

PRE-SEASON TRAINING

It's that time of year when you start feeling the itch of getting back in that saddle and back in the pool. Maybe in this past off-season you worked on a few weaknesses. Maybe you took the time to make yourself stronger in the weight room. Maybe you decided to really emphasize running, and run a marathon or PR at your favorite distance. In any event, it's a new year, and the new year brings pre-season for triathlons into focus.

SET GOALS

The first thing you need to do in the pre-season is set your goals. It's very hard to reach your best or really even feel happy about your training without clear goals. It's really not best to simply do what all the other triathletes are doing and mimic their plans. You may end up doing a lot of the same training together, but first you must have your own specific plan, and your plan starts with your goals. What is it that you really want to do this year? Do you want to tackle sprints and be faster than the year before? Is it your goal to do an Olympic distance triathlon for the first time, a ½ Ironman, or even an Ironman? Maybe you want to push your limits and try to make Nationals, or even Worlds? Maybe you want to do both short course and long course races? You can do both. Some people like to try to peak for sprints early in the season, and then up their volume and peak for an Ironman. This is very doable, but knowing this ahead of time is wise.

BUILD YOUR BASE

After you've set your base, it's time to get to work. But before you do, you need to understand what you're trying to accomplish. I'm not a believer in just going through the motions or doing what others are doing. And having your own plan and agenda starts with understanding what you're really trying to accomplish. The pre-season for multi-sporters is about building your base. A lot of people talk about building base, but do they really know what it means? Simply put, building your base is preparing your body for the greater rigors you'll be experiencing in competition or training for competition (speed). You can't or shouldn't think about speed before the foundation is set. And what is the foundation? First, it's the aerobic system and all of its components. This means we must condition our SLOW TWITCH muscle fibers so they are as fit as they can be. Much of the time, the slow twitchers are neglected when athletes tend to do all speed work or hard workouts, which use more of the fast twitch muscle fibers (either type IIa or IIb). This is a huge error, because the bulk of endurance events requires using the slow twitch muscle fibers. Another thing you want to build back up aerobically during the pre-season is the cardiovascular system of the heart and lungs. They also need to be brought up to speed. Another goal of the pre-season base building process is to get your joints prepared for the hard workouts to come. The soft tissue of the joints builds up too, and the joints need to be coaxed into action so they are stronger and can handle the stresses that are to follow. So it's a simple question: Is your body ready for the rigors of hard training? When it is, you can start to build speed. A rule of thumb is a good two months of base building before you bring speed into the equation. I always advise my trainees that it's okay to do a few races here or there during this time period, if you think you want to or you're up to them. You simply aren't training (or shouldn't be) for these particular races. They are simply training races to gauge how far along you're coming. A

lot of triathletes like to mix in some duathlons in the early months to have some fun and test themselves. This certainly is fine, as long as they are not made a priority. A short course athlete should be planning on racing his or her best in the middle of the summer, either July or August when these races peak, and a long distance athlete should be looking to peak in the fall. So don't rush it and start hitting the speed early, or you will burn out and not race your best when it counts. The good news for those who simply don't like easy, base building workouts, is that once the base is built (especially for short course), you can back way off these types of workouts and maybe only do one or so per sport each week during the season.

HOW TO BUILD THE BASE?

FREQUENCY:

There really is no magic number in regards to how many days per week to do each sport in pre-season, or any other part of the year. Most all the research supports that you must do at least 3 workouts per week to get a training effect. So for triathletes, that's 3 X 3 sports = 9 workouts. There is also research that supports the cross training theory to treat all 3 modes as one and divide up the frequency in a way that works best for you. Like everything else, there is ample research to back both claims. With that in mind, I believe that it has mostly to do with how much time you have to train and how much you want to train. I can tell you from experience and research that there is a point of diminishing returns, meaning you don't get that much more out of 6 workouts than you do from 3, and you often simply burn out. Finding the right balance is up to you, how well your body recovers, and how much systematic overload you use. My advice would be to start with 3 each and build in more, based on how much time you have and what you enjoy doing. If you love to cycle, it is obviously much better on your body if you cycle every day versus run, so that would be fine. But just don't think that the added volume is the answer to a much faster cycling split. It may help a little, but remember: Those Tour de France guys get paid to ride every day, and have massages, nutritionists, and trainers to help them recover after each workout. And they're in the Tour more due to their genetics than their training.

INTENSITY:

"How hard" (intensity) is the most important variable of your base training. **IT MUST BE EASY!** Painfully easy. Many of my athletes get very impatient with me during this time of year because they want to GO GO GO, and I keep reeling them in, explaining that there is a method to the madness. We all love to work hard... The workouts go by faster. But we must be disciplined. Very simply, the slow twitch muscle fibers need low intensity training to get a training effect. These muscles hypertrophy too, and as they do, their mitochondria get bigger and can later utilize more oxygen. If the training is too high, you're using your fast twitch muscle fibers, so your endurance fibers get neglected. If this happens, you won't recover as well later on, and you will especially struggle in longer races. A HR around 65% and lower of your VO2 max is the HR you want to be around to ensure you're at an aerobic pace. If you use anaerobic threshold for your intensity gauge (and really know it), then use 85% of your AT as the guide for a ceiling of aerobic training. If you want to use pace as a guide, the following pace numbers appear to work well: A pace of 1-2 minutes per mile slower than you could run a particular distance is a good rule of thumb. The less fit you are, the closer you want to be to the 2:00 pace. So, if you run a 4 mile race in 32:00 (8:00 miles), and that was your best effort, then you want to run your easy 4 mile runs in 36-40 minutes (9:00-10:00 miles). And you would do

this all the way up as far as your longest distance you're training for. If you race a 10-miler in 1:10:00 (7:00 miles), then your easy, long day of 10 miles would be 80-90 minutes (8:00-9:00 miles). With cycling, you'd want to use a 4-5 MPH rule of thumb. So if you average 22 MPH in a 12 mile sprint triathlon (the fastest you can go), then you'd do that same 12 miles for an easy aerobic day at an 18 MPH clip. With swimming, you can use a 400 meter time to determine this pace. Simply take 1:00-2:00 off of the time you could race 400 meters in, and use that for an easy pace. So if your best 400 is 7:00, a possible good easy pace for you would to do 8:00-9:00 per 400. Again, the less fit (or less talented) swimmer you are, the more you'll want to gravitate towards the slower times, because good swimmers will have higher ATs for swimming and be more aerobic at higher speeds. But these paces are guesstimates. The best way to know for sure is to know your VO2 max and/or anaerobic threshold. And if you're using AT, it will be different for each sport.

TIME (DURATION):

The pre-season is the time that you start to set how far you need to go. With triathlons, there are many different distances. Your volume will depend on what distance race you're choosing. If you're planning on doing all long course races (half or full Ironman), there really is no need to start building your long day way up in the pre-season (early months of the year) unless you're doing a longer distance race in the spring or early summer. My advice to long distance athletes is to simply build your base like the short course people would, and then start adding to the long days about 3-5 months prior to the big event. If you're a constant "Ironman" then this advice probably doesn't apply, because you may have kept your base pretty high all year. But for the rest of the long distance athletes who are planning a long race in the fall, I would recommend building your base like the short distance folks, and simply start adding 10% to your long distance days starting in the early summer. Again, this advice is general, but the point is there is no reason for you to be doing mega long distances when the event is 7-8 months away. There is plenty of time for that. As for as how much volume to do, it really depends on where you are. If you haven't been doing any swimming or cycling or running, then start with very brief workouts for the mode you've laid off of, and build 10% each week. If you're doing sprints only, you don't need as much volume.

GUIDELINES FOR SPRINT TRIS:

MODE	BASE	LONG DAY
Swim	20-30 minutes	unnecessary
Bike	30-40 minutes	50-60 minutes
Run	20-30 minutes	45 minutes

GUIDELINES FOR OLYMPIC DISTANCE TRIS:

MODE	BASE	LONG DAY
Swim	30-40 minutes	40-50 minutes
Bike	60-75 minutes	1 ½ to 2 hours
Run	40-50 minutes	60-75 minutes

These are all just estimates of durations I've used successfully in training with athletes. A lot of it comes back to knowing just how much volume your body responds best to, but this is a good educated guesstimate to start. And if you like to use miles (which is fine - any way of tracking duration is fine, minutes is simply easier), then you would approximate the miles to the above times.

Have a great pre-season and don't skip this important leg of the triathlon!