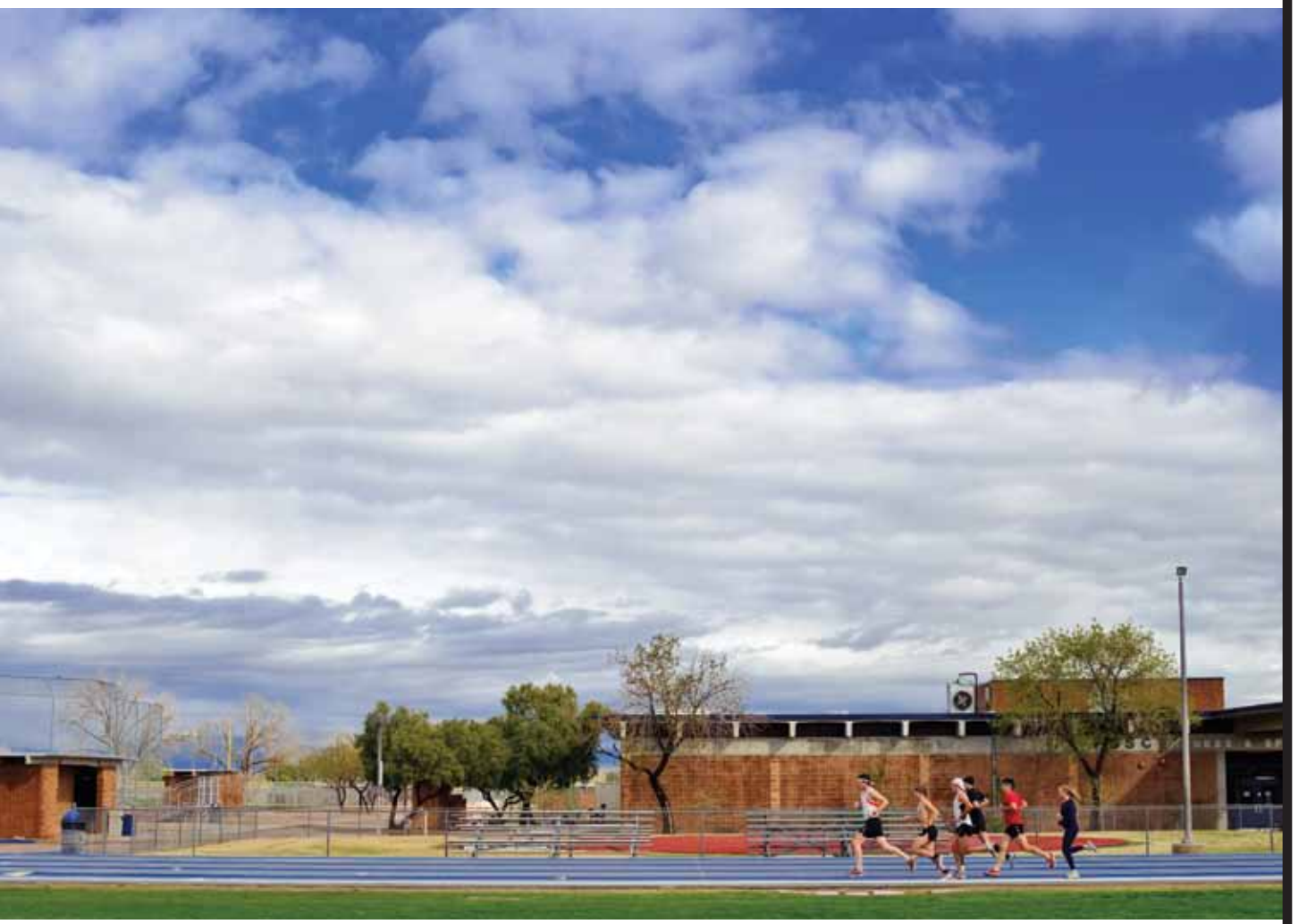
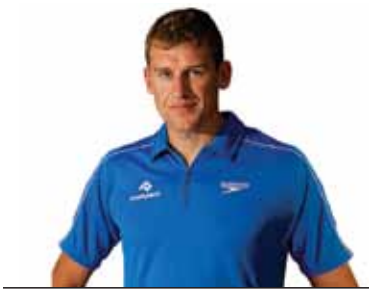


Quantity vs. Quality



WITH MATT DIXON

Dear Coach,
I read a lot about the high-mileage versus high-quality debate. Is it true that to thoroughly develop an aerobic foundation you have to put in years of low-intensity, high-mileage training? Others say that higher quality training is a superior route to success. There seems to be a lot of disagreement. What's the deal?

This question strikes to the heart of the discussion about the optimal approach to training for a single-day endurance event. First, I think it is worth acknowledging something that is beyond dispute—athletes develop over years—not months—and your performance progression is certainly a journey that, when nurtured correctly, will evolve over multiple seasons. It is also true that volume, programmed into the season along with adequate recovery, is a critical component of performance development, and the benefits are cumulative and strong. The problem arises when athletes and coaches take

DEAR COACH

this as a cue that accumulating as much low-intensity volume as possible, often at the expense of recovery, is the optimal path to success. Components such as functional strength, biomechanics and higher-intensity training are dismissed as unnecessary factors that should be avoided at all costs. This is simply not true.

Any smart training program will be designed to stress the body enough that, given recovery, it can adapt and become stronger. Throughout this process it is critical that you can remain healthy to achieve optimal gains. We know through extensive research that the two training factors that place the biggest physiological stress on the body are volume (duration) in combination with monotony (continuous intensity or pattern of training).We also know that the body responds positively to variance, or changes in intensity and types of stress applied to it. We can use these principles to create a smart training program. This program would include some higher volume in it, but only in combination with a wide range of intensities that include the very highest intensity. It would also incorporate a full functional strength and mobility program that could improve the structural integrity of the musculoskeletal system, in conjunction with the cardiovascular benefits of training.

The traditional approach of training at low intensity for long durations does provide a set of critical adaptations that assist in the development of long-term endurance adaptations, including fat utilization, oxygen transport and musculoskeletal adaptations. Unfortunately, the majority of people who follow this path are often stuck with one (slow) speed that limits their ability to continue to make sustainable speed improvements, as well suppressed metabolic health from continual monotony and volume. The approach becomes really ineffective when a person is starved for time in a regular week, which is highly common for many competing athletes.

One of two things happens in this case: The athlete either crams the volume into an already busy work week, and in turn receives limited or negative long-term results, or maintains a sensible set of hours of weekly training, and does not see improvement. For a time-starved athlete intensity becomes everything, but interestingly we have learned a lot from these athletes. I have several elite athletes who also work full-time, who only have 12 to 15 hours per week to train for Ironman-distance races. They never had years of low-intensity volume training but have continued to evolve through specificity, intensity and some targeted volume. They have gone from successful amateurs to Ironman champions and podium finishers.

While some volume and low-intensity training is critical to athletes in every single week of training, simply "hanging your hat" on consistent repetition will ultimately limit potential and performance. The sport is evolving, and as we move forward you are going to see a diminishing focus on simple long-and-slow-approaches to training. The importance of speed and intensity will continue to create a necessary balance for any volume you might do. As we say at Purplepatch, fitness is seldom your limiter. Let's go fast!