

TRAIN WITH PURPOSE

The sport of triathlon has really gone high tech. This is true for the equipment we use to race with, and the plans and aids we use to train with. There are elaborate periodization plans out there that can build you for 6 months all the way up to an Ironman. But it seems that through this we've lost a little bit of our common sense with training. I am an Exercise Physiologist, and I've always tried to bridge the gap between what is being written or talked about and what my clients really need to know and do. One of the better compliments I get from trainees is that I'm able to explain what they really need, because they are so confused after reading the popular magazines and books. Really, all I do differently is I don't overthink what my trainees need. I see what they might be "lacking", and I set up a plan to improve in the areas they need most improvements in. This is simply training with a purpose. I see this done far too little these days. Many triathletes get on the same generic triathlon training plan (even for an IM), and sometimes they hit their goals, and sometimes don't. I've always believed the fastest route from point A to point B is a straight line.

Before I go on, I do want to touch on something I think is very important, and that is the role of genetics. Genetics plays a role in just how fast of a triathlete and runner you can become. We can all get faster and more fit, but those who are winning the races are genetically gifted at their sport. But this is not an article on genetics, so I'll simply point out that the genetic factors regarding triathlon and running are what muscle fiber type you are mostly made up of, your VO2 max (the gold standard for endurance athletes, and is only 5% trainable), and even what body type you are. These things you can do little about, so know that going into any training plan and you shouldn't get frustrated or injured. How do you know how genetically gifted you are? Very simple—how did you do in your first few races? Up near the front of the entire field, in the middle, or happy to survive?

How do you currently evaluate your training and racing? Racing is a great place to evaluate your fitness levels. When I begin working with triathletes who are unsure if their current training plans are correct or not, I tell them very simply, "If you're happy with how your racing is going, you're doing everything just fine. If you're not, you have to make changes. It's that simple". When evaluating your training, the key is to know what's wrong. Many triathletes blame their pitfalls on not enough miles. Not enough miles seems to be the general diagnosis for whatever goes wrong with a race or a string of races. I didn't hit my marathon goal—didn't do enough miles. I blew up in the Ironman—didn't do enough miles. I didn't place in that sprint tri—must be lack of miles. I didn't PR the last 5K—miles must be down. You get the point. I'm here to tell you that there is more to overload in your training than miles. Building your miles will build your endurance. It will NOT make you faster. And typically, "blowing up" scenarios, and especially the time goals mentioned above, are products of speed, not endurance. If you "blew up", that means you tried to run a pace that was over your head. What does this have to do with endurance? If you would have slowed down to a slower pace, you would have finished—hence your endurance (a product of miles) is fine.

Proper diagnosis of your particular pitfalls with your racing is critical. Sit down after each race or after a string of training sessions and examine them objectively. Think about what could be better. Did you not reach your goal time? Again, this is a product of speed. And if it's speed,

you're talking primarily your anaerobic threshold or AT (the point at which you go from aerobic to anaerobic). This needs to be higher if you're going to hold a faster pace. If this is the problem, how do you fix it? Clue: It's not by doing more miles. The way to raise your AT is to spend time at it or above it, so if you want to finish faster, you must set up a plan to target speed by doing some kind of intervals. Or if you blew up, maybe you didn't eat enough. Did you know that your body can only hold 500 grams of glycogen (stored carbohydrates)? This is about 2 hours worth. So if your race is longer than that, and you didn't eat, of course you will run out of gas.

What if you miss a lot of training due to injury? Is that a way to make improvements? A full year of consistent training will lead to much improvement. If you get injured frequently, why? Again, evaluate it. I've even heard the mileage argument thrown in here. "My base isn't high enough, so I got hurt". No. Typically, if you get hurt often, it is a problem of overstress and not being strong or flexible enough. If you get hurt frequently and you don't spend time doing resistance training, the solution is simple: Get to the gym and work at getting stronger. How is your flexibility? If you are tight, you are also more likely to get muscle pulls and strains. Solution: Stretch! Do you run every day? If so, why? If you do, you are putting a greater stress load on your body than necessary. Again, you can't get faster from the sidelines, so if you keep getting hurt, you need to objectively identify the culprit and make the necessary changes.

There really isn't room in this article to address every possible thing that can go wrong with training. The point is to look at your training and racing and point blank identify your weaknesses. Very cut and dry. Look at your splits. If your time wasn't what you wanted, where did you get off pace? Was your swim on pace? Were you still on goal pace after the bike? Was it the run that let you down? Whatever it is, there is an objective that you can identify and work on.

In the first Exercise Physiology class I ever took in college, one principal was pushed down our throats: SAIDs (Specific Adaptations to Imposed Demands). All this means is that you must specifically train exactly what you're trying to improve—eg. you must swim, bike, or run to get better at swimming, biking, or running. And you must overload the activity that you're trying to improve. Overload simply means that you systematically apply more stress if you are to see greater gains. Doing the SAME thing over and over will get you the SAME results. I see very little overload in most tri plans I've read out there. Most of the templates I've looked at will overload miles or time as you get closer to the event, but there is not much overload of anything else, whether it be speed or strength. Well, how would you get faster or stronger, by accident?

It's easy to lose sight of common sense as technology grows, but I promise you that using it in training is of high value. If you're lacking speed, you need to work on speed and set up an overload plan that does that. If you're not running well off the bike compared to your "straight" running races, you need to set up an overload plan in which you're practicing running off the bike. If you have trouble spotting buoys in open water swims and it costs you minutes in the swim and greater amounts of energy, then you need to set up a plan of practicing this specifically. Whatever you're seeing as "falling short", you must put it at the top of your priority for training. Just because you're following a professional athlete's personal training plan doesn't mean that it's going to blanket everything in training and you'll come out being more fit. Your

plan must be personal to you. Here is an example: If you are unhappy with your 5K times, and let's say you run a 21:45 (7 minutes per mile), go to the track and start running 400s at a pace about 5 seconds faster than this pace per mile (6:55), which is about 1:44 400s. Set up this workout doing the same amount of repeats each week—say 8 repeats, and the same amount of rest time—say 60 seconds. Now each week, take 1-2 seconds off each 400. Do this until you can no longer make improvements. Guess what? All else staying equal, your 5K time will be faster. This is taking the direct route to improvement.

I know I only listed just a few of the scenarios that may come up, and I couldn't have possibly answered all the training questions that might arise when talking about overload. The point of this article is to get you to think a little more about your training. I always teach my trainees to use some common sense. If we apply a solution to a specific problem, we'll come up with countless answers on how to improve. And doing your research on specific training philosophies will give you a broader base of solutions to pull from when needed. Whatever you do, don't just blindly follow a template plan or do what the pros do. Remind yourself that this isn't as complicated as you're making it out to be.