

**MATT DIXON**

# CLARIFYING RECOVERY

## WHERE SHOULD YOUR RECOVERY FOCUS BE?

Many of us plan those weekly hours where we nail ourselves in the name of triathlon, but it's rare that we properly plan our recovery. Often it's skipped, compromised or even ignored completely because we simply run out of time. After all there are only so many hours in the day. The key to success and getting faster in triathlon is to consistently stress the body and recover. It is during this recovery phase we take on the training gains and become faster, fitter and stronger. The key to becoming a better athlete is consistency. We can only train consistently and continue to improve if we persistently allow our bodies to recover properly. This month purplepatch coach Matt Dixon clarifies what recovery really is and how you can use it to become a more successful triathlete.





I recently heard an interesting quote from a new purplepatch athlete. He'd arrived with great enthusiasm and aspirations with his new direction and ready to apply process to his performance journey. We began his training with about a month's worth of early season progression, then he had the opportunity to join us at the purplepatch training camp based in Kona, Hawaii. Three days into some tough training he blurted, "I thought you were the recovery coach, I thought this was supposed to be easy!". His outburst was met with a lot of knowing smiles from the other purplepatch athletes, as well as a few pats on the back of support.

Making recovery a focus of a training programme does not equate to easy training or a short cut to success. Most of my athletes will tell you that I am not an 'easy' coach. The training is challenging and sustained in application, but we do believe in keeping athletes healthy and balanced as they continue on their training journey. The reason I tell you this little story is because of the conversation that followed the outburst. I went on to outline what recovery really

means for an endurance athlete. He understood that recovery was a critical component of endurance performance, was a believer in its value, but hadn't quite grasped the finer elements of it as a supporting component of continued performance.

Leaving that conversation I was struck with how I should try to do a better job of really explaining the important elements of recovery and framing what is critical to focus on, and what parts can be thought of as secondary. Let's delve deeper into this concept, as it should help you maximise your hard training and make smart decisions of when to push through and when to take the foot off gas.

### FRAMING RECOVERY

I don't need to spend too much time discussing the value of recovery. I have written about it many times in *Triathlete Europe* but it is worth remembering that properly integrated recovery is not an opportunity for laziness or short cuts, but is a critical element of the actual training plan. If you place great emotional value on

recovery, you have an opportunity to set yourself up for most consistent training over the course of extended periods. Ultimately, recovery provides the chance for you to train harder and more often. The key is to maintain the wide-angle lens on your training, and realise that endurance performance comes with an accumulation of months of training, not a few days or a week of epic battles.

At this time of the year, the increased daylight and better weather opens the door for greater training volume and quality, so it is a pertinent time to review recovery and the components of it. This way you can make the best use of the whole season's worth of training opportunity, and not simply train more while getting tired (and slower).

### TYPES OF RECOVERY

There is no use in me throwing around the term recovery without outlining exactly what I mean by it. There are many different types of recovery an endurance athlete must focus on, and others that have application, but are (surprisingly) less critical. I will review the >



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types of recovery you should consider, identify areas you should focus on and never compromise, and allow you to integrate into your training plan to maximise the results.

### LIFESTYLE RECOVERY

I label the types of recovery that are hugely important for any person, athlete or not, to maintain a healthy metabolic balance and optimal function in life. If you are a busy executive, or elite athlete, or simply maintain a very busy life schedule, lifestyle recovery is hugely important. These include:

**SLEEP:** Simply the most critical component of recovery for us all. There is no substitution for sleep. It is the most restorative component of life or sports performance. Nearly all muscular adaptations and hormonal rejuvenation occurs during sleep. It is important in terms of quantity, quality and timing. As an athlete, sleep is the number one element of your recovery programme (it isn't your compression socks cowboy!). This instantly creates a dilemma for many time-starved athletes, as sleep is often the first thing to be compromised to fit in work, family and training. A sustained life of low quality and quantity sleep will create performance decline always. Always.

**NAPS/MEDITATION:** Another powerful tool for the time-starved athlete is short

time-outs of rejuvenation. The optimal time to take a short nap is between 1-3 pm, when the body naturally craves sleep. Keeping the nap short (10 to 20 minutes) is key, to avoid deeper sleep patterns. Progressive companies often encourage short naps with the realisation that overall productivity is greatly increased following these short time-outs. Obviously this not possible in all environments, but if you are able don't feel guilty. It will not only assist your athlete performance, it will help your daily performance.

**NUTRITION:** A whole subject within itself but you cannot recover from your endurance training without a complete focus on both appropriate fuelling, as well as a solid approach to daily nutrition. Most athletes under-fuel relative to demands, and don't eat near enough high quality foods in their daily eating. In addition, daily hydration is a large issue for many athletes I work with, and we try to get athletes to aim for 66ml of water per kilogramme of bodyweight as a rule of thumb for hydration.

### TRAINING RECOVERY

Another area of recovery comes from the actual set up of your training plan. Having a smart or progressive training plan tailored to your needs is a key to success, but not a promise of guaranteed

performance. The key areas to consider in integrating recovery include:

**WEEKLY SESSIONS:** Recovery does not mean sitting on the couch in endurance sports. Complete rest from activity is sometimes good for emotional recovery, but moving the body with low-intensity and short training sessions can facilitate recovery. Going easy and short at least a couple of days each week will help support the harder extended sessions you need to stress the body to get stronger and fitter. We like to keep recovery sessions less than 40 minutes in duration, and conversational in effort (note: you can get away with slightly extended duration of riding, up to 90 minutes, but at lower intensity).

**RECOVERY BLOCKS:** While I don't tend to follow a training progression based on periodisation, it is important to allow the body to recuperate with extended blocks of recovery. I like to get in front of fatigue if possible, and place two to five days in a row of lighter sessions every 10 to 14 days of training. The timing and amount of highly individual, but the goal is the same; to allow long term consistency. If this means I have an athlete who can complete 10 days of solid work, but needs four lighter days in a row to recuperate, then this is the recipe. On the flip side, I have a few athletes who can absorb up to 17 days in a row of mostly stressful work,



then only need a couple of days recuperation before being ready to go again. Your level of individual resilience is not necessarily a sign of competition performance. Self-assessment and honesty is hugely important, and finding out what integrated recovery works for you is a key to unlocking potential.

**SEASON BREAKS:** At least twice in each calendar year I would recommend you turn your back on structured training and take an emotional and physical break. It is critical to longevity, and often see athletes skipping these breaks (often in excitement of great previous results or frustration at disappointments), only to suffer injury or burnout a few months down the line. These complete periods of healing always allow greater sustainability throughout the coming months.

**RUNNING BREAKS:** Worth a mention, and a slight tangent, but I am not a fan of hard

## MODALITY RECOVERY

The final area of recovery is the copious amounts of recovery modalities that are available, and sold, to endurance athletes. These include:

**MASSAGE/A.R.T/TRIGGER POINT:** There are a host of modalities that can facilitate recovery. Real bodywork will focus on releasing muscle tightness and facilitate rejuvenation. These specific therapeutic modalities have strong value in assisting structural and muscular recovery, hence are worthy of attention.

**COMPRESSION:** The answer to every athlete's recovery needs. Well, that is what we are told, and there certainly seems some value to using compression as a recovery tool. I have found the best application in travel and post-workout recovery, but have many athletes that swear by it during training. If it works, use it, and don't look

following the dreaded ice baths. If anything, I prefer warmth and heat as a recovery tool.

**STRETCHING:** I always smile when I see endurance athletes aggressively, and painfully, holding their body in static stretches before and following activity. Some specific people may need targeted range of motion stretches, but others should focus their time on trigger point release and mobility work. In my humble opinion, stretching is largely over-rated for many endurance athletes.

## WHERE TO FOCUS?

That is a lot of talk about the types of recovery, so where should your focus fall? Ironically, I see many endurance athletes completely misplace their focus on recovery, with plenty of attention on massage, compression and stretching, while maintaining reduced attention on the really important (and free!) recovery. By far and away the most important component is high quality sleep combined with appropriate approach to fuelling and nutrition. This combination is the most powerful weapon you have in your performance arsenal. This means you simply cannot consistently compromise sleep patterns every day without performance decline. You might need to get up early a few times a week to make a swim session or early morning ride, but you must balance it with other days of extended sleep nights. I would rather see a reduced weekly training volume done well, than a higher weekly volume performed with compromised sleep.

If you manage to put sleep and nutrition at the forefront of your approach to recovery, and then combine it with a training recipe that is appropriate to you, your level and your needs, you have a wonderful combination and personal recipe. Once this is accomplished, consistency will be maximised, and you can now look for the little additions and bonuses that come with the modalities of recovery. They are surely important, and of high value to endurance athletes, but they are not the foundation of your success. As you might say, "set the foundations first before you think about painting the bathroom!". The same can be said about your approach to recovery. **!**



running training consistently for 12 months of the year. Many triathletes grind themselves down with hard running training week-on-week throughout the year. I find that the pre-season is generally a great time to dial back the amount of running done, instead building swim fitness and focus. Running performance is key, but a few restorative weeks, replaced with added swim volume, is a solid pre-season recipe for many athletes.

back. Please don't wear it to the shops though, that is a personal brand withdrawal!

**ICE/HEAT:** The use of ice and heat as a recovery tool is well known. As a coach, in real-world application, I am not a fan of using ice as a recovery tool. There is plenty of controversy in scientific literature, but beyond that, I tend to see many athletes feel tight through the hips and lower back