

Rest More, Race Faster

In his feature last month, top triathlon coach Matt Dixon from purplepatch introduced his four pillars approach to training, emphasising the importance of giving each equal time to achieve a balanced training programme. These four pillars - training, nutrition, functional strength and recovery – all need to be working in unison to achieve best results. He outlined the importance for all athletes, regardless of level and experience, to maintain a state of good health and vibrancy in order to improve. This month, Dixon looks deeper into the recovery pillar of his theory.



Finding your own optimal performance is a journey that will have many twists and turns. It's not always as straightforward as you may hope but committing to a training approach that puts health first will always lay the runway to success. Stemming from this fundamental belief, purplepatch considers the four pillars of performance to carry equal emotional and philosophical value when creating a training programme. These pillars include your main sport (in this case swimming, biking and running), recovery, nutrition and functional strength. The reason for outlining the four elements of training as pillars is to cement into the minds of our athletes the absolute importance of each area. Many athletes have a tendency to place hard training as the priority and then think about recovery, nutrition and functional strength if time allows. I see many athletes under-perform because of their over-training.

This month I am going to focus on the recovery pillar. Reaping the rewards of recovery starts with understanding how it benefits you (comprehension), choosing to embrace it (value it and commit to it), and integrating it into your training (integrate it).

Benefits of Recovery

As you read this there is a good chance you are nodding your head agreeing that proper recovery is paramount to performance gains. Most knowledgeable athletes understand this but you might also be thinking about your busy schedule, how much training you have to get done and how there simply isn't time to recover properly. It is the consequence of the sport and our busy lives. This is the

common outlook on recovery, and combining this with the fact that many athletes don't understand how to properly recover, it gets relegated to an afterthought, or, if lucky, an occasional easy day thrown into the training plan. Viewing recovery as such is missing the point.

Many athletes think of recovery as simply a period of rejuvenation following a workout, obviously a part of the equation, but truly integrated recovery is designed to keep you metabolically healthy and allow you to maintain a body that is able to absorb the hard training. With all the internal and external stressors you face in daily life, with the addition of training, your body is facing an ongoing battle to resist and manage stress. If you fail to manage the accumulation of all the stressors, including training stress, your body will be unable to make positive training adaptations. Worse yet, trying to train on a suppressed status of metabolic health risks a total collapse in the form of injury or illness. Nearly all overuse injuries are directly related to an accumulation of too much work relative to your structural ability.

Proper recovery allows you to remain healthy and injury-free with improved energy balance eliciting a set of related outcomes that can become defined in good performance. You will train with consistency which I believe to be one of the secrets of continued success. You will also find it easier to achieve proper body composition, sleep well and even train harder. Proper recovery allows improvements across the board if you do it well and often.



Shifting Your Lens

For the vast majority of athletes a lack of recovery is the biggest weakness in their training and there are many reasons or excuses as to why it is an afterthought for so many. Some of the challenge arises while creating a training programme that includes swimming, biking a running. Another massive issue is based in our own insecurities as athletes with a desire to emulate the top people in the sport. When you recover there is very limited emotional return that builds confidence and is nothing compared to the thrill of completing a tough workout. While it is the perception that the top athletes in the sport train hard every single day, many chase the pain and suffering daily. Anything less is surely to be taking short cuts or being weak. There is no worse feeling than riding easy while thinking about your competitors completing epic workouts. This tendency is compounded by the dominant culture of “more is better,” which applauds epic suffering. Smart training approaches seldom make the news. The truth is that while the sport does demand massive commitment and training, with plenty of





suffering to go along with it, the best in the sport all truly value supporting their own epic training with adequate recovery tactics. The issue is the recovery tactics seldom get talked about.

Before I explain the forms of recovery, and how to build it into your plan, you should really understand the goal outcome of truly making recovery a priority in your plan. The outcome should be the ability to work very hard more consistently. There is no denying that you have to train hard to improve, but balancing the hard work with plenty of smart recovery tactics will allow you to maintain consistency and ensure that you can approach your training with enhanced specificity and effectiveness. It is not an afterthought, but rather a necessary component that requires planning and thought. Recovery should be embraced as much as any of your hard training sessions.

The planning and integration of recovery actually begins with the planning of training itself. Your optimal performance, along with continual

evolution of that performance, will arrive from proper planning. I believe that most athletes require a multi-year plan that will allow progression and stepping stones to facilitate continual gains. With a plan like this you will then be in a place to build recovery in.

Planning Recovery

Implementing recovery into your plan does not simply mean setting aside a day each week and assuming you are good to go. It permeates your training at several levels.

Recovery Phases.

At the highest level of the plan I believe every athlete needs extended periods of rejuvenation with two to three weeks dedicated to greatly decreased structure, training time and commitment to normal training practice. This does not have to mean inactive or wasted time but a time to facilitate emotional recuperation, metabolic restoration and structural repair. Athletes skipping these mini-breaks are normally those who fail to maintain

commitment and enthusiasm throughout the following season with accumulated fatigue often being central to the issue. Do athletes who skip breaks get injured more? I don't have the data to prove it but that would be my inclination.

Recovery Blocks

Within a phase of training I also like to integrate consistent mini breaks of recovery. This will last three to seven days and allows emotional and physical healing and rest without any loss of fitness. I think that more frequent three or four day periods of recovery, completed more frequently, generally facilitate better results. It is not uncommon for me to build a plan that has an athlete going only 10 focus days of training, followed by three days of lower-stress, with multiple cycles of this pattern making up a phase of training.

Recovery Day

Even within this phase of training I would still implement recovery days as needed. A recovery day is one that you are not



aiming to achieve any cardiovascular fitness gains through hard training. Whether it is a complete day off exercise, which is not always optimal, or very low intensity for a short duration, the power of rejuvenation is great. To be truly effective it is optimal to keep daily life stressors low on this day too, so work travel does not really count as recovery.

Recovery Workout.

There actually is a form of workout that can facilitate recovery, or help prepare you for a tough workout that might follow. The intensity of these is generally very low and the duration short, although you may include some very short (seven to 10 seconds) surges to stimulate the central nervous system and stay sharp.

More Than The Training

It would be a mistake to finish this article without pulling our thoughts back from the nitty-gritty of the training plan, and realise that recovery is much more than rest days, phases, blocks or workouts. While a smart training programme is

critical, any training plan will only succeed if it is supported by proper nutrition and fuelling along with adequate sleep. Both nutrition and sleep should be considered in terms of quantity, quality and timing, as all impact the effectiveness of their ability to support the training. We shall explore nutrition in greater depth in a future feature, but it is worth talking about sleep. It is proven that the power of restoration with sleep is critical for overall energy balance and sustaining health. Sleep might be the most powerful antidote to accumulation of life stressors and in the case of triathletes the major stressor would be training.

Ironically sleep is the first thing to be cut down by many athletes as workouts are crammed into very early morning or late evening sessions. While this might be a life necessity a couple of times a week, I would rather see a greatly reduced number of training hours (albeit with a greater emphasis on intensity being likely) if it meant maintaining good sleep. I have athletes, admittedly very naturally talented,

competing at high levels of Ironman racing on a stable training budget of 10 to 15 hours per week. This in itself is a lot of training, but not when considered next to the norm of 20 to 25 hours that many amateur athletes think are necessary. Ironically, if I view these time-restricted athletes lives, I could see holes where more training could be crammed in, but I am unwilling to do it at the cost of recovery and sleep.

We have a saying at purplepatch: "Anyone can train hard, the best know how to recover". It's true it takes courage to recover, but by committing to it as a partner to hard training will only accelerate your performance gains and facilitate long-term success. It is not a short cut, it is something to be embraced and take courage from.

For your next big race I encourage you not to show up fit and tired, gain the edge and show up fit and fresh. 📌

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