

## HOW TO BALANCE YOUR TRIATHLON PLAN THIS YEAR

By Rob Maxwell, M.A.

I've always believed that the middle of the road is typically where the best decision making takes place. Not too far to either extreme. I can't say I've always followed this, but I can say that I think it's the best plan for success. What am I talking about? I'm talking about triathlon training. It's warming up outside, and it's time to think about all those great triathlons that will be here soon in the state of Florida. We have some great sprint and long course races to prepare for. So it's time to get busy. What I meant by all the middle-of-the-road stuff is this: Some believe in just winging their training. They just do what they feel like doing, or what their friends feel like doing—that's pretty far to one extreme. And others try to figure out some of the highly technical new training plans that are in the books written by pros or experts. Now I'm an exercise physiologist, and even *I* am boggled by the complexity that some of these plans offer. Trying to follow that (completely) is going very far to the other extreme. (Don't get me wrong... There are some really good plans out there). What I've always tried to do in my work is be the middle person who deciphers what's really important in all the science and studies, and what's overdone. I take what I think is really the meat and potatoes, and bring that to my clients. This has always been successful in my personal training business, and now I try to do the same thing for the endurance athletes I coach. Keep in mind that it can be hard to figure out very technical plans that may work well for the PROS. They often have somebody (most of the time) to figure out a lot of this for them. But remember, the difference between a good training plan and a super, high tech plan isn't what you think—it may or may not lead to a very small percentage difference in your race performance. For PROS, where seconds matter, that matters, but for 99.9% of us, good will get it done and you'll enjoy it along the way.

For this article, I'll break down what most coaches and writers use for different segments of a tri season (base, build, peak, recovery), and be the interpreter of what you really need to know to be successful there.

### **BASE**

What is the essence of this period? This can be called several different things, but the bottom line is this is the time to get back on the bike and/or back in the water and/or back to the run. The exercise science principals that apply here are **THE RULE OF SPECIFICITY** and **SAIDS**. The Rule of Specificity states that to become fit at something specifically, you have to do that something—specifically. So running alone will not provide the training for cycling and swimming. You must do all three. This is the time to start that again. And the other rule is **SAIDS**, or Specific Adaptations to Imposed Demands. In short, what this means is you have to start back the activity and slowly increase your volume on an incremental basis. The body must adjust to the new training demands. The goal of this stage is to allow your muscles, joints, and cardiovascular system get used to the training load. You want to start to build a foundation to build on. This stage is typically a month long, but can be even longer, depending on how much time you've taken off and what you did in the off-season.

- **FREQUENCY:** The frequency of training for this period does not have to be too structured. You're going to want to swim, cycle and run regularly each week, but an exact set-up at this point isn't that important. Just get out the goggles, dust off your saddle, and break in those shoes!
- **INTENSITY:** Before I state what intensity is best for this time period, you have to make sure that you're following an accurate gauge of intensity. As a general rule of thumb, the workouts should be less than 75% of your maximum heart rate, or easy to comfortable on a perceived rate of exertion scale.
- **TIME (DURATION):** This is not the time for long workouts. Sure, it's okay to do a long day, but again, the point is to get your body ready for what's to come. There really is not a set "best" duration for any stage. The important thing, no matter what you end up with regarding duration, is to practice SAIDS and build up slowly. A good rule of thumb is no more than a 5% to 10% increase each week. Again, simply get back into regular multi-sport workouts.

## **BUILD**

The next stage of training is simply building up your volume to where your aerobic foundation is as fit as it can be before you start adding speed, and to make sure that your muscles, skeleton and soft tissues can handle all the loads. It's this stage that you maximize your endurance. How far? Again, there really is not a best number for volume. I will say that many athletes make the mistake of piling on the miles thinking it leads to speed. After a certain point, it does not. For longer course athletes, you're going to want to build up to more volume than short course, but again it's SAIDS that's important. Build to let your body catch up. This period can be anywhere from 1 to 3 months. The longer your goal race(s) is (are), the more time you want to spend in this stage. During this time, it's also a good idea to start a brick workout (Bike/Run) one time per week so your body gets used to running off of the bike. Remember the rule of specificity—you have to train specifically for the event you're going to race.

- **FREQUENCY:** During this stage, you do want to set a regular schedule for all three of the disciplines. Each mode should become more regular and consistent. There really is no best schedule for all 3 modes. Some studies demonstrate that you must do at least 3 days a week of each mode. Other studies contradict that and point to as long as you're cross training, that may not be the case. I believe it's different for everybody, and as long as your training is regular and consistent, it will work. I've witnessed athletes perform well by doing just one day a week on a certain mode, and I've seen athletes perform well doing far greater. Just be consistent.
- **INTENSITY:** This is still an easy training cycle. You do not build endurance by training hard. You merely have to put in the time. And if you're putting in the time and doing much of it hard, that's a recipe for overtraining. You can throw in some speedplay (unstructured bouts of speed) during a workout or two during this time for fun, but this stage is simply about going easy and building up your base. Easy would be defined by doing less than 75% max heart rate in this stage and/or a perceived rate of exertion of easy to comfortable.
- **TIME (VOLUME):** The million dollar question... How many miles should I run or bike? How many yards in the pool? Guess what? That matters less than you think.

There is not a set magic number. The longer your goal race is, the more volume you will need to do. A strategy for a long workout (can be defined in many ways) is a good idea and works well, but again, how far is very subjective. Just remember more is NOT always better. (Great read—look up the Point of Diminishing Returns—an article by Dr. Jack Daniels). A good rule of thumb is when you feel like you have the confidence to finish the distance of the race you want to race. I didn't say you're confident in how fast you'd go (that's the goal of the next stage). I said finish it. If you know you have the endurance to finish, I would say your base is built.

## PEAK

Some people call this RACE PHASE. It's really the same thing. The bottom line of this period is to add speed to that great foundation of endurance you've built up. This is when you work on your goal time. This is when you work on getting as fit and fast as you think you can. This time period, like the others, varies. For some short course people who race once a month or more, it can be through the entire tri season, along with a recovery week after races. For long course it can be a few months leading up to the big day. In this stage, you still want to practice a brick workout at least one time per week.

- **FREQUENCY:** This pretty much doesn't change from the previous stage. If anything, the frequency can be cut back just slightly to make up for the increase in intensity that comes along with this period. But for the most part, the consistent, regular workouts that you established in the base period needs to be maintained. You do want to think about organization of the workouts now. You do not want to do back-to-back hard workouts. I am also against athletes doing hard bikes on the days after hard runs or vice versa. You still use a lot of the same muscle groups that need to recover. A nice frequency of alternating days of hard/easy works best.
- **INTENSITY:** This is what getting faster is all about. If you want to go faster, you have to go fast. There is no other way around it. Despite what you may have heard or read or believe, you will not get faster by simply piling on the miles. The Exercise Physiology lesson here is that in order to get faster, you have to raise your **ANAEROBIC THRESHOLD**, and that is the point at which you go from being aerobic to anaerobic. **The higher the anaerobic threshold is, the faster you go—period.** And this is true for any racing distance. The key again is knowing it or having some way to accurately measure your intensity. It's hard to get faster if you're guessing. A rule of thumb for Anaerobic Threshold is 85% of your maximum heart rate. But that's not a definite. The AT is variable, and can be as low as 60% max heart in some de-conditioned athletes and as high as the upper 90 percentile for people like Lance Armstrong. There are many different ways to set up your speed workouts, and I can't talk about them all here. But in short, you need to do some form of intervals that are above your anaerobic threshold. I recommend, for the most part, doing one day a week of speed work for each discipline. Be aware of overtraining. How much? Again, no exact answer, but a good rule of thumb is 10% of your volume. So if you're running 20 miles a week, then 2 miles worth of speedwork would suffice.

## RECOVERY

The final stage is recovery. As the name implies, it's the time to recover. To be your best, your body does need a period of renewal. Don't be macho and think you'll get better by slaving to the grind. You won't! You'll get better by letting all your muscles and central nervous system recover. If you're doing short course, this period can be an easy week after each week that you race. If you've been training for one big long course race, you'll want to take much longer than a week to adequately recover—maybe all off-season. The key during this time is to do very little duration and no intensity. After a race, take a full day or so off, and after that just do some brief, low intensity workouts. Listen to your body. If you're sore, take even more full days off. The bottom line is—use this time period to get yourself mentally and physically charged back up.

I hope I've been able to sum up what you need to do and think about to set up your tri season training. I know I didn't offer specifics regarding exact workout durations, and I have my reasons for that. I'd rather see endurance athletes really discover what's important and why they do what they do versus how much/how hard. You do have to discover what works best for you, and maybe understanding what is really important about each stage will help you determine what your best plan should be.