

The Recovery Approach

Matt Dixon has helped turn over-trained athletes back into competitive machines, Ryan Hall among them. Here's how.

By Michelle Hamilton

As featured in the Web Only issue of Running Times Magazine

Every athlete knows recovery is essential, but Ryan Hall seems to be living it. At the Boston and Chicago marathons in 2011, as well as the Jan. 14 U.S. Olympic trials marathon, where he placed second, Hall toed the line fit and fresh. His recovered state comes courtesy of strategic changes Hall has made to his training over the last year since becoming self-coached — strategies he gathered from an unexpected source: professional triathlon coach Matt Dixon.



Matt Dixon (right) taught marathoner Ryan Hall how to incorporate rest and recovery in his training.

Why would an elite runner with no interest in triathlon or even cross-training turn to a triathlon coach? Reputation. Dixon, a 37-year-old Brit who also coaches recreational runners and triathletes, is known in multisport circles as “the recovery coach.” Over the last four years, he has helped revive a number of burnt-out athletes, putting them back on the path to peak performance through a program of “massive recovery.” Professional triathlete Chris Lieto — who told his friend Ryan Hall about Dixon — is a good example of his handiwork. Overtrained and underperforming, Dixon slashed Lieto’s volume by 30 percent, added easier workouts and had him eat more. A year later, Lieto placed second at the 2009 Ironman World Championships (2.4-mile swim, 112-mile bike, 26.2-mile run).

Pro triathlete and former collegiate distance runner Linsey Corbin has a similar story. Dixon reduced her volume from 35 hours a week to 25, then filled those 10 hours with massage, functional strength and more sleep. Six weeks later, she clocked a personal best in the Ironman.

“Matt was working with athletes with a substantially higher workload than I, and I wanted to learn how I could become a smarter, more recovered runner,” says Hall, on why he reached out to Dixon shortly after leaving the Mammoth Track Club to pursue a self-coached, faith-based approach to training.

Since he started working with Dixon, Hall has run three marathons: Boston (fourth, 2:04:58), Chicago (fifth, 2:08:04) and the Olympic trials (second, 2:09:30).

Dixon helped Hall see anew the benefits of recovery, encouraging him to incorporate more rest into his training and to eat more post-run to aid recovery. In his buildup to Boston, Chicago and the trials race in Houston, Hall — who is now only occasionally in touch with Dixon — took one full day off per week, dropped his mileage to 100 (down from 120, which was his usual during previous marathon buildups), recovered fully between hard sessions, and says he probably ate more than any other elite runner after workouts. Although Hall is no longer working with Dixon, he will continue to follow the recovery methods he learned under him as he prepares for the London Olympics.

“Matt,” Hall says, “is a master of recovery.”

Rest Well, Train Hard

Dixon isn't a 21st century wizard with secret knowledge; he just believes that recovery is under-valued and under-utilized. "Our goal is not to train as hard as we can, but to perform well," Dixon says. "And to perform well you have to be very fit, but not fatigued."

Recovery, however, shouldn't be confused with easy. "Recovery is the thing that enables hard training," Dixon says. If you're rested and fueled, you can you push yourself to new heights in key workouts and increase fitness.

This philosophy is the cornerstone of a broader methodology Dixon calls the four pillars of performance: endurance (or workouts), recovery, nutrition and strength. "I talk a lot about recovery because that's what's often missing [from people's training]," he says. But he believes all four pillars must be treated equally if you want to maximize performance.

If you argue that running, and specifically the workouts, are more important — because you can downplay the other three and still perform well — Dixon will counter: "Perhaps, but if you maximize all of them, how much better could you be?"

He points to Lieto as an example. His improvements were not simply a product of more rest, but the result of increased calories and greater stability and endurance gained through functional strength. Dixon attributes Hall's newfound freshness to the right personalized mix of all four pillars: a strength routine that works for him (an hour of body weight exercises two times a week), lower volume, and more food combined with the long runs, tempo miles and speed sessions that continue to anchor his training.

Valuing all four pillars equally is a simple attitude shift — but one with dramatic implications. When you prioritize workouts above all else, as our culture tends to do, you're prone to make choices that can lead to overtraining, Dixon says. You might do a hard session when your body needs rest, or get up early for a workout when what you really need is sleep.

But place equal value on all aspects of training and you'll approach rest, nutrition and strength with the same discipline you apply to your workouts: move an interval session to the next day if you're tired; eat within the 90-minute refueling window; sneak 20 minutes of core and strength work in, even if it means a shorter run. In other words, you'll obey the rules that have been there all along. "The pillars are not a special recipe," Dixon says, "just the confidence to follow through on the areas we know make a difference."



In addition to elite athletes, Dixon (on bike) coaches age-group runners and triathletes, including this group session in near Sausalito, Calif.

Personal Knowledge

Dixon learned this lesson the hard way. After swimming competitively for the University of Cincinnati, he did his first triathlon on a dare while pursuing a master's degree in clinical and exercise physiology. Despite having no idea what he was doing — after the swim, a friend had to tell him to get on his bike and go — he wound up fifth.

Dixon turned pro in 2002 and trained hard. Really hard. Exhaustion followed. As did chronic fatigue. His sponsorship dried up. Physically and emotionally spent, Dixon stopped training altogether.

From the sidelines, he began asking questions. How could I train so much and not perform? His reflections, coupled with his academic studies and years as a swim coach, led to a few revelations, including “how stupid I was,” and “I was doing too much volume, too much intensity, and not enough recovery.”

Dixon became convinced that rest held the key to “metabolic health,” a term he uses to indicate vibrancy rather than the mere absence of injury and illness. In other words, only in a state of peak health can we reach peak performance.

Dixon also observed that when athletes fatigue, their form falters, especially when running (the last discipline in a triathlon — swim, bike, run). But strong stabilizing muscles could aid form, and therefore extend endurance.

Emotions, Dixon believes, get in the way, too. A primary example: You do a hard workout because it provides validation, whereas rest offers no such reward.

“I have definitely experienced this,” says Hall. “When I was younger and less confident in my abilities, I was always out to prove myself to myself and my teammates. I rarely went as easy as I do now.”

Dixon's insights eventually led him to develop the pillars of performance and launch his San Francisco-based coaching business, Purplepatch Fitness (purplepatchfitness.com), named for a British term meaning an extended period of exceptional performance.

“I wanted to evolve the way people approach endurance sports,” he says.

A number of his recreational runners and triathletes — most of whom live in the Bay Area — are proof that he has. “You're constantly thinking about how the four pillars work together,” says Carmel Galvin, who after multiple injuries ran 3:47 for the marathon. “So even on off days, I feel like I'm doing something instructive.” Willow Harrington, a 29-year-old runner and triathlete, recently ran a 1:32 half marathon, dropping 10 minutes from her personal best. And Mark Watt, 38, beat his previous Half Ironman time by 35 minutes last year.

Notably, though, their personal accomplishments are not what they bring up in interviews. Instead, they talk about Dixon, calling him educator, listener, problem-solver. “You join a coach and expect to be handed a training program,” says Pete O'Dea, a recreational athlete. “But Matt talks about the fact that you cannot train and perform well if you have not dealt with sleep, food, and the stress of work and family. That's innovative.”

Dixon recently started offering his half and full marathon training plans online, programs that include functional strength and fueling notes along with running workouts. He also just launched webinars and Q&As via Google+ to help build community.

Dixon has been contacted by other elite runners, but he's turned them down, for now anyway. “I'm one guy, with a full roster,” he says, citing the importance of maintaining quality.

This dedication to his athletes is what resonates most with them. “He loves to coach age-groupers and non-competitors just as much as he enjoys working with the likes of Ryan Hall, or Chris Lieto,” says O'Dea. “His commitment is the same regardless.”