning the workout)**, then you need to be following a long term plan designed to help you achieve your objective. Mindlessly blasting yourself because you're scared that you've detrained a little is a complete waste of time. And let's not forget the definition of insanity.....
- The commonly agreed upon physical requirements for athletic success are:
  - The ability to apply force in a sport specific manner
  - The capacity to sustain the application of force
  - The skill to perform the activity quickly

Joe Friel calls these forces, **endurance and speed**. Remember that force needs to be specific; and speed is quickness, not velocity. To those three I would add - **durability** - the capacity to sustain load over time. To enhance our durability, in the winter, we can:

- Avoid material weight gain
  - Improve whole-body strength and flexibility via yoga and strength training
  - Limit losses of lean body mass
  - Stick to a high frequency, but low volume/moderate intensity, run program
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- The commonly agreed upon **psychological requirements for athletic success** are:
    - motivation

- coachability
  - confidence
  - concentration and task orientation
  - anxiety management and coping skills
  - superior arousal control
- Most athletes will be tempted to maintain their late season fitness. However, if you **relax and allow your body to recover while you rebuild your strength**, and focus on the basic skills needed for triathlon, then you are guaranteed to get back there. Consistency is key. Trying to keep performing at a higher volume or higher intensity and racing year round will lead to illness, injury or burnout. So long as you don't allow yourself to get fat and lazy, you'll not only return to last season's performance, you will be giving your body the chance to perform even better. It's normal, but irrational, to expect that all the training gains will be gone unless you take drastic winter action.
  - **Do not allow too many weeks to go by without a structured training plan if you hope to improve your performance for next year.** You will find yourself playing catch-up when you come back to training and will miss many of the gains that low intensity, aerobic training provides. By rushing your fitness, you'll come back to "decent" fitness but will limit your ability to breakthrough to a new level.
  - **Determine your race goals for next year and stick to the plan.** Don't add random races because they sound like fun or because others are doing them, especially if they will interfere with the overall goal. If the goal changes, communicate with your coach, but don't keep moving the goal-posts because you'll never hit them. Racing every weekend is a very bad idea if you want to be excellent, if you want to be doing this for a while and if you don't want to get passed by your more disciplined competitors. Over-racing will seem like a great idea until it doesn't.
  - **Work in a way designed to improve the specific result you want to achieve.** The more ambitious your goals, the more you need a lot of general preparation. This is the best way to absorb the training load and prepare for the sessions required for success. If you are racing or doing high intensity training all through February and March, you will likely be too tired or too beat up by June to perform the high volume, high intensity training required for your breakthrough.
  - **Early in the season is the best time to spend working on your weaknesses and on the areas where you "lose the race".** If you are already a strong cyclist, spending the winter seeking to improve your FTP by 5% might be a complete waste of time. *You will never be able to train your strengths to overcome what you are not putting into training to improve your weaknesses.* Instead of looking for marginal gains in the area where you are already near your peak, you will be better off with a few really big swim weeks if you are getting crushed in the swim; or getting strong, if big training efforts wear you down; or improving your run by following a specific run plan followed by lots of flexibility training; or just about anything else that's important to the fundamentals of triathlon performance. Talk it over with your coach to determine where you need to improve.

Endurance training and ultra-racing is about the strength of our fundamentals combined with the total load that we can handle. Your best competition knows what needs to be done. Do you?

#### REFERENCES:

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