

THE PILLARS OF PERFORMANCE

The first in a series of articles by Purplepatch Fitness founder Matt Dixon highlighting his fresh approach to triathlon training.

By Matt Dixon, MSc



COURTESY MATT DIXON

If I were forced to choose one word that encompasses what all athletes are in search of, it would be *performance*. Whether you are a professional triathlete targeting the top step of the podium or a weekend warrior trying to improve on your last event, you are aiming for performance. It may seem obvious, but there is a glut of misinformation and antiquated training approaches dominating endurance sports, and you may well be consuming, albeit unwittingly, some or much of it. There has been a change in how the smartest athletes and coaches approach their training: they are now including recovery, nutrition and fueling, and core stability and mobility as key components. Combined with swimming, biking and running, these are the *Pillars of Performance*.

Over the coming months, I will outline the framework and philosophy behind the *Pillars of Performance* and provide a path to help you achieve your best performance. This path has strong similarities to the approach I use for the professional athletes I coach. Though you might not be training like an elite, the core foundation and methods remain identical.

In this first article, I present the overall philosophy and approach to achieving performance. I question the long-established mindset to training for endurance events, such as Ironman triathlon, and call for a change in our way of thinking. The traditional “*more is better—you must suffer to succeed*” mentality should shift toward a broader, more comprehensive philosophy that expands your focus beyond merely swimming, biking and running. Although I provide a five-step “path to performance” (see sidebar), this is not a cookie-cutter recipe for success, but rather an introduction to a way of thinking. It can help shape your training decisions and empower you to quash the confidence-sucking emotional responses that often cloud good

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judgment in training. In subsequent articles, I'll delve deeper into the individual pillars that complement swim, bike, and run training.

CURRENT STATE. Make no mistake; there are some excellent athletes and coaches in our sport, doing wonderful things. We owe a lot to the early generation of triathletes who paved the way for the sport, allowing it to flourish and grow as it has. Much of the mystique that exists around triathlon is thanks to the massive-mileage training and epic racing of the early years. The common training philosophy of the day—*more is better; only the tough survive!*—still dominates today. But does this really result in optimal performance?

THE MOTIVATED ATHLETE WILL GO BACK TO TRAINING WITH A HEARTY DECLARATION TO PUSH EVEN HARDER—LIKELY ENDING UP EVEN FARTHER IN THE HOLE.

Many athletes and coaches build training around the simple accumulation of hours of swimming, biking and running, squeezing in as much time as the body or schedule can handle, assuming good results will follow. It is an endless pursuit of just a little more cardiovascular fitness that will hopefully provide that last step to achieving top potential and great performance. Cardiovascular fitness is seldom the limiter in performance, yet volume of training still dominates as the central focus of most training regimens. This restricted focus on swimming, biking and running relieves concepts such as recovery, nutrition and fueling, and core stability and mobility to mere afterthoughts.

CURRENT RESULTS. The result of pure swim, bike and run focus and big miles is athletes who are stuck in a cycle of training hard and being very fit, but also being consistently tired, often injured, and/or failing to perform well or live up to their potential. This is rampant at the elite level, and is nearly as common throughout the amateur ranks,

where the additional responsibilities of work, school, family, etc. add to the stress of heavy training. Many of these hard-working athletes constantly succumb to injuries, a symptom of their musculoskeletal system being ill-prepared to handle the stress of swimming, biking and running without parallel improvements to mobility and strength. The result is very fit people who are not as prepared as a complete athlete. They are structurally weak, lack mobility, and are over-tired and undernourished.

These symptoms are difficult to spot on a day-to-day basis (i.e., easily disguised while training), but normally become exposed when it counts—while racing. It becomes really apparent toward the end of an event, when fatigue sets in and performance crashes. Unfortunately the normal emotional response to fatigue, cramps or suffering late in a race is, quite naturally, to blame lack of fitness or race-day nutrition. The motivated athlete will go back to training with a hearty declaration to push even harder—likely ending up even farther in the hole.

UNDERSTANDING PERFORMANCE.

To set yourself up for optimal performance you need to make *physiological adaptations*. Whether you are improving fitness, strength and power, or body composition, your body will improve through a complex set of adaptations resulting from a correctly dosed training stimulus. You likely understand this in its most basic form, as it is the very reason all athletes train, but it is also critical to understand that optimal training adaptations will only occur if you are metabolically healthy. In this context, metabolic health is more than the absence of disease; it also encompasses a strong immune system and hormonal profile that is in homeostasis (balance) with the stresses applied to it on a daily basis. As mentioned earlier, the accumulation of stress comes from exercise (training), but also from the endless challenges we face in everyday life such as work, school, relationships, travel, etc. Proper nutrition and fueling, in terms of timing, quality and quantity, as well as proper recovery and sleep, are fundamental in promoting good metabolic health.

RESETTING YOUR LENS. Imagine that you have no history in sports, no knowledge of how people have approached training before

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or how others do it now. If we sat down and discussed training, and I broke it down into several components, it would likely appear pretty logical. Swimming, biking and running would be key, but I would also discuss nutrition, functional strength and mobility, as well as recovery, as key considerations to attaining optimal performance. My guess is that you would not put up much protest. If we think of the swim, bike and run as "cardiovascular fitness," then these training elements are the essentials for *any athlete in any sport*. This is a key point, as when I coach athletes, my first goal is to turn them into *high-performing athletes*, and then train them specifically for triathlon. Every single top performer in any endurance sport has a solid balance of functional strength, cardiovascular fitness and strong metabolic profile from proper recovery and nutrition. The ones that repeatedly perform at the very highest level maintain this profile and key components throughout their careers. They also tend to experience fewer injuries and more consistent results.

ESTABLISHING A TRAINING PROGRAM. When building your training program I urge you to think of yourself as an athlete who specializes in triathlon. To do this you have to place equal importance on all aspects of fitness—not just swimming, biking and running, but also recovery, nutrition, and functional strength and mobility—your *Pillars of Performance*. This may sound simple, but treating these pillars as equals will result in a more logical decision-making process, enabling you to program in essential recovery without guilt, and promoting necessary structural integrity that will provide the platform to safely (i.e., with fewer injuries) swim, bike and run. Below is a bit more on the "new" pillars of this training plan. We'll cover them in more depth in future articles.

PATH TO PERFORMANCE

STEP ONE ➤ SET YOUR NORTH STAR (GOAL).

What are you trying to accomplish in the coming two to three years? What are you trying to accomplish this year?

STEP TWO ➤ CREATE YOUR ROADMAP.

Without direction you will forever be lost. Determine the path toward your North Star. Things might happen to alter that map—you must consistently revisit it and adapt it to life's situations—but the journey can remain on course.

STEP THREE ➤ ASSESS YOUR CURRENT TRAINING.

Are you training to be an athlete or simply training? Are you recovering enough to optimize your hard work? Is your chassis getting as much attention as your heart?

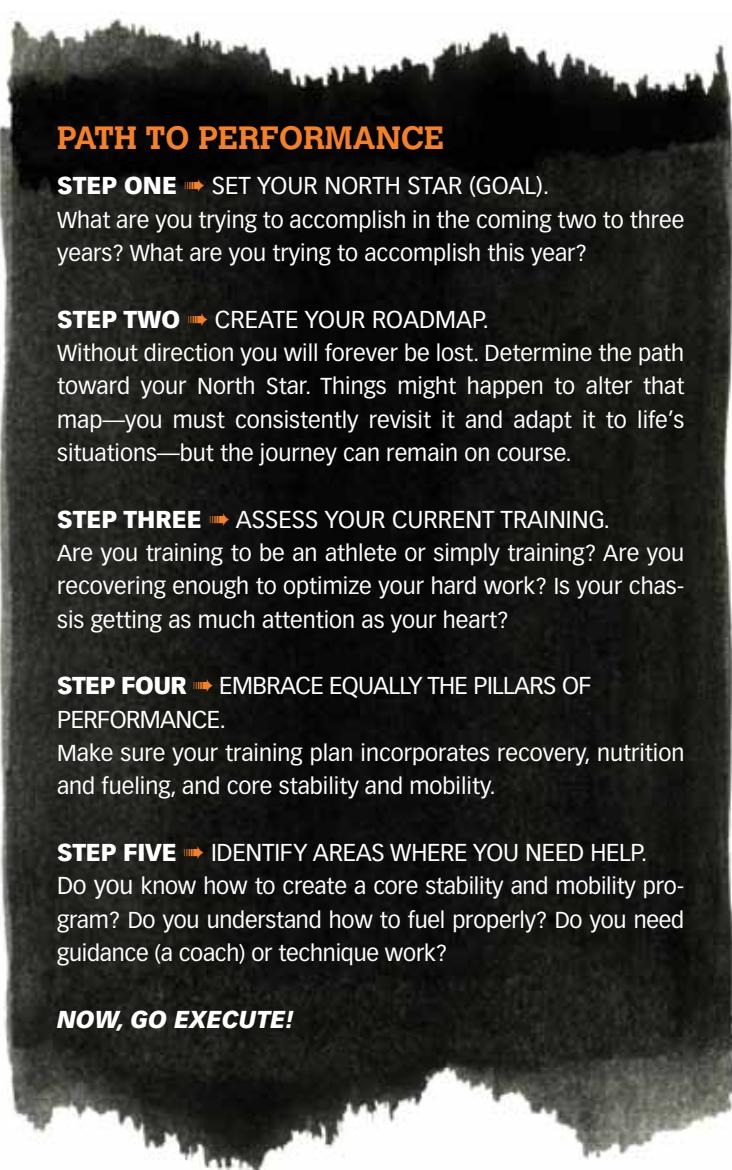
STEP FOUR ➤ EMBRACE EQUALLY THE PILLARS OF PERFORMANCE.

Make sure your training plan incorporates recovery, nutrition and fueling, and core stability and mobility.

STEP FIVE ➤ IDENTIFY AREAS WHERE YOU NEED HELP.

Do you know how to create a core stability and mobility program? Do you understand how to fuel properly? Do you need guidance (a coach) or technique work?

NOW, GO EXECUTE!



Recovery: This is the most often ignored component of training, and perhaps the most important. It is easy to understand why many skip it—after all, we get no validation of performance gains when we are recovering—but its importance cannot be overstated. I tend to schedule at least two days of each training week as what I call “blue” days—days on which the goal is to place no additional physiological stress on your metabolic health and purely promote recovery and adaptations. I find many of my athletes are hesitant to schedule in recovery, but quickly become much more keen as our relationship develops and they observe the positive effects. Rather than viewing these days as lost training days, realize that they are a key component in achieving optimal performance.

Nutrition and fueling: Proper nutrition and fueling can be broken down into the quality of what you are taking in, the timing, and the number of calories you ingest. If there is one area that is more confusing than any other, it has to be fueling and nutrition. Fuel is food and drink you take in during (and right before and after) a workout. Nutrition encompasses the rest of your eating and drink-

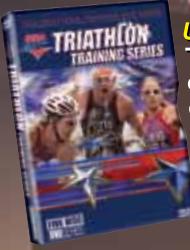
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ing. For highly active athletes, such as Ironman and Ironman 70.3 participants, the most common issue I see in this area is under-fueling relative to energy expenditure. In order to

in pursuit of muscle growth. A proper functional strength and mobility program will facilitate massive improvements in biomechanics, efficiency, neuromuscular recruitment

CONCLUSION. They say insanity is “doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.” You don’t need to give up your “crazy triathlete” identity, but if your training consists solely or primarily of swimming, biking and running (especially in massive quantities), and it has left you frequently injured, always tired, regularly underperforming, or simply feeling you’re not meeting your goals or potential, it’s time to make a change. It’s time to embrace equally recovery, fueling and nutrition, and core stability and mobility—core components of the *Pillars of Performance*. ▀

A PROPER FUNCTIONAL STRENGTH AND MOBILITY PROGRAM WILL FACILITATE MASSIVE IMPROVEMENTS IN BIOMECHANICS, EFFICIENCY, NEUROMUSCULAR RECRUITMENT AND INJURY PREVENTION.

promote loss of body fat for many of the athletes I work with, I often find myself persuading people to exercise less while eating more. Yes, you read that correctly.

Core stability and mobility: There is a lot of controversy about the role of strength training in endurance sports, namely, whether athletes benefit from strength training. Much of this comes from a perception that strength training consists of “pumping iron”

and injury prevention. It should consist of exercises that create improvements in joint stability and range of motion, transfer of power in sport-specific movements, and lay the structural platform to gain maximal benefits from our key sport-specific training (swim, bike, run). In a future article I will explore some key concepts in functional movement and set forth a plan for you to integrate into your training.

Stay tuned for Matt Dixon’s next article, where he will be discussing the differences between fueling and nutrition. “Unfortunately the drive of many athletes to lose fat and weight has led many of them to under-eat relative to their training needs,” says Dixon. He will explain his philosophy on finding one’s optimal body composition by respecting the unique caloric needs of an athlete and ignoring the often confusing and misleading nutritional information out there.



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“For physical training is of some value, but Godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.”
(1 Timothy 4:8)



“May you experience the love of Christ, though it is so great you will never fully understand it. Then you will be filled with the fullness of life and power that comes from God.” (Ephesians 3:19)

A TRIATHLON TEAM WITH A PURPOSE