

## Back from the Brink

### How do you find success with an athlete who comes to you having previously over-trained?

I have had several opportunities to help athletes who were dealing with accumulated fatigue and poor recent performances, and I enjoyed seeing the reversal of fortune and results. Not only with Chris Lieto, Luke Bell, Linsey Corbin and runner Ryan Hall, but also with executives who struggle to balance work and life with training, and amateur endurance athletes simply looking to improve results. ➔



BY MATT DIXON



“There’s a culture of suffering at all costs in our sport, and a naiveté about how athletes fall into this state.”

I am always careful to label athletes as over-trained, as this is a term that is carelessly thrown around these days. But it’s fair to say that they all were, on arrival to Purplepatch, training very hard while remaining in a place of fatigue and diminishing performance. There’s a culture of suffering at all costs in our sport, and a naiveté about how athletes fall into this state.

#### How and why deep fatigue occurs

Triathlon is a sport that lends itself to a culture of over-training, and also attracts people who are attracted to the joy of tough training. Consequently, highly motivated individuals are likely to ignore signs of deep fatigue, while employing tougher training regimes to

find performance.

Ironically, one can gain short-term results from this approach, but consistent stress without recovery normally leads to accumulating fatigue and, at some level, systemic collapse.

Plus, most dedicated athletes don’t realize that they under-fuel relative to the demands of training. This additional stress is often the final straw of impaired rejuvenation and can push the athlete into deep fatigue.

#### Process of rejuvenation

The desire to succeed is usually strong in the athletes I work with, and if the desire burns bright, I usually believe that

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## DEAR COACH CONTINUED

the fatigue is not so deep to prevent total recovery. Each athlete requires a differing process of rejuvenation, but I can generalize the process that we tend to take.

**1. Rest and regain health** The first step is nearly always to rest and regain health before even thinking of proper training and competition. De-emphasizing fitness gains and emphasizing health emotionally alters the athlete's goal and allows him or her to recuperate. This phase can take anywhere from a couple of weeks to multiple months, and it's the single most important factor to total recovery. Continued exercise is usually short (less than 40 minutes per session) and at a lower intensity.

There is no substitute for rest. During this time, you can be productive in several other areas, such as changes to nutrition, planning the training on return and deep education. We also assess how the body is performing physiologically, often with blood tests and more subjective evaluations.

**2. Nutrition** There is a massive nutritional component to regaining health and performance, which includes timing, type and amount of calories, in both fueling around exercise sessions and daily meals or snacks. Athletes almost always need to increase the total number of calories taken in and increase fueling during and following activity. The result: a great bump in total energy and, over a longer period, body composition improvement.

**3. Education** Many of the athletes I have helped were already experienced top-class performers, though their training philosophies were already deeply imbedded. I've found that education on why things went wrong, and how to prevent it in the future are key. And providing athletes with the tools and understanding to succeed is much more effective than simply telling them what to do. Without education, it is impossible to really believe in the process—and without total belief, old habits are sure to resurface with a complete return to

training.

We normally begin our athletes on a program of self-assessment and coach monitoring, using tools such as RestWise (Restwise.com), which can assist in monitoring the state of fatigue, as well as learning how an athlete responds to different training loads and bouts of recovery.

**4. Implementing a smart approach** Once the athlete returns to health, and therefore training, we then dedicate ourselves to shifting the approach to training. I believe in simplifying complex issues, to allow athletes to self-monitor and buy into a set of beliefs. This shifts the lens of how to train for endurance performance, and prevents simply considering hard training the only aspect of importance. This is empowering for coaches and athletes, as it gives them

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confidence in recovery as a part of training, not a time of laziness. The outcome is usually more consistent training that's less hindered by injury, sickness or poor performance.

### The Ongoing Journey

This process is always ongoing, and never a complete solution. A highly motivated athlete should push barriers and take risks. Injuries can occur, as can fatigue, but ensuring you have a system of checks and balances, as well as a set of beliefs that prevent naive accumulation of suffering without gains, is a positive step in the journey to your best performance. ❶

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