

MATT DIXON

# NAILING THE



# TRAINING WEEK

Most triathletes understand they must train hard in order to improve. It's important to understand this improvement won't happen overnight, yet so many athletes have wonderful and grand visions of success, but fail to be myopically successful in day-to-day and week-to-week training. Mistakes often happen and are then repeated, which results in many falling into a cycle of failure without a grasp on why they consistently battle injury, sickness or performance decline. As a coach who consistently preaches a long-term lens to performance, this month Matt Dixon looks at how to tackle the day-to-day training and exactly how to nail your training week.

## THE PREMISE OF PERFORMANCE

I simply cannot bring myself to delve into day-to-day solutions without framing the premise of overall performance success. You must understand the big picture to nail the details, so it makes sense to be here. Let's begin with a few 'truths', or at least, truths as I see them in my coaching career.

Performance arrives from consistent load: While many look to find a secret sauce, the truth is that performance evolution occurs only with consistent load over many months and years. You may be able to get a boost in performance from a smart 10-12 week build into a key event, but true and lasting evolution takes a long time, and the training load has to be consistent. Perhaps this is a good time for a related tangent? Think about the disruption to consistency that occurs if you have frequent sickness, injury or breaks from training. It is pretty significant and when you apply a long-term review of training completed, your epic training weeks might not look quite so beneficial. Consistency is a pretty magical word for endurance athletes and coaches.

**It is a journey:** Building on the consistency concept you must realise that your performance is a journey. It is not multiple single seasons of training and racing, but a series of years that build on the previous and progress you to a new level. Last month I wrote about this in reviewing Meredith Kessler's journey and multi-year progression, but this applies to all athletes. With this in mind, thinking in these terms, versus simply what the next event is, helps the productive mindset.

While I always encourage this long-term lens, you now must become successfully myopic, and craft a daily and weekly approach to training that will facilitate this journey. Let's investigate how you can accomplish this.

## A FOUNDATION TO BUILD ON

To be successful on a daily basis you must have a clear sense of purpose and direction. What do you want over the coming seasons? What is the mission or missions of this year? How are you going to get there? These foundational questions will lead to the answer that will create the framework, or roadmap, of your progression.

**Build the roadmap:** I am amazed at how even the most talented individuals lack a real sense of direction and purpose, relying of random progression and back-to-back seasons simply repeating what was done before. Perhaps another chance for another related tangent? Even if you do have a clear path, and are currently experiencing tremendous success, it is still essential to revisit these goals and roadmaps, and assess if change is needed to maintain the positive paths. Implementing changes while being successful is the most challenging component of coaching, but also critical to continually evolve.

**Understanding the training purpose:** Another foundation to build daily success on is understanding why you do the training you do every day. Contrary to what many would suggest, training is not there to make you tired or break you. While fatigue is a part of the equation, it is not the purpose. The purpose is simple. It is to prepare you for optimal performance on race day (when it matters).

It is no more complicated than this and is something we always need to remember. This doesn't make it easy but does remind us of the purpose. To achieve optimal performance, or at least get some way toward it, the mission of daily training is also equally simple in concept. It is to maximise training load while maintaining a state of positive adaptation.

Training load is key and we want to stretch the boundaries of what athletes can absorb.

This is only if it allows the athlete to remain in a state of positive adaptation, or as you might say, making adaptations that results in being fitter, stronger and more powerful, which ultimately results in racing faster.

I encourage athletes to keep this mission in mind as they approach the training week, and assess their training progression and results.

## KEY TRAINING CONCEPTS

As we delve into the week itself, there are several concepts that you should keep in mind as you begin each week or day of training. They all revolve around specificity, repetition and progression, and are wrapped in my favourite word: consistency.

**Repetition:** Something many are scared of but should embrace. There is tremendous value around reproducing efforts and sessions. It is not uncommon that I might provide a training week that is comprised of very similar sessions, with some key sessions potentially the same as the previous. This isn't laziness but allows the athlete to be highly challenged the first time through, learn (physically and emotionally) and then return for another go in a better place to execute perfectly. Of course, once this has occurred, we can assume some adaptation, and the need is to increase the load or stress.

**Specificity:** We talk a lot about specificity, but you have to understand the goal and purpose of your sessions, then do your job, and follow through on appropriate execution. Many highly motivated athletes have a real struggle with this. They love the epic challenges and big sessions, but see little value in the easy and light sessions. Those are the days they think they are not getting anything done and feel like they're going backwards, but this just isn't the case.

In order to string together a successful week, then a series of weeks, the high load training sessions and days have to be



supported with lighter and lower stress sessions. If the mission of the day is a conversational ride at lower intensity, you must follow this, or the training progression if disrupted. Now, if a lower intensity ride becomes a hard session, for one reason or another, that might be fine, as long as you adjust subsequent sessions. The issue arises when every day becomes a big and challenging day, without a chance to recuperate, leaving you chronically tired and non-responsive. It is a catalyst to injury or deep fatigue.

It is worth mentioning that you may well be able to train hard for many days in a row, and this will create expected fatigue, something you might well need to push through. The art of it is to push your boundaries and comfort without driving you into the ground. A sense of awareness on your state of fatigue and structural integrity remains vital.

**Executing the plan:** When you are deep into your training there is little doubt it should be a challenge, but it should be a challenge that you can face and succeed.

Breaking athletes is easy, but it is not the mission or of value. Seldom do I like to see complete failure or breakdown, preferring to see barriers being overcome. I often refer to training as never taking you to 100 per cent. That is what race day is there for.

Training should prepare you for this adventure. Sessions can be hard, the load will accumulate and you will get tired, but ultimately you will adapt and get stronger. This is important, as I consistently have to educate athletes on not needing to go until failure. Failure is not a positive place to visit, and provides minimal positive training effect. One step back from failure in the land of challenge is the optimal place to sit. Keep this in mind because even in your most challenging weeks and sessions, the goal is success. This doesn't mean easy either, so don't make that mistake!

#### KEY RECOVERY CONCEPTS

There is so much more to nailing your training than simply training hard. Any great training plan will consider both recovery and nutrition as a part of the plan. As mentioned previously, fatigue is a normal reaction to

training stress, but a non-functional level of fatigue is not productive. If I can get one thing across in this piece, it would be to encourage you to realise that recovery sessions and days are not a break from the training plan, rather they are a part of the plan. They hold equal philosophical importance as the big nasty sessions and days. Many sessions facilitate recovery, so let's not confuse recovery with simply sitting on the couch. Recovery comes in following main areas:

**Lighter sessions and days:** Training recovery or sessions that place a lower amount of training load and set-up the ability to perform well in future high stress sessions.

**Sleep and rest:** You cannot expect to be consistent if you continually skip adequate sleep to allow recuperation from life and training, as well as facilitate adaptations. I am often amazed with those who rise at 4.30am for workouts every day, follow up with evening workouts, and believe four hours sleep nightly will be enough to facilitate progress. It just doesn't work like that.





**Recovery modalities:** These are the lowest in priority, behind proper sleep and training plan execution, but still have a role. These include compression, massage, heat therapy and such like, and are all valuable assets in allowing consistency. With this said, the biggest help in this category is maintaining joint mobility through tools such as the foam roller, trigger point therapy and mobility exercises. It allows you to maintain a healthy body and maximise absorption of training.

If you are frequently sick, injured, lose motivation or struggle to maintain a rhythm in training, you can be sure that you are not making recovery a part of your plan.

#### KEY CONCEPTS IN NUTRITION

The final piece of the puzzle to training success is your nutrition and fuelling. I believe fuelling, the calories taken in during and immediately following training, to be the platform to build a successful approach to endurance athlete nutrition. Get your fuelling right and you can maximise performance in the sessions, facilitate recovery, provide your best chance for quality food choices later in the day, and minimise any possibility of metabolic stress from athletic starvation.

Once you consistently nail appropriate fuelling, your nutrition is easier to get right. Most athletes would require a lower focus on starchy carbohydrates in the nutrition phase of daily eating (any calories consumed outside the fuelling window), with an emphasis on protein, fruits, vegetables and quality fats.

With this in mind, I find the largest obstacle to athletes is, ironically, consuming enough calories to support training. If you are seriously training, on a consistent basis, it is startling just how much food you require to support training. This problem exists in athletes for several reasons, including a worry about getting to race weight, the simple chore of consuming that many calories, or body image issues.

Unfortunately, too many search for leaner and lighter bodies through caloric restriction, but this normally lends itself to fat retention, loss of functional muscle mass, and poor recovery and performance. Once you eat enough high quality foods, at the right time, your consistency and weekly performance will remain stable and set up the training you need to succeed. Think about the calories you consume as facilitating the opportunity to

absorb more training load. If you do that, you will get even better.

Ultimately, a training plan without consideration of nutrition is one doomed for failure or sub-standard results. If you are training hard but retaining fat, losing muscle mass, requiring unusual recovery time, experiencing a disruption of your menstrual cycle, or consistently getting sick or injured, there is almost certainly a nutrition problem at the centre of your woes. None of it leads to weekly success, and you simply must focus on fuelling, then nutrition, on a daily basis if you want consistency and success.

#### THE HEROISM IN TRAINING

Ok, that might be a little much, but I want to get the message across. Rather than thinking your race day performance arrives out of any single session, weekend or training camp, shift your lens toward making your heroism arrive out of your consistency. To achieve that you need to know where you are going, have a roadmap to keep you on course, balance the hard days with the light, and make sure you sleep and fuel your way to success. All pretty simple really. Now go do it - what are you waiting for? 🏃