

Train Less, Train Smarter, Race Faster

Although triathlon is comprised of three traditional sport disciplines, it is a sport with its own identity rather than simply three individual disciplines which take place consecutively. Training for triathlon should recognize this distinction and adapt accordingly.

In the sport's early years, athletes entered the sport primarily from swimming and running backgrounds. Training methods were anything but refined, instruction manuals were scarce, and the top athletes at the time will tell you that they were flying by the seat of their pants.

Faced with a general lack of knowledge, experience, and the daunting image of this new be all you can be sport, triathletes were quick to adopt mega-training routines which added new meaning to the phrase "not enough hours in a day." Romantic stories of brutally epic training routines were passed along by word of mouth and in print and only served to fuel the training craze.

Cross-training became an 80s buzzword as it was introduced to our sporting lexicon by triathlon pioneers. In its original application, cross-training meant multiplying one's original sport training routine by 3, while trying not to leave anything out. The result of this approach was to produce cadres of stiff, slow, mono-speed athletes who never could do enough training to break out of their performance ruts. There are still many practitioners of these training methods, who each year somehow expect a different result with the same training methods.

Cross-training version 2002 is now referred to as multisport training, and recognizes that there is a training carryover effect from one discipline to another. This means that bike training can help your running, which can in turn help your swimming, thus reducing the amount of time that you have to spend training each discipline.

The cross-training carryover effect does not mean that one can show up a triathlon having not swum, and expect that your biking and running will propel you through the water. Nor does it mean that you can skip run training yet ask your chiseled bike legs to drive you over the run course. There is an absolute need for sport specificity, meaning swim, bike, and run.

Yet, by viewing your training as a composite, rather than 3 separate entities, one discovers that optimal performance can be achieved with miles and training hours that are much less than what one commonly reads as being necessary. Indeed, it has taken many years of general overtraining for the romantic image of epic training slugfests to lose their glow and for more thoughtful training approaches to crystallize and begin to emerge.

Listed below are guideline principles which support training methods that I have found to be effective in helping athletes of all abilities, from Ironman winners to age group All-Americans, to novice triathletes looking for new challenges.

- ***Think key workouts***

In simple terms, your key workouts are an endurance outing, a tempo effort of medium distance, and a shorter, more intense workout which might be hill repeats or a track workout @ 80% intensity. These workouts should build methodically for several weeks before taking a week of easy training to assimilate the training and recharge the battery.

Technique work can be incorporated into warmups and cooldowns of each of the three disciplines. Running drills and strides, pedaling efficiency and high cadence spinning on the bike, and swim drills and stroke count in the pool represent fundamental form work.

I believe that athletes and coaches in single discipline sports like swimming, biking or running, are guilty of widespread training excess and could benefit greatly from more attention to the principle of focusing on key workouts and paring away the excess fat.

- ***Don't count miles***

If you are hitting your key workouts in the three disciplines, miles become a much less relevant measurement of your training. I have seen this demonstrated with countless athletes from all backgrounds, and at all competitive distances.

Triathletes with swimming backgrounds approach their swimming bests while swimming a fraction of what they did as mono-swimmers. Ditto for runners. Ironman athletes run strong and fast marathons on 30 miles a week of running.

Cyclists who use tools like Computrainers can realize tremendous time savings and improved performance with one hour mid-week sessions, saving road outings for the weekends. My experience is that 1 hour well spent indoors translates to 3 hours on the road.

- ***Variety is the spice of life—no two consecutive workouts the same!***

All training obeys the law of diminishing returns. This is to say that after a certain point, repeating a workout will bring less and less improvement. Athletes that do not realize this will continue to train to the point where workouts are not only failing to help them improve, but in fact are making them slower! Just as the 2nd hot dog never tastes as good as the first one, so too does the 2nd same workout produce a less satisfying result.

Variety in your training is essential because of its widespread positive influence:

- contributes to health by mixing things up and bringing balance
- keeps things fun and interesting
- respects scientific evidence of the need to have your training evolve

- ***Am I getting stronger?***

If you can see and feel yourself getting stronger, then you are on the right track. While this might seem an obvious observation, I have always been amazed at how people will

grind themselves into a pulp with training that is somehow deemed *essential*, or will similarly ignore an injury despite clear signs that they are wearing themselves out and causing further damage.

Learn to listen to your body.

- ***Am I having fun?***

Here is a simple mental check list:

Are you having fun? Are you excited about your workouts? Would you describe your pre-race state as “pysched and ready” or let’s get this over with? Do you have outside interests?

If you answer yes to all of these questions, then chances are you are on a healthy track with your athletic participation.

Future articles will explore these principles and their application in greater detail. The reader will be pleased to discover that triathlon and its training can indeed be a vehicle with which to challenge our limits, yet without consuming all else that we do to maintain a healthy life balance.

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