

## OFF-SEASON TRAINING FOR TRIATHLON

I've never thought too much of long range training templates. I read Don Shula's philosophy on coaching once, and he stated that he thought each practice session and goal should be to make you better than you were the day before. He believed in coaching day to day versus looking too far into the future. If you look too far into the future, you may be looking past things that may or may not happen. I'll get off of my football subject here. I bring this up because this has always been how I approach coaching and personal training. I believe in looking at exactly where an athlete is NOW and taking a direct route into fixing what that athlete needs at that particular time to make him or her more successful.

When you talk off-season training for triathlons, this philosophy should especially be the case. There is no question that part of the time should be used to recover mentally and physically from the rigors of a tri season, but it should also be used to improve upon YOUR weaknesses and be productive so you become more fit.

Many athletes pick up a book or a magazine and simply follow an off-season template. I understand why the authors write these templates. It is for giving some generalizations which offer some guidelines. After reading this, it is the reader's responsibility to determine how to best use this off-season time.

Where do you start? Start with your racing. Look back at your races and determine if you hit your goals or not. Determine if your racing season was a complete success in your mind, a partial success, or left you feeling disappointed. Be objective and honest and really try to pinpoint where you went wrong, as well as what you did right. We can all go back and find a race that we're really proud of. If so, what was so great about it? And we can all find a race in which we really feel like we let ourselves down. If so, what went wrong? List these things. After you find a theme or themes, determine what it was that caused the lack of success. For example, if you look back and determine that your ½ Ironman was not a complete success in your mind, determine what it was that hurt your race. Was your swim split your problem, was it your bike split, or was it your run split? Did you have trouble with your nutrition that day? Did you not taper? Try to determine objectively what it was that went wrong. Typically, we can find a theme in our racing season. For example, was it your run that let you down in most every race? Were you up where you wanted to be the entire race only to let places go by on each and every run? Did you always find that you were "land sharking" and having to work way too hard to get caught up on the bike because your swim split was simply far off expectation? Whatever your case may be, identify it as an area of improvement.

You might be surprised by how many athletes all go into the same off-season all doing the same thing. Why would a strong swimmer/weak runner and a strong runner/weak swimmer both do the same thing during the off-season? Well, when you follow a template, isn't that what you're doing?

Let me make a point here not to blast yourself during the off-season. First, you do have to get some rest. But the off-season is long. So the best way to use it is to rest first, and then work on YOUR weaknesses.

After you evaluate, work at fixing what needs to be fixed. First remember genetics. If swimming is always your weakness, chances are it will remain your weakness, but it can get better, maybe even much better. Secondly, don't expect perfection. I say work at what needs fixing, not fix it. Along the same lines as genetics, we'll never have it all right—right? It would be no fun if we no longer had room for improvement. But work at your specific weaknesses.

This is where you need to address properly what you need to do and what does it. If your run is letting you down at the end of a tri, doesn't this simply mean you're slower than you want to be? If this is the case, then you're talking about improving your run SPEED. This means you must take some of your off-season and work on intervals, just like runners would. Don't get carried away and do this all off-season or you'll get burned out. But if not now, when? If you are the type that has to catch up too much on the bike and run, doesn't this mean your swim isn't fast enough for you? Again, if this is the case you must swim intervals to get faster in the water. Or possibly you can gain a lot of speed by taking swim instruction to help you with your technique if you feel it's lacking. The point is to take the direct route to your problem. If you feel like you ran out of gas in your ½ Ironman because you really don't know how to eat properly for this event, then isn't the off-season a great time to learn more about nutrition? So many athletes just chalk this up to needing more training in general versus really thinking about what would help them the most.

Along with what to do, there is what not to do. Don't bust your butt all off-season doing anaerobic intervals in all 3 disciplines if you don't need to. I see many athletes do this as well. This is a recipe for burn out. If your swim is already good, why are you doing speed intervals in the off-season. If you can already hammer with the best of them, why are you doing bike intervals on your trainer in December? The problem with this is it leaves little time and energy to work on the things you really need.

I believe in making the off-season productive. I hate the idea of waiting for a season and the rest of your exercise life gets put on hold. If you don't feel like working on specific needs, you can still make your off-season productive, and I mean productive as in actually adding to your fitness.

- Lose weight. This is the time to do it if you feel like you need to. If you're one of those who runs around stating "if I were 10 pounds lighter, I'd be faster", do it in the off-season. A terrible time to lose weight is during a competitive season when you need your energy (food) for recovery and for hard workouts. In-season is not the time to drop weight. To lose weight, you have to create a calorie deficit, and you will not be able to train hard while being calorically deficient.
- Get serious about strength training. There is no question that strength training can help your triathlon goals. The biggest way it helps is by making you stronger so you are less likely to get injured. And there is no question that doing intense weight training during the season will leave your legs stale and tired. Maintenance during the season is prudent, but making gains in the gym is not. So use this time to make gains. Use the off-season to set your own personal strength records. When you hit October and it's time to challenge Sugarloaf during the bike leg of a ½ Ironman, your legs will thank you!

- Get serious about running. Fall and winter is the best time to run in Florida. It's when all the 5Ks, 10Ks and marathons are in full effect. Take advantage of this, and become a runner for a few months. Without a doubt this will help your running. Maybe it's time to do a marathon? What a way to spend the off-season, training for something that makes you feel great about yourself when you hit the finish line. You don't have to abandon your cross training roots to do this. In fact, doing an easy bike and swim here or there will help you recover from your running program.

Whatever you do, I believe in making the off-season productive. I think one of two things should come out of an off-season, if not both of these things: You should have either made yourself slightly better at a weakness during the off-season, or have done something to make you more physically fit. If you accomplish any or both of these things, great job! You had a great off-season!