

Nailing The Off-Season

The Northern hemisphere triathlon season is now at a close, and as we approach the winter and Christmas period the feeling of pre-race nerves couldn't be further away. Despite one season being over and the new season months away this 'off-season' period can be a confusing time for athletes. What is it? Does it really exist? What should I be doing? The big question is how should you approach your training during this time? Matt Dixon investigates.

Setting The Tone And Expectations Of Winter Training

Following your last race of the season it is important and deserved to have an emotional and physical break from structured training. A few weeks of active exercise, but not training, and a chance to enjoy life is not only good for the soul, but allows your body to recover from a long season of training and racing. For serious athletes this should only be two or three weeks, so defining this break in

the calendar is a good start to setting up 2012 correctly. Most people know how to relax well, and no structure means no structure, but it is important to define a start to building for 2012. Following this season break you move into an important developmental phase of your training for 2012. This will define success and an evolution of your performance. It would be crazy to call this the 'off-season' because this suggests it's of little importance. The developmental phase of training prior to next season's racing is the chance to set the

tone for your performance changes. The key is to getting it right for your needs.

You will read much about the importance of setting the foundation, or base, for next season's racing, hence the call for hours and hours of low intensity training. In contrast, there are some coaches who reject that thought process and believe the first part of athlete development is to work on higher intensity and speed, then increase specific race endurance closer to the race. Two perfectly opposite training





theories certainly lead to plenty of athlete confusion and debate, but which approach should you take this winter? The honest answer is it depends, but let me expand my thoughts before you make a decision.

What Training Produces Performance?

I think it is important to set the context of training in general before myopically focusing on how to approach early-season training. No matter what your

level, improved performance arrives from consistency in effective (specific) training. Like layers of an onion, results are achieved with days of training strung together for many weeks, months and even seasons. The consistent athlete who does not miss massive chunks of time with injury, fatigue or decreased motivation will always prosper in the long run. It is obvious that you cannot rush great performance. The old saying goes, “it takes 10 years to be great at anything” and while you won’t want to wait 10 years to see results, you

should understand that consistency will prevail. Set up your training in a smart and specific manner, and the outcome will be optimal results, which is what you should be after.

Setting Up The Season According To Your Needs

Every athlete has a specific training ‘recipe’ that works for them, and one of the joys and challenges of coaching is to find what works perfectly for each individual, but you can still make sound decisions to your needs

for early season training relative to prior seasons and experience. If you have a lot of training and racing experience your needs may well be very different at this part of the year, compared to an athlete relatively new to the sport and training.

***Inexperienced Athletically**

Unless you have completed multiple seasons in a row of endurance training, your 'aerobic engine' likely needs further development and improvement. The physiological adaptations that occur with lower-intensity and longer duration training are 'long-term' and take a long time to develop in the first place. There is no short cut to this development, and it is true that many athletes would be well served spending the early part of the year with a focus on lower-intensity training. Layering multiple seasons in a row of developing your aerobic capacity is important, but this does not mean that this should be your only focus at this time of the year. Newer, and even capable athletes, always need to balance this type of 'winter training' with a massive focus on technique, skills and even some speed work to learn simply how to operate at a range of intensities. There is little use simply being fit and slow, and while this is an aerobic sport in nature, I like to see triathletes be athletic. The focus is lower intensity work (building the aerobic engine) but this is supported with technique, sport-specific strength, and a sprinkling of higher intensity training to keep each system alive.

***Established endurance trainer**

There are many athletes who have the benefit of multiple seasons in a row of endurance training, often following the classical progression of a period of low-intensity base training to set of a periodised progression of training. I meet many of these seasoned athletes, who seem to repeat the same process year after year, hoping for a breakthrough or radical improvement. It is often the case that these athletes have reached their natural development of aerobic capability, but never evolve the training approach to truly work on an area of weakness or take a major step up in performance. It should be noted that this is a natural situation to be in, after all, this athlete has seen improvements over the years with their 'process', so change becomes a scary concept. The problem is, change is exactly what is needed.



Following multiple seasons of applying low intensity training during 'winter training', the potential gains become less and less, and the situation now becomes that the athlete is very fit, but often without the ability to increase sustainable speed. If you are established and fit, but just cannot get faster in your race performances, it is very likely that you need to do just that — get faster. Don't worry you don't have to switch from being an Ironman to a 5K runner, but a pre-season truly dedicated to increase your sustainable strength, power and pace that you can operate at will surely provide

a platform to move in 2012 as an athlete evolved. In circumstances like this I have often encouraged athletes to shift the lens that they look at themselves through for a few months. If you are an Ironman focused athlete, shift to performance at short course, or half-Ironman at least, for a few months. Go and find your power, increase your range of gears and base your weekly training around the pursuit of speed. It takes courage because you have to shift your focus, your athletic identity and normally a little of your ego.

By integrating two to three power/strength focused sessions weekly to

your overall plan you can expect to arrive in the spring as a faster athlete with a wider range of gears of intensities that you can operate at. The compelling component of this approach is that you're supporting workouts are the two or three key sessions which have to, by definition, be of lower intensity. This allows your general conditioning and aerobic engine to be maintained, although not necessarily improved, over the pre-season months. You will arrive to the spring fit and fast, but the key will be what you do with this new found speed. Remember what your goal is; to perform at triathlon races, and therefore there should certainly be a shift back to your training approach that has worked for you in previous years. Specificity to the events you are preparing for becomes critical, and being willing to shift your lens to event-specific intensity, and volume, in the weeks leading up to the race will provide you with the new level of performance you crave.

The Swimming Question

Whether you are an established triathlete or in one of your first few seasons, you could likely benefit from a massive focus on swimming during this pre-season period. It seems that swimming is often the most ignored of the three disciplines making up a triathlon, which is no doubt a mistake for most athletes. It is easy to understand why because it's the most technical sport and the one which requires sustained dedication to see real improvements. Frustration often results from swim training because results don't appear quickly. One of the issues is the lack of quality information on how to truly prepare for open water swimming, which is not the same as regular swimming, but many give up before giving swimming a real shot. Unless you have spent thousands of hours in the pool as a competitive swimmer the pre-season should include a large focus on a progressive swimming programme, with the ratio of training hours weighted toward swimming at this part of the year.

Swimming is unique in that it does require high volume and frequency to see great improvements. Performed in water, a foreign substance to us land creatures, makes controlling our skills that much more difficult. For many athletes it is truly a two season process to see the massive jumps in performance gains



in swimming, but those that make the commitment are always rewarded with not just better swim times, but a much lower energy cost in swims, and improved performance generally. Some of my athletes have a pre-season focus of up to 50 per cent of training time dedicated to swimming. Built around two foundational workouts each week, supported by other sessions, the swim foundation is the only platform that you can build for the upcoming year ahead. The commitment sounds counterintuitive, but is worth every effort.

In an upcoming issue I will break down a solid

approach to triathlon swimming training for all triathletes, include a building phase, into a shaping period, then progression into skills and specificity for open water racing. Until then, get in the pool and get swimming, and while you are looking at the black line make sure you are considering your overall approach to this pre-season. Do you need to develop your baseline endurance, or is it time to shift to power and speed? **1**

Matt Dixon is an exercise physiologist, former professional triathlete, elite coach and the owner of professional coaching company Purplepatch Fitness.