



DO YOU REALLY NEED TO TAPER?

We all know the best way to taper is to cut back the training and chow down on pasta, right? Well, some experts would disagree. We take a look at the ideal pre-race week

WORDS NICK BUSCA ILLUSTRATIONS DANIEL SEEX

Coaching athletes means keeping an eye on whether they're following their training. Back in May, I noticed an athlete hadn't completed his session at Zone 4 as per his plan. I asked him why and got this reply: "To be honest, I thought it was a mistake as it was so close to race day, so I did it easy." He's not alone in his thinking, either. Most age-groupers think 'it's tapering, I can slow down and relax'. So is the idea of 'tapering' actually one big scam?

Well, even if tapering is defined as an 'intentional reduction in the athlete's training load before an objective competition' (Stephen J. McGregor, *Tapering and Peaking for Races*), the reduction in volume doesn't mean a reduction in intensity. Because losing both volume *and* intensity in the tapering period can actually be detrimental to your performance. So, how can you get rid of fatigue yet be fresh for your race? We asked five experts to give you all the answers. ►



“Tapering is about becoming fresh while still being ready to race”

TRAINING LOAD

Several studies have shown that in order to get into good shape and be prepared for an event, a reduction in training volume can improve the race performance if the intensity is maintained. Volume here is the duration of the workouts rather than their frequency.

“Tapering is all about becoming fresh while maintaining a relatively high race-preparedness,” says Joe Friel. His normal prescription of volume reduction during the tapering depends on each athlete and the length of the tapering. It usually fluctuates from a 30% up to a 50% reduction compared to the volumes of the build period.

“In the last 2-3 weeks [of the plan and ahead of the A-race], I reduce

training volume, in general, from what it had been in the build period by 30-50% depending on the length of the taper – about 30% for 3 weeks and 50% for 2 weeks,” he says.

Depending on the race length, the tapering window becomes even more specific. “The longer the race, the longer the taper,” says Friel. “That’s because the preparation before long races usually imposes much greater stress on the athlete, so it takes longer to remove it. But there are exceptions.”

Even though both elite athletes and age-groupers benefit from tapering, their actual response to it, and how it’s scheduled, differs. “Elite athletes tend to recover much more quickly from stressful training than age-groupers, so elites are likely to benefit more from a shorter taper,” says Friel.

JOE FRIEL

Joe Friel is the author of top training books *Going Long* and *The Triathlete’s Training Bible*, and is one of the founders of the online training software, TrainingPeaks.

Because of the specifics of swimming, biking and running, the tapering approach to each discipline can also differ. “The decrease is greatest for the run due to the orthopedic stress it puts on the legs,” says Friel. “So I’d typically start that discipline’s taper three weeks out. Then around two weeks out I’d taper the bike... And for the swim, the taper is about a week. The swim is the easiest to recover from so that’s why it can wait longer.”

You might have also started to feel niggles and are worried you’re getting injured during the taper – that’s the ‘tapering syndrome’ reveals Friel. “It’s when an athlete senses aches, pains, or even slight injuries while tapering. Nothing is being done by the athlete that would produce such sensations – yet it seems to be quite common.”

TRAINING INTENSITY

In order to maintain a high level of fitness ahead of the event, high-intensity training must be preserved. This will sharpen your race-readiness and form. A double decrease – i.e. in both volume and intensity – could lead to lethargic performance. Still, every athlete is different and every race presents a different bill.

“It varies from athlete to athlete; there’s no secret formula, and also it depends on what they’re actually training for and the training load leading into their A-race,” says coach Richard Laidlow. “From an intensity point of view, I’d keep the

intensity relatively similar and put in one or two sharp intervals where their intensity would increase by 1–2%. But it depends what training the athletes have done before.”

Although the taper is mostly tailored to each individual athlete, Laidlow often applies intense sessions within the tapering of all his athletes. “Quite often I’d get the athletes going up to short VO₂max sessions, because what I’ve noticed is athletes tend to get lethargic. So, if they’ve gone from a high volume and they drop down to a lower volume two weeks prior to their major race, they start feeling lethargic because they haven’t put in the actual effort.

“In taking them into short VO₂max sort of intervals, for example 30:30 (30secs hard, 30

RICHARD LAIDLLOW

Richard is the lead coach of Sancture Sportifs, a triathlon academy based in the French Pyrenees. His son Sam, 18, won the ETU Junior European Cup in 2016.

easy), that keeps the athletes sharp without putting too much stress into it.

“What I try to do in the final week,” adds Laidlow, “is ‘triples’: with 30sec intervals with 1:30min jogs in between, just to keep the athletes sharp and fast (do one of these for each discipline). But it depends again on who they are and what training they’ve done.”

But there’s another component that plays a role in preparing the athletes for the race: their mindset. “The physiological aspect for me isn’t as important as the psychological aspect within a short period of time,” adds Laidlow. “If an athlete is taking off too much training for two weeks before the race, they can think that they’re going to lose fitness.” ▶



“Maintaining high-intensity training will sharpen your form”



“One of the most common casualties of an age-grouper’s training plan is a lack of sleep”



REST & RECOVERY

As far as recovery and sleep during the tapering period go, the last thing you want to do is to reinvent the wheel in the final stretch. “Familiarity and consistency are the keys,” says Matt Dixon. “People are always looking for something magic in the taper – and, in fact, the magic thing is familiarity.”

“In the taper, you don’t need to start taking huge naps during the day and you don’t suddenly need to start sleeping 10hrs a day. Sleep your regular amount, make sure it’s good quality sleep and make sure you’re not compromising it.”

Because age-grouper are trying to integrate training with a busy life, says Dixon, sleep is something that they sometimes sacrifice. “Many people end up arriving at races very fit, but fatigued. The reason is that they’ve followed a training programme that’s too focused on the simple accumulation of training hours, rather than actually a pragmatic training programme where they truly maximise the number of hours that they have.

“One of the common casualties of an age-grouper’s training plan is sleep,” continues Dixon. “Sleep is the most important recovery tool athletes have and it has to be part of the programme. I’d rather people train slightly less and do it effectively, rather than compromising their sleep.”

Instead of over-tapering ahead of the event because of the accumulated fatigue, Dixon suggests including in the plan a pre-tapering period of 2-4 days before the taper itself when the

MATT DIXON

California-based Brit Matt Dixon is the coach of many top pro athletes, the author of *The Well-Built Triathlete* and head coach of Purplepatch coaching.

priority is sleep – just to rejuvenate and get fresh again.

Finally, there are three key things that you shouldn’t forget in the tapering weeks. “Number one is you don’t want to enter a taper period really tired and have to try digging yourself out of a hole. A good clean out before you’re actually into the sharpening last two weeks is good. The second thing is that you want to maintain the same pattern and rhythm of training. Number three, don’t introduce anything else; the body responds best to familiarity.”



ESSENTIAL FUELLING TIPS FOR THE TAPER

Our Ironman-certified coach Nick Busca gives his essential race-week nutrition advice

1 Practise your race nutrition and fuelling plan again. Where will you keep your bars and gels on the bike? How many will you need and when will you take them? Don't leave these details for the very last day.

2 Make sure that weight-gain won't happen in the last few weeks because of the reduced training volume. As the training intensity will remain high, keep balancing the calories expense with a proper intake plan.

3 Don't exaggerate with the carb-loading during the last days before the race. It's key to have enough energy storage, but it's also important to know how your body responds to different foods to avoid stomach distress.

“Nutrition plays a crucial role in an athlete’s training plan”

RACE-WEEK NUTRITION

Often considered tri's fourth discipline, nutrition plays a crucial role in an athlete's training program, particularly on long events like 70.3 and full Ironman. The main point to keep in mind isn't to try new things during the taper.

“I just make sure that the athletes have enough calorie intake to match their calorie expenditure. And also, that they still get the optimal ratio of carbohydrates, proteins and fats for what they need to do,” says Will Girling. “In this period I make sure that weight gain isn't happening as the training volume decreases.

“I wouldn't say that there's something extravagant happening

in the week leading up to a race,” continues Girling, “but in the last few days coming up to the race, that's the most crucial time for nutrition: the carb-loading starts coming in and then other factors like fibre reduction, potentially.”

Although it helps digestion, fibre tends to stay longer in your digestive tract and could cause stomach distress. But what about the most important – and perhaps misunderstood – aspect for an endurance athlete ahead of a race, namely the carb-loading?

“Carb-loading is a funny one,” says Girling. “There are several different ways to do it. Historically, carb-loading has been done three days before an event, but recent studies have shown that you can get the same level of muscle glycogen storage (what you're trying to store

WILL GIRLING

Will Girling is the head nutritionist for the ONE Pro cycling team and personal nutritionist to a number of triathletes.

in carb-loading) in one day. This is by consuming 10g of carbs/per kg of body weight the day before.

“I do a modified taper for an Ironman as it's longer, and I normally do a 36hr carb-loading. This would be the full day beforehand carb-loading, and then normally the afternoon and evening two days out. What I find here is that you get the maximum amount of storage, but you're not having two three to four days of really high consumption – which can mentally be quite difficult as athletes can worry about their weight and that could be psychologically detrimental as they feel heavier.”

As nutrition is unique for every athlete, make sure you practise it well ahead of your main race, in your B-races, long training rides and runs. ▶



“An evergreen tip is to do a recce of the course before the race”

RACING MINDSET

Arriving physically and mentally fresh at the taper is crucial to performing well. At the same time, for a busy athlete, it's hard to concentrate just on training. Furthermore, even a short trip to the race destination can put a lot of stress on your body: mentally, physically and emotionally.

“You'd imagine that you'd suddenly have lots of time on your hands, but the 'extra' hours are quickly filled; packing, organising, travelling, race briefings, team meetings... Race weeks are often quite busy so you don't have time to worry about the lower training volumes,” says Non Stanford. “The biggest psychological factor is the impending race, rather than the

taper. Building apprehension, excitement and emotions, these are probably the hardest things to try and comprehend.”

Stanford's tapering depends mostly on the significance of the race rather than on its distance (sprint or Olympic), and the most important race of the season is normally the ITU WTS Grand Final. A full taper would start the weekend before the race and it'd involve less volume, but still quality sessions. “The role of tapering,” she says, “is equally important for the mind and the body.

“Some of it's trial and error and finding what works best for you. There's definitely a degree of 'superstition' to everyone's taper week, too; if there's something specific that you've done during one particular taper and you've

NON STANFORD

Welsh short-course star Non Stanford is the 2013 ITU World Triathlon Series Champion, who finished fourth at the 2016 Rio Olympic Games.

subsequently raced well, it'll probably become part of your regular taper routine, just in case. Generally, though, you should get to the start line well rested and well fuelled. Put your feet up as much as possible, eat good, nutritious food, keep hydrated and stay relaxed both mentally and physically.”

An evergreen tip is to do a recce of the course before the race. “Knowing the course, and what lies ahead is important, especially if the the bike is known to be technical,” says Non. “I always like to try and ride and run the course beforehand and, where possible, see a course profile a few weeks or months out so that I can specifically prepare as best possible. But this isn't always doable and I've definitely raced a few races 'blind', with both good and bad results!” **220**