

April, 2002

TO REACH YOUR GOAL(S), YOU HAVE TO HAVE A PLAN!

By Rob Maxwell, M.A.

A lot of us start running, cycling, or swimming because we feel like it is a great way to improve our health and fitness. Or maybe we start because we simply like to do these activities. Often, we go out and train because we want to. Or we go out and train because we feel like we should, and later we feel good. These are all good reasons, but personally, I feel better about my physical fitness, and consequently myself when I have a goal and strive to reach that goal. I think most of us who train do have goals. A goal can be specific as winning your age group at a race or qualifying for a dream event, or it could be loose, like losing weight or being fit. A goal is a goal, and any goal is a good thing. But once you have a goal, you need to have a plan if you want to be sure your goal will be realized.

Often people follow other people's plans to reach their goals. They'll run a workout the friend is doing or follow what someone else is doing to reach his own goal. This basic "follow others" plan might help you reach a goal if the goal is to lose weight, stay fit, or make friends, but it won't maximize your chances to reach your own specific goals. Your fitness plan must be tailored to your own strengths and weaknesses and be specific to what you want to accomplish.

Coming from an exercise physiologist, this may sound strange, but the fact is people in my field have over-complicated the training for endurance events. There is too much debate about high intensity/short duration training versus long slow distance training. There is debate over heart rate training-how or if you should. I've seen all the studies, and I can tell you that all ways of training work have merit; basically, you have to pick a road that makes sense to you and stick to it. There is no better way to see what works than trial and error. If you're getting faster and feeling good, guess what—it's working! But I believe you have to have a plan of some kind and stick to it. And it should be personal.

There really are only two "rules" in exercise physiology that nobody debates and that stand the test of time. They are the Law of Specificity and the Overload Principle. Both of these should be considered when making your own plan. Basically, the law of specificity states that you should match your training to whatever activity you're trying to improve. In other words, to be a better cyclist, you must bike. You can't swim and expect it to improve your running. The closer you match your training to your racing, the better the training effect will be. So if you were to use a triathlete as an example, the best training would be for him/her to combine swimming, biking, and running in the same

April, 2002

workout. This also speaks of duration and intensity. If you are going to do shorter races, you must make your training specific to this, Sprint triathlons (if done right) are above the anaerobic threshold. Marathons (again, if done right) are events that are below the anaerobic threshold. So what does specificity say about this? Emphasize those systems in training. There is really no reason for a sprint distance triathlete or 5k specialist to do long slow distance training on the weekends. The systems don't match. Short course specialists, if they want to excel, really need to save their energy for lots of hard training and intervals. Marathoners have less of a need to put in a lot of anaerobic work. But the key is to pick your goal and direct your training to that. So a 5k specialist would be better off to jump in a 5k every weekend and strive to get faster, while the marathoner puts in a nice easy/moderate 15 miles on the week end. Both are doing what they should be doing. The problem comes when you don't know what you should be doing, so sometimes you may jump in with the sprint guys and go hard, and the other times you go long with the marathoners. To reach your potential, you must pick a road. I think you've got the idea: If you're doing shorter races, do shorter but harder training. If you're doing more distance race, do more training that is specific to this. But don't get carried away with miles, and don't forget about intervals. Even you distance guys want to raise your anaerobic threshold.

Next, when planning your training, emphasize the Overload Principle. You cannot do the same thing over and over and expect to get better. The body loves homeostasis. It will stay right where it is unless you force it to improve. The body adjusts to whatever workload you give it, so unless you turn up the jets, it will stay right where it is. You must always build in a system of improvement. If you're doing short course events, this means you must push yourself harder each week. So a triathlete could work on decreasing his/her rest time on the intervals as the pool or make sure his/her 400's are improving at the track each week. On the bike, it could mean pushing intervals faster than before, or find a more challenging group to ride with. In any event, as long as you're being pushed to go harder than you have before, you're accomplishing overload and you will get more fit. Distance guys need to practice overload when training for a marathon. Each week you should add % more volume until you reach the point where you want to be at on the big day. This point is different for everybody, but as long as you're adding a little more time to the runs on a regular basis, you are experiencing overload. Another key variable with overload is a systematic increase. You never want to go way beyond what you've done before. Just add a little each week. Don't go from doing 1:45 quarters at the track to trying to do 1:30's. You'll only get a few done. And you'll burn out. Instead, take a few seconds off each one every week.

Now you have an idea of how to build a plan. Train specifically to your goal and always try to make small improvements. If you do this, you'll reach it.