

MATT DIXON

RASMUS HENNING: THE JOURNEY SO FAR

By Matt Dixon purplepatch

Rasmus Henning recently won the Abu Dhabi International Triathlon but it's been a roller coaster ride over the last 18 months for the Dane. He had a great career as a short course ITU racer winning five World Cup events, represented Denmark at two Olympic Games where he came seventh in Athens and eighth in Beijing and won the Hy Vee event twice netting himself \$200,000 for each. Following this he turned his attention back to long course racing having won the ITU Long Distance World Championships in 2001. His long distance career started well with a win at Ironman China, a fifth place finish at the Ironman World Championships despite a broken hand and went on to win Challenge Roth in 2010 in a time of 7:52:36. Things were looking good but a string of poor performances and issues with cramping led to many writing him off. At times he was thinking the same. Change was needed and this was when he approached purplepatch coach Matt Dixon, who takes us through the journey so far.

I find it interesting to write articles on my own athletes because I feel it can potentially provide some insight into the process a professional athlete has to go through on their journey. It also allows me the chance to look back and review the journey so far, which is always a learning experience for me.

As I begin this review, I think it is important to recognise the different types, needs and backgrounds of the elite athletes I work with. While each of my professional athletes are competing on the same 'playing field', their background, needs and experience differ vastly. This is the fun puzzle of athletics, and highlights the need for a coach and athlete to truly assess the individual needs. Then together we can create a training progression based around the needs for that individual athlete versus a formulaic one size fits all training methodology. Not only does each athlete require specificity in training relative to how they respond to different types of work, and the events they are preparing for, but they also need specific planning and progression dependent on where they are at in their career.

As an exercise to establish this point, I loosely categorised my current squad of athletes into broad types, when they joined purplepatch. Some of the athletes arrived with established resumes, but with great barriers in front of them, such as fatigue, injury or performance decline (Chris Lieto, Luke Bell and Linsey Corbin). Others arrived healthy but required extensive development to establish consistently solid results (Rachel Joyce, Meredith Kessler, Jesse Thomas), while some were just beginning their journey, progressing from amateur up to the pro level (Jennifer Tetrack and Sarah Piampiano).

The training prescription could not be more different for each athlete, despite all the programmes and approaches including the same set of beliefs underpinning the training prescription. Underlying all of the programme development was the goal of creating individual training recipes that allow consistent effective training, but individual plans would vary wildly.

When starting work with Rasmus Henning it was quickly apparent the journey was going to be both fun, and a challenge. He arrived as an established athlete with grand resume already created, but also with plenty of barriers and problems to fix.

THE HISTORY

Rasmus arrived as a former European champion, two-time Olympian, Hy-Vee champion and the owner of the fifth fastest Iron-distance performance in history. All of this was under the guidance of good coaching from Michael Krüger (The Danish National Team Coach). Despite his strong history and initial success in long course racing, Rasmus found himself in a rut. He was burdened with massive expectations following his fifth place in Kona in 2009 and his 7:52 debut at Challenge Roth, while struggling with a year's worth of setbacks and struggles in his long course training and racing.

Rasmus seemed to have lost some of his confidence to perform at the highest level in longer distance racing, and was also struggling with debilitating cramps during races. This led to lower than expected bike performances, and a variety of nutritional and injury-related issues. From the outside it looked like a hot pot of minor issues, but they all added up to a major performance problem.

THE START

Rasmus reached out to me in early July and hence began a series of conversations around a coaching relationship. I strongly believe that every athlete should own their sport and career. In other words, the coaching relationship only works if it is right for the athlete and I feel I can truly help. The athlete should be in the best fit for them and their needs, and starting from this place allows trust and a truly professional relationship to flourish.

Initial conversations with Rasmus quickly highlighted what type of person and athlete he is. Not only amiable and likable, he is also smart, thoughtful and detail orientated. He showed that he had learned a lot from his training and racing experiences, and was pretty clear in what he needed. I could immediately tell that he was a 'high IQ' athlete, which is always fun and rewarding to work with. At the same time, I could tell he was at a crossroads in his career and a little lost on the right path for him. With the timing of the conversations occurring in July, we both knew that the timing was not ideal, but decided that we would begin the journey at that time.

THE COACHING DECISIONS

I felt my role with Rasmus at that time, with under three months before the Ironman world championships in Hawaii, was to assess his major obstacles, provide some confidence in his ability, create an intervention plan for Hawaii, while also setting a longer term progressive plan for the coming couple of seasons. I also felt it was important to be honest and open with him through the process on how I felt he was progressing and evolving. Looking back, I identified the following key performance issues in his training and performance: >



MATT DIXON



MATT DIXON

- **Cramping:** Rasmus had severely debilitating cramps in race situations from either nutrition, hydration or some other area.
- **Bike performance:** While often thought of as his strength in short-course, he had 'lost' his confidence and ability in riding.
- **Confidence:** His confidence was naturally low following his recent struggles, and surrounded his ability to perform in long course racing and, specifically, in Kona.
- **Consistency:** He struggled with consistency in training, often with minor injury and accumulating fatigue.

Upon my initial evaluations of his training and nutrition, I realised that he did not have massive red flags in his nutrition or training approach. This was great news because he was healthy and ready to train well, but also showed it would not be a quick fix when it came to resolving the cramping issues.

I decided to set up the plan in two phases:

- **Intervention phase:** From July until October (Ironman Hawaii). All effort would be put into getting him ready to perform well at the Ironman Hawaii.
- **The long-term plan:** Post Hawaii. A full programme of evolution looking towards the 2012 and 2013 race seasons.

The toughest part of this approach is that the intervention phase is filled with risk. I had to make some decisions without a long-term lens, and failure of success would mean he might experience even greater loss of self-belief and confidence to perform. To mitigate this risk I often reminded Rasmus of the long-term plan, careful not to minimise the 2011 Ironman Hawaii, but keen for him to realise that even if he had a wonderful performance in Kona, he could still evolve to even better performances beyond that.

Starting the intervention phase, I had to rapidly try to gain a strong picture of how Rasmus responds to different types of work and training, as well as how he approaches racing emotionally. The key was to not try and change too much, but evolve the key areas that could help build confidence and the changes of success. He had told me in an early conversation that he responds very quickly, and well, to intensity. That was useful but also created a risk-reward question. I knew he needed confidence and a lift, but I did not want him to be too good, too early. I made a coaching decision to sneakily inject some intensity into his programme early in his progression three to four weeks prior to the Ironman 70.3 Timberman held in August 2011. I pushed him on the bike and scaled back any intense running. I wanted him to feel powerful on his bike again. The result was a surging win at Timberman 70.3, and won by a convincing bike display. This was a huge

confidence boost and lift, but one that might be full of risk for being great in October.

In conjunction of this training approach, we also went to work on the cramps, consulting with multiple people much smarter than me on this subject, to find a solution. I felt some of the issue may be accumulated fatigue, and we injected a little more light training and recovery into the programme to ensure he muscles were healthy, not just strong.

The result in Hawaii was not what we hoped for with immediate cramps and a day long struggle. Obviously a massive disappointment for coach and athlete, and a cross-roads for Rasmus. I felt he needed to step away for a couple of weeks and let the race sink in. While he recuperated I reviewed the fact we hadn't found a solution to the cramping, which still baffled me, and the training changes had not had time to take full effect. The risk did not provide our hoped returns.

Ironically, this failure was the catalyst for real evolution and problem solving. Rasmus returned hungrier than ever, but truly ready to evolve the approach. We both realised we had seen too much good in training to be derailed by one bad day, and it is the sign of a great athlete to fully understand and accept this. We spent the pre-season winter months developing a training programme to progress the bike, solve the cramping issues, reignite swim ability and extinguish any nagging injury problems. We now had the opportunity to build a season, instead of simply implementing a risky intervention.

Key areas of focus and training were:

- **Nutrition:** A complete overhaul of nutrition, including pre-hydration leading up to the race, race morning and fuel for the race. If I was to nail down one fundamental shift in the type of fuelling, it was to shift him from an electrolyte replenishment protocol of mainly sodium chloride to focusing on sodium citrate based solution through pre-hydration and race intake. We, of course, did not ignore other electrolytes, but shifted this as a primary area of focus. Outside of the lab, one area of sports performance that I have yet to see a really conclusive understanding of it electrolyte replenishment. Many will claim they understand the ideal solution for everyone, but in the field it seems like it is highly individual as to the right recipe for the right person.
- **Training:** Become more specific on training intensity and recovery. I tend to fall away from focusing on how many hours of training an athlete does, and more on what they need to get done in each week. We developed a wider range of weekly intensity hit, with easy being easier, and fast being very fast.

- **Rebuild the strengths:** Assessing what his major weapons are and playing to these strengths. Sometimes athletes and coaches focus so much on mitigating weakness, they forget to maximise strengths.
- **Build a progressive season:** Make training and racing choices that could allow progression and full preparation. This included adding Panama 70.3 to the schedule, simply to arrive to Adu Dhabi race-ready.
- **Live on his experience:** I felt Rasmus had to realise his previous experiences, as well as years of training, had not gone anywhere. Short course World Cup racing provides massive experience and wisdom, and while long course is a different event, racing experience and training doesn't just evaporate.

During the initial months of training Rasmus was able to maintain a really patient approach and marvellous consistency. I integrated a philosophy of trying to get in front of the fatigue, so placing lighter days into the session before he was desperate for



them. This enabled him to consistently hit the key sessions of each week, and not lose enthusiasm for the process. Beyond the training we strategised and focused heavily on nutrition, which is still a work in progress but evolving rapidly. While our final recipe is not finalised, we have managed to get a more solid lead up into the race, as well as tweaks to how he fuels during the race.

RESULTS SO FAR

So far we have encouraging results and it is important to note the so far part. Rasmus is smart enough to understand that a single performance does not make up a season. In the same way as the disappointment in Kona last year did not derail him, the success of Abu Dhabi will not make him complacent. The win at Abu Dhabi was simply a stepping stone toward the goals he has, but also a tremendous boost of confidence in his ability and the process. Any athlete can learn a lot in both success and failure, and analysis of the good and bad from Abu Dhabi is critical. We must also continue to evolve and learn how he responds to training load, how much training

he can positively respond to and what the final nutrition solution is for him. He is never a completed journey that ends, but a continued path of learning and tweaking.

THE LESSONS

The interesting and valuable lesson to you, as an athlete, is that every problem or barrier is one that can be fixed. Athletic barriers and challenges are not often simple or immediate fixes, instead they usually require a lot of thought, patience, assessment and risk. I am always amazed by how many athletes I see who repeat the same mistakes time and time again, and fail to truly fix a massive performance issue through either fear of change, or lacking the capacity or courage to do what is necessary to make the change.

The reason that Rasmus has the CV he does, and while he has every opportunity to progress and build on it even more, is that he has the patience, resilience and courage to truly do what it takes to improve. It sounds simple, but it is hard for so many. I can only hope to keep being able to assist him to the best of my ability. 🗣️



EVOLUTION OF TRAINING: TYPICAL SESSION CHANGES

Swim

Most triathletes enjoy single paced swimming at or around 80 per cent effort. It suits their strengths and natural make up. Rasmus comes from short course racing and requires some longer swimming, but needs to maintain the top end speed (weapon) he has. This is a great main set for any triathlete getting ready for open water swimming:

- 800 Pull (snorkel, buoy, band) at 70 –75% with 1 minute rest.
- 8x1 00 Short rest, swim at 85% (on 1:20 for Rasmus)
- 800 Pull (snorkel, buoy, band) at 70 - 75 % with 1 min rest.
- 8 x 1 00 Fast at 95 % output with ~ 30 rest (on 1:40 for Rasmus)*

* These 1 00's should be two to five seconds per 1 00 faster than what was held on short rest, which is tough for many triathletes.

Bike

Instead of simply completing a four hour endurance ride with some endurance/ Ironman type race pace near the end, we shifted to specific endurance work just under, at and above that effort (let's call it Zone 3). A four-hour ride would be broken up as:

- 60min Warm up
- 60min As (20min under, 20min at, 20min above Abu Dhabi pace)
- 15min Easy Zone 2
- 45min (15 min under, 15 min at, 15 min above Abu Dhabi pace)
- 15min Easy
- 30min All at or above Abu Dhabi pace
- Home

Run

Long course racing is not just about speed, an athlete needs real strength. We shifted the emphasis from a speed session, toward a strength session that would translate into controlled tempo/race pace effort. I like athletes to be able to transfer strength into faster (race pace) running on flats. A typical session would be:

- 15min Warm up, smooth and light
- 6 - 8 x 15 sec strides to open gait and hit good form (1 min rest between)
- 2 rounds of:
 - 4 x 3min on 4 - 5% grade at Zone 3/4 effort (not pace)
 - Run down easy with good form
 - Straight into: 1 x 12min progress into last 8min at Abu Dhabi/70.3 race pace
 - Rest 4 - 5 min between each round
- Cool down