

MATT DIXON

IN SICKNESS AND HEALTH

This tends to be the time of year that we face many training challenges and, beyond the short days and inclement weather that can be bothersome, a bout of illness is almost inevitably destined to interrupt your training plans. It seems to be a yearly ritual of minor hassle for normal people but, for the athlete, it will add the additional annoyance of lost training quality. It also presents a host of questions on how to manage around the illness. Should you stubbornly train straight through illness? Fully rest up and wait for it to pass? Somewhere in between? It all depends. Matt Dixon explores the relationship between the common cold and your approach to training, and offers some sensible solutions and strategies to managing illness.



SETTING THE LENS: TRAINING ADAPTATIONS

Before we delve into the central questions concerning training and sickness, we should step back and consider how training stress and life stress interact with the body. You obviously want to improve your performance, and I am sure you grasp in order to do so it is important to train. Training is a sport-specific stress that is placed on the body that, if all is well, create a sport-specific adaptation. These adaptations are the things that make you fitter, stronger, faster, more powerful and so on. When an athlete responds positively to stress, in other words experiences an increase in physiological capacity, we call it functional adaptation. When the response is negative, such as reaching a plateau or experiences increases of chronic injury and illness, we call it non-functional adaptation. As I have talked about here before recovery is equally important. While hard training creates the conditions for adaptation, the adaptation itself takes place during rest and recovery.

We also have to cope with non-training stress, which we might call life, and the body will react or adapt to in order to maintain balance and cope with the accumulation of these stressors. If you think about non-training stressors you might come up with responses including relationships, work, travel commitments, lack of sleep and finances. I would also add nutrition and fuelling for many athletes because so few

seem to manage to support their training with an adequate approach to nutrition, hence it becomes a stress. While these stressors may fluctuate day to day and week to week, they are relatively ongoing, and our training stress has to be integrated into the balance of these life stressors (non-training stress) in order to keep us in a state for functional adaptation.

Now, consider what happens when you add the massive non-training stressor of illness on top of this equation. When you step away from your motivation to succeed, and what your friends and competitors are doing, it is blindingly obvious that the inclusion of an illness is going to place a hefty load on your already overloaded plate of training stress and life stress. The unfortunate aspect of sickness, such as flu or a head cold, is that it is a stressor than suppresses your health through the time you are burdened with its friendly presence. Even a low level head cold suppresses your system quite dramatically, and will automatically reduce your ability to remain in your cherished functional state. Does this mean that at the first sign of sickness you should cut all exercise? The simple answer is no, but it's important to investigate a smart path forward. Let's investigate the path our athletes tend to follow when faced with an unwanted sickness.

THE MAGIC QUESTIONS

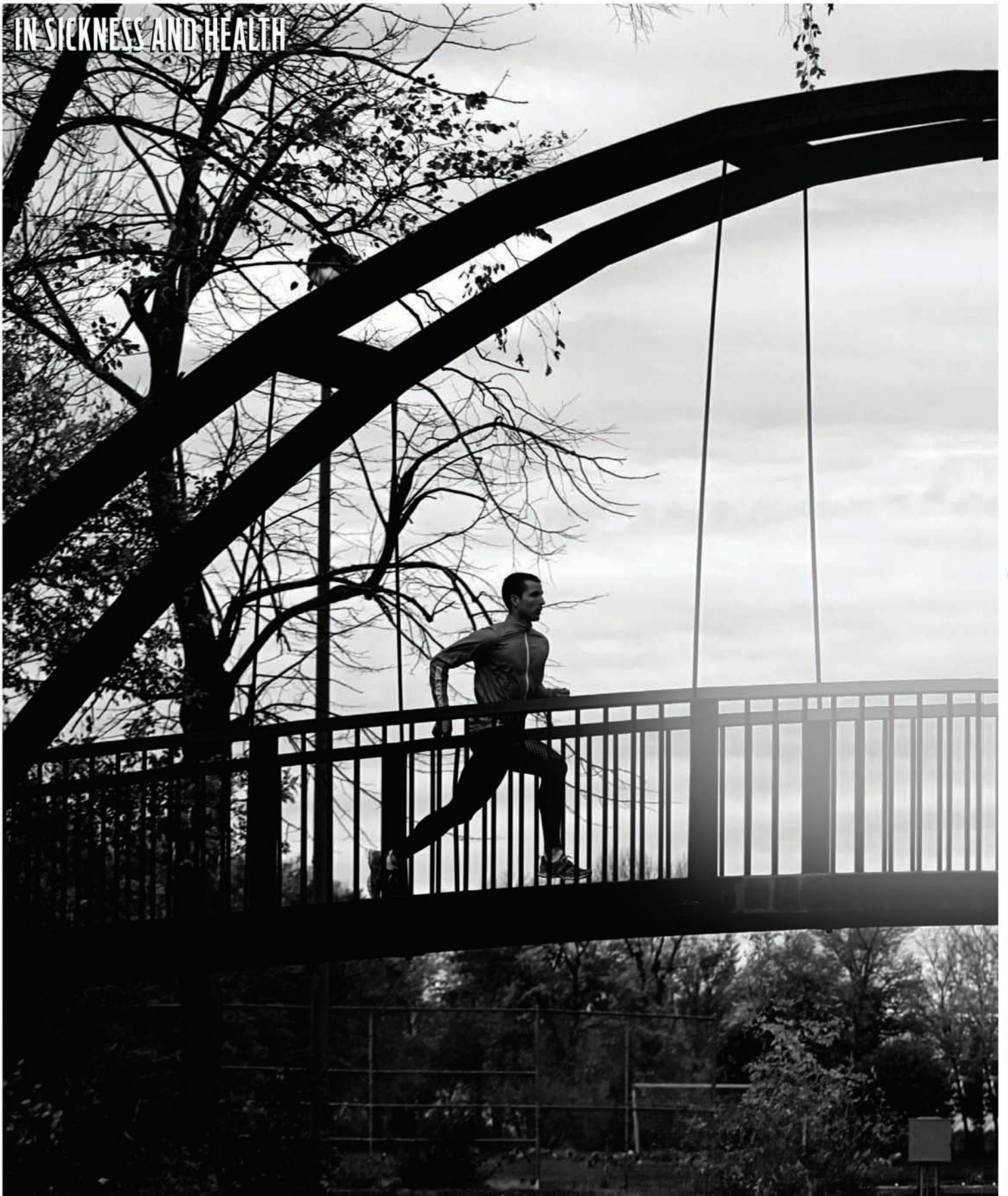
When faced with sickness you have a few paths that you can follow. These might include complete rest, abbreviated training, or continued training without alteration. In making these decisions, first ask yourself these questions:

- Will sticking to my plan, as written, delay my recovery from this sickness?
- Is my body in a place to facilitate positive adaptations from the training I am doing? If the answer to these is "no" then ask yourself:
- Is there anything I can do to maintain fitness or improve without delaying my recovery from the sickness?

There is no magic answer to these questions. You rely on honest self-appraisal, a logical mindset and a long term vision to your training. While slight sickness can often be a wonderful excuse for the lazy, I have found that the majority of athletes I work with are highly motivated and keen to simply push through any illness. You are part of a sport that attracts high achievers and self-motivated individuals. This is one of the reasons I am bemused by coaches who only talk about motivation techniques and getting tougher, for many the traits of suffering and toughness live strong, it is employing those traits in a consistent and intelligent manner that breeds success. >

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Another approach is to evaluate your symptoms in terms of severity and rate them from mild to severe. The protocol to follow can be different dependent on your symptoms.

LESS SEVERE SYMPTOMS

There is a nice rule of thumb that considers if your symptoms are restricted to above the neck line, you should be okay to train. This actually has some merit to it, even in its simplicity, but I would still urge a little caution. In the first days of this type of illness, you are suppressed with an additional non-training stressor, hence have a lower capacity to make positive adaptations. If I have an athlete in this situation I often shift to a similar protocol that I would use following a race or hard block. This recovery protocol still moves blood around the body, maintains some fitness, and has room for some productive workouts, but limits how much stress is placed on the immune system.

EXAMPLES OF RECOVERY WORK OUTS

- Lower overall intensity of workouts.
- Limit running sessions to under 40 minutes in duration.
- Limit swimming sessions to under 40 minutes in duration.
- Keep rides under 90 minutes, if not shorter, in duration.
- The only intensity comes from neuromuscular (short, fast intervals with long rest).
- Replace regular training time with rest and additional sleep, not other activities.
- Maximise hydration status and optimal nutrition.

The athlete remains on this protocol until one day beyond feeling 95 per cent better, then can resume regular training. There is no set number of days, it is simply a game of waiting, and while you are powerless in your frustration, it is the only sensible route.

MORE SEVERE SYMPTOMS

Ironically, more severe symptoms don't necessarily mean more time away from real training, but they do call for more drastic action. When you have heavy symptoms from the neck down (including a chesty cough, fever, chills and massive fatigue), it is impossible for your body to make positive adaptations. Any real training will simply extend the sickness, or lead to a worse illness. When this happens I suggest:

- Complete rest with massive focus on sleep.
- Maximise hydration status and optimal nutrition.
- When you feel 90 per cent better wait an extra day and then resume the recovery protocol above until back to normal health.

These approaches might seem a little restrictive, but I have yet to see quality training that delivers positive results from simply gritting teeth and pushing through. The result is usually extended sickness, and a shorter time-frame before being hit with another illness. The cycle of frequent sickness or injury comes from a series of silly decisions and poor training approaches, lending an environment to permanent non-functional adaptation.

If you are one of those athletes that are struck with frequent sickness, it should be a wake up call to make you take a step back and review your training. Frequent sickness in athletes nearly always comes from a training programme and life schedule that is not supported by enough sleep, recovery and quality nutrition. The resulting non-functional state is a wonderful invitation to frequent sickness, as well as a fast track to poor performance and fatigue. Are you a performance time-bomb?

PREVENTION IS BETTER THAN CURE

If you feel fatigue in training for a day or two and then feel the first signs of a head cold (tickle in the throat, slight sniffles, bloodshot eyes) no matter if you have a big day planned, it is smart to take the foot off the gas here. This way you give yourself the best chance of avoiding a real illness if you don't push through when these symptoms first present themselves. You are smart enough to feel the big difference between expected tiredness from a few heavy days of training and the fatigue that comes with a radically suppressed system. The symptoms you feel may be simply warning signs that, if you rest for just a day or two, you can avoid the real sickness and move on with training. This is never a guarantee but it gives you a chance of dodging the bullet. The only reason an athlete pushes on in this state is fear of falling behind, ego and stubbornness.

LINGERING SYMPTOMS

There are situations where you can't avoid getting ill and smartly take some rest before returning to training. Sometimes the last symptoms just seem to linger and your training is still suffering. This is, I am afraid, a judgment call. I have seen many athletes simply persevere and keep on training, with the symptoms finally retreating, however, if your performance in training remains poor and the symptoms show no sign of gains, you need corrective action. Revert to the recovery protocol for two to three days, allow the last sickness to retreat, and then get back on the wagon.

While it is inevitable for illness to hit you this season, you can be sure that nearly everyone faces the same barrier. If you plan your season ahead, continually make smart training decisions, and remain consistent with your hard work when healthy, your long-term performance will not suffer one bit. **1**