

MATT DIXON

BUSY LIVING

You have aspirations, the best intentions and you're motivated, but your weekly training is so often limited with that full bucket of life you have to deal with. Sound familiar? So many triathletes face the challenges of daily life in which we compress more and more, and end up with a training approach that sits *on top* of life, instead of being integrated into life to make a sustainable and effective training approach. This month *Triathlete Europe's* resident coach, Matt Dixon, looks at the best approach to fitting in training and applying sessions appropriately to get the most from your time available.

Ironically, many of the published articles in major triathlon magazines seem to either focus on those with limitless time, or promote fake 'get rich quick' schemes to bypass the need for hard and consistent work. What follows does not include any shortcuts to the work required. There are no secrets to success beyond hard and smart graft. Instead, it is about maximising what you *do have* to work with, and how to manage your training within a busy and fluctuating life.

SETTING THE STAGE

Before we delve into the tools and strategies you can use to plan and execute training in a busy week, or how to manage or adjust training if a day or week gets crazy, let's define the lens we look through for the pursuit of performance generally.

You will *improve* if you can be *consistent* in your training with a plan that delivers *specificity* and *progression*. In fact, when asked about elements that make up improvement for athletes, I always seem to fall back on four key words:

Consistency: more than the need for big days, successful training is stringing together many weeks, months and even seasons of consistent training.

Progression: Your training dose must progress throughout each phase of training and each season. I like to think of it as not being 'performance ready' too early, but to be in prime fitness and readiness at the

perfect phase of the year when your key events take place.

Specificity: Your training needs to be specific to your goals, where you are at in your season, your own background and profile, and your life commitments.

Patience: to create and execute on all of the above requires a tremendous amount of patience and perseverance.

You have to set this framework in your mind as you approach both the work and also your training in general. The mission is consistency, hence layering weeks and months of training on top of each other that you are able to adapt to in a positive fashion. This leads into the consideration of how much training is appropriate, a question I receive almost daily, but one that doesn't have a clear example. I cannot tell you how many hours you should train for an Olympic distance, half Ironman or Ironman event, because it is entirely dependent on your background and experience, as well as the other life commitments you have. Instead, I can tell you that the goal is to maximise your training time, while remaining in a positive state of adaptation. You can translate this to ensure you plan and execute training that you have time for, and that your body can absorb and positively adapt to, within the framework of life. Of course, this is a topic that is worthy of its own article, but it at least provides the framework of how I look at training for all level of athletes.



SETTING UP YOUR WEEK

If you are busy and have limited opportunities for training you do need to plan a little and give real consideration to *when and how* you set up training. Luckily, there is a pretty simple process to go through. Once you have the below established, you have a great opportunity of making your key training sessions *habitual*, versus things you hope to squeeze in. Habits become automatic. Automatic equals consistency.



First, an example to provide clarity on how it works for our athletes. One of the key programmes at purplepatch are the guided training programmes, which are the backbone for our 'virtual training squad' for triathletes. We have athletes all over the world with massively different levels, goals and backgrounds, as well as varying schedules and time-commitments to train, who all utilise the progressive training plan. My barrier was how to deliver training that was specific and progressive for all athletes without forcing

them into schedules that would never work. This is a massive issue for generic programmes.

To solve this problem I simply utilised a concept I use in framing all individually coached athletes training, and built the weeks of training around key, or *foundational* sessions. These 'do not miss' sessions act as the bedrock of the training week, usually two per discipline (swim, bike run), and are then supplemented with a range of supporting, or optional workouts. This allows each athlete to centre their training around key focus

sessions, with some athletes only having time to complete these within any week, whereas others having time to support with all of the supporting workouts. This solution creates a couple of positive things; first, it provides focus and specificity for the athletes around the training week, and secondly also allows them to manage their training more effectively, and make smart decisions as to what sessions they *must get in*, while others can be the first to be trimmed or culled. You, as the busy athlete, can learn from this approach.

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The first thing to do is look at your typical week of training and carve out time slots that you can *nearly always* allot to training, then, look at secondary times of the week that you can *usually hit* (note: the *nearly always* should be at 'good times' to train, so 4am is not what I have in mind for these slots!). From this, you can establish set times that you have a good shot at hitting nearly every week. Concurrently, look at your training plan and identify the key sessions in each discipline (swim, bike, run).

You should have a couple of key sessions in each sport and these should be the bedrock of your training week. You should try to place these key sessions in the slots you can *nearly always* train. As simplistic as this sounds, by doing this, you are more likely to hit the most specific and foundational sessions of training each week, and you then have a more flexible range of slots to place the other supporting workouts. I don't need to tell you which workouts get trimmed if your life gets even busier one week and you are forced to cull

some workouts. When this happens you should still be able to get in the key sessions if you've planned well.

THE DAILY BUST

There will be times when an individual day gets crunched. What happens when your time for an individual session gets limited? If your workouts are built with purpose and thought, it shouldn't be too hard to still get an effective, albeit lessened, workout in. I typically like any training session to be built in four main progressive sequences; warm up, a pre-main (technical or secondary warm up) set, a main set and an additional speed (neuromuscular) or smooth set to finish. If you are running tight on time, the first places to trim are the warm up, pre-main set and additional set, aiming to retain the central focus of the workout.

If you are still limited on time, and unable to get in the 'meat and potatoes' of the session, then I typically ask athletes to trim the *number* of any intervals prescribed, instead of the *length* of any intervals. An example, if I prescribed eight repetitions of 400 metres in the pool, you might not have time to get the full session in. I would much rather you squeeze in four or five of the 400's, instead of being able to complete eight repetitions of 200 metres. While it takes a similar time to complete it's a very different stressor.

Your mission should always be to complete the full workout but sometimes it is impossible to achieve. This strategy allows you to maximise the time you have versus simply pulling the plug all together. I should note that you will be forced to make decisions along the way to balance your training time with factors such as properly prepared meals and adequate sleep. This is not something to be taken lightly, although many athletes think of proper eating and enough sleep as factors to potentially squeeze in, once the hard work is done.

Remember your training programme is only effective, and will only produce the intended results, if it is supported by proper nutrition and quality recovery and sleep. You simply cannot train and thrive on a 'diet' of quick-meals and bars, along with three to five hours sleep per night. In the real world some early morning sessions might be needed to train at all, but I always aim to limit athletes waking up very early for training to no more than two or three times per week. I would





argue that consistently applied slightly abbreviated workouts that are supported with plenty of sleep, proper nutrition and hydration, will always out-perform full workouts supported with poor sleep and nutrition focus.

POST-WORK TIREDNESS

Many people feel exhausted after a long day at work. For busy people the ideal time to workout is in the morning hours, and if you can schedule this in all the better. If this is impossible you need to be more flexible in the application of your plan. Let's imagine you have a set of running hill intervals to do following a busy and exhausting workday. Quite a daunting prospect because you more likely feel like dropping into the couch. What should you do in this situation? Does the recovery coach tell you to go home and rest? Not at all. The initial action is *get started* with a warm up, as so often you will feel better once the blood starts moving. Suspend your disbelief and warm up for 10-15 minutes. If you feel great, then roll on with the set, or some abbreviated version of it as time allows.

If you still feel fatigued and tired, and the tank feels as though you are close to empty, there is little value to following these intervals, as your body simply won't adapt. Instead, switch to a 'free-form build' run. This is a run, normally 40 to 50 minutes in duration, in which you begin very easy and gradually increase intensity as you go. If you feel better, edge up intensity again, once settled and better, edge it up again, and so on. You use your own perceived effort and what your body is telling you as your governor of intensity and effort. If your engine opens up, you will finish strong, but if you remain tired, it becomes a floating easy shake out run. Either way, you got *something of value* in the session. If you are smart you will realise that a shake out run means your body is telling you something, and you better get fuelling, hydrating and resting to restore your place of positive adaptation.

The athletes that listen and respond to the signals and what the body tells us are the athletes with great longevity and long-term performance. I call them 'high IQ' athletes. Remember your training is written on a piece of paper with the best intentions, but a smart athlete will honestly apply that

plan in conjunction with how their body reacts. Consistency, patience, progression and specificity are key. Take the long-term lens and create a path and journey that works for you and your life. 📌

