

STRENGTH TRAINING FOR ENDURANCE ATHLETES

If you've read the Sandpiper for a few years, you know that I've written about this before. And don't worry, I haven't gotten that lazy. I didn't re-tread that article, this is a new one. In fact, other than the basics, I can't tell you what I stressed in the other article.

I'm writing about this topic again because it's so important. Why? It is a sure way to lessen your chances of getting injured. And if you don't get injured, you have more training volume per year. People ask me all the time why I don't get hurt, and the answer is plain and simple, I'm strong. I work out and keep my body up to speed. I also operate on high volume. It's funny, but many who read my articles think that I train the minimum because I preach quality over quantity, but I actually do a lot more than I suggest. Why? I guess you can't coach yourself is the only answer I have. In all four marathons I've done, I end up doing many more miles than my training partners and trainees, and consequently do worse. The only point of this is to point out that I do a lot of volume and I **don't get hurt**. I'm sure you are aware that being able to recover may be the most important part of getting faster, fitter. Would you get faster, fitter if you could hammer hard every day? Believe it or not, the answer is YES. But what is wrong with that equation? You can't do that everyday because, even though metabolically you are improving, your body is breaking down. Strength training helps keep your body from breaking down, so a greater frequency of workouts is possible.

Another reason I'm writing about this is because strength training is being written about so much these days, and I believe it is being misrepresented in the majority of articles I've read. In short, this results in over-complication of training. Studies are done every day at universities. Students are required to take part in, if not conduct their own studies. So there ends up being numerous different situations studied. In exercise physiology, every scenario has been looked at. So much so that it became the running joke of us student as to what study we were going to investigate each week.

Is this good? Not always. This has occurred with strength training. All I'm reading about is strength training specificity for endurance athletes, and all sports really. But all the "authors" have done is pull out some studies that have already been done (and for every one done, there is one to disprove it) and over-magnetized to present a good read. Not to get off track, but this is a related story. About 8 years ago, I went and saw Dr. Stephan Fleck speak. He is one of the "founders" of PERIODIZATION. So as you might imagine, this topic was hot and all of us in the room wanted to hear from him the importance of this topic. And don't get me wrong, it is. But when asked point blank about periodization and how to set up an elaborate 6 month training plan of "base", "build", "peak", and "recover", Dr. Fleck stated "You know all we really meant to point out with all that research is that your body needs change and rest". We were all thinking, "Is it really that simple?" He says yes. True story. So for all my trainees who have asked me to draw out a 6 month plan and I won't, that is why. It's always better, in my estimation, to take it week to week and tackle things as they come up, and apply enough rest and systematic overload into the weekly plan. I think there is a lot of "just enough information to make you dangerous" going on in the world of giving coaching advice.

So, back to strength training. It's the same thing. Yes, there have been some studies that indicate that if you specifically do a strength exercise that mimics a movement in your sport, for example a tricep kickback that mimics the arm extension in swimming, that it may improve swimming. There has also been even more research that backs specificity in general, which means if you want to get faster in swimming, then swim. Why is doing this sport specific strength training workout a problem? Because it's a waste of time. No offense to Dave Scott fans (former IM winner, now author), but his strength workouts drive me nuts. He writes frequently about strength training in the triathlon mags and in a couple of books. There is no question that Mr. Scott is an incredible athlete and one of the greatest triathletes of all time, but sorry Dave, when it comes to strength training, you've got it all wrong. He prints this elaborate routine of cords, bands, and all of his exercises mimic some form of triathlon movement. I think if you did one of his routines, you might get the workout done in about 2 hours. I can tell you from somebody who used to have to get up on stage and be judged, for the amount of muscle on my physique, even I didn't strength train for longer than an hour, and for triathletes who are already lacking for time, this is totally crazy.

I've said this before. All of this really isn't that hard. Yes, I'm glad that exercise science is coming into this sport. But we do take it too far. I'm glad that it's not just ex-runners doing all of the coaching these days, but there should be a happy medium. An example of how strength training works for triathletes is this: If you do an exercise for the quads (for example, a leg extension), and you overload (add more weight or reps) each week for 3 months (for example when you started your off-season you could do 1 set of 12 with 50 pounds and when you ended 3 months later you could do 1 set of 12 with 80 pounds), your quad "hypertrophied" (got bigger), and by it getting bigger it is not only stronger in the gym as evidenced by your weights, it's stronger climbing hills. I personally am strong on hills in both running and cycling. Why? I have big quads. And by doing an overall program to keep the major muscle groups strong, you'll be less likely to get injured, so you can specifically swim, bike and run.

Forget about all the sports specificity for strength training, including plyometrics (unless you want to get hurt), and get back to basics. We know that performing one set of 8-12 reps taken to outright failure and overloaded, whenever possible, is the way to make a muscle stronger. Train all of the 10 major muscles groups (glutes, quads, hamstrings, chest, lats, delts, biceps, triceps, abs, low back) and focus on quality. I personally do the leg press, leg extension, leg curl, pull up, dip, bench press, pulldown, overhead press, bicep curls, ab machine and low back (12 exercises). I do 12 reps to fatigue, and this routine takes about 15 minutes. And I don't have any trouble with lack of strength.