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»MATT DIXON«

# TIM REED

# THE COMPLETE PACKAGE

This month *Triathlete Europe* coach Matt Dixon offers an inside look into the training of Australia's Tim Reed from his purplepatch stable of athletes. Reed. He has only been working with Dixon over the last year, but has seen

significant improvements and race success. The goal here is not to guide you to becoming a pro, or even training like one, but to offer some insight into how the approach is unique with each athlete. Plus you can draw a few lessons that you can apply to your own training and planning.

The 2013 season saw Tim a record four wins, three second place finishes and one third, along with a fifth place overall at the Ironman 70.3 World Championships. Not bad for a development athlete. A smart and thoughtful athlete, Tim has a strong vision of who he is and where he wants to go. The initial season of working with each other has helped define the path toward his future. Let's review the relationship, training approach and methodology, and our future plans.

### Forming The Relationship

Tim originally approached me when he was visiting San Francisco during the summer of 2012. At the time my mind was more focused on helping my current athletes than starting new projects, so we delayed any potential start. Instead, waited for the end of the 2012 season. This allowed me time to keep a sneaky eye on his progression and racing for six months before starting to work together.

My initial impressions were of a 'journeyman' pro, who raced a lot, but seemed to require certain racing conditions to excel overall. It was clear that his run was fast but I was less impressed with his swimming and riding performance. Some years ago athletes could find some success at the top level by being reliant on a fast run but this is no longer the case. When nearly all athletes are running fast, a poor swim and bike performance leaves you fighting for pride, not podiums. I knew a key area of focus would be to develop Tim's swim and bike, but not limit run performance.

The start of any coaching relationship is one that requires patience and time. A coach cannot change everything and the athlete cannot hope for instant success. It is a process that requires time, communication and real planning. It all begins with the question of where do we need/want to go?

Using this as the bedrock of initial planning and conversations, I could tell

that Tim was conflicted. He wanted to progress overall performance and evolve into becoming world-class, but also had to support his young family, hence racing consistently was also key. The two don't always go hand in hand. Through these conversations I realised that Tim didn't have a firm grasp of quite where he could evolve to. Confidence was not an issue but it's tough to see your own potential sometimes. Over the coming months I realised he had the opportunity to develop into a world-class triathlete.

### The Planning

In the initial stages of training we held a relatively flexible approach to the overall plan. We created a strong enough 'guide' to create direction, but wanted to see how things evolved in the initial months. It didn't take me long to realise that the main focus should be in middle distance racing, and there should be a delay before heading to Ironman. The swim and bike needed

real work, and adding a true Ironman focus would be too much to allow adaptation and improvements in swimming and biking, to arrive ready for Ironman.

In addition, a committed approach to Ironman racing would limit overall racing opportunities, adding a real pressure to perform. This would not be a way to approach overall progression. We placed the Ironman 70.3 World Championships as the main priority, coupled with a strong catalogue of racing throughout the season to ease financial pressure and allow the progression of the résumé. Parallel to this was a real focus on swimming and biking ability through the training plan. Ironman would have to wait another year, and 2013 was about becoming a better athlete. Maybe we could look towards 2014 for becoming an Ironman.

### Training Approach

It's important to remember that, when starting to help an athlete, it is important to look back at all the good they have done with their previous plan. In reviewing Tim's plan, it was obvious that he had improved consistently over the previous year, but still missed the ability to progress in level. It seemed that his training plan reflected his racing abilities, with a heavy and consistent focus on running, leaving less room for specific swimming and riding work. I decided to flip this on its head knowing full well that it would be a cause of consternation and worry for Tim himself.

Nearly every athlete enjoys and embraces their strongest discipline, and gains tremendous confidence from the training completed in it. The strength becomes the guiding light. We never want to diminish that strength but it cannot always dominate the development of other areas. This is especially true to those with strong running backgrounds, who embrace higher volume endurance running as a pillar of the overall plan.

Running is the one area that truly gains a strong 'cross-pollination' benefit from swimming and biking training and,

in addition, strong runners need consistent running to excel, but often don't require a big overall load. My goal was to maintain the frequency of running, but shave significant duration from many of the weekly sessions. I coupled this with an increased focus on power and sustained speed work in the run, leaving supporting runs, and increased bike work, to provide the foundational fitness.

With running load reduced, we placed a greater focus on riding and swimming. While Tim recorded plenty of riding miles, real focus on muscle-recruitment



and strength was limited. He was a 'big engine with no power'. The question was how he would respond to our work. We approached riding through a framework that attacked three main areas:

**1. Thought:** Plenty of work to understand how to ride the bike well with focus on posture, position, gear choices, skills and pedal-stroke. With help from the purplepatch bike specialist, Paul Buick, we evolved the focus of simply getting on the bike and producing work. We wanted a true understanding of when and how to

apply effort to allow the wheels to move more quickly.

### 2. Muscular endurance and recruitment:

We placed a massive emphasis on what I would coarsely call strength work. With big gear intervals on flat roads, hill repetitions and extended intervals in rolling terrain, the goal was to improve the muscular recruitment of the available riding muscles. This process takes a while to truly imbed in the body to allow performance gains, but is a key focus for time trial ability. Its effectiveness is driven by the athlete's focus and commitment to the process, and we have no worries with Tim adopting that ferocious focus.

**3. Variance in power:** While Tim had consistently worked on strong and sustained efforts, the intervals seldom included a high degree of variance in intensity. These steady state intervals failed to truly prepare him for the dynamics of professional racing. Almost every interval session included a challenge for Tim to become comfortable in the highly distressing environment of intensity change. Failure in these sessions was replaced by familiarity, and not only served as a massive performance improvement, but more effective race readiness.

In parallel to this riding intensity, we also evolved the approach in swimming, adding specificity and overall load. A naturally talented swimmer, considering his lack of real background, Tim sat comfortably in the second pack, but was often two-to-three minutes off the lead pack at races. This was a big hurdle in available race tactics. It became obvious that he would often get dropped from the faster swimmers in the initial couple of minutes of the swim, then dangle in 'no-man's land' for the rest of the swim. The two main areas missing from his swim programme were overall load and specificity to prepare for open water swimming. He also missed the benefits of group swimming, and the value of competition and community. The main focus points in swimming were:

**1. Race Specificity:** We deployed two-to-three sessions weekly that would specifically work on race-specific needs. This included a great jump in overall intensity, and a transition away from simple one-pace threshold type sessions. Once again, variance became key, because I wanted Tim to become familiar with swimming at a strong and sustainable pace while under distress. This takes training and familiarity, especially in the claustrophobic swim.

Many sessions included multiple repetitions of short and very high intensity intervals, followed by extended medium-duration intervals at a pace that is similar to the middle of a race swim. Simulators of swimming starts were included in nearly every session, and any open water sessions became race simulators, instead of relaxing endurance sessions. These sessions are not fun because they cause distress and panic, but embracing them leads to familiarity, which leads to confidence and performance. Tim embraced them and evolved.

**2. Training Load:** Supporting this specificity was the simple need to swim more. Not many triathletes view swimming as their favourite sport, and Tim was no different, but the benefits of a high swimming load typically extend beyond swimming. To truly evolve in swimming you have to swim consistently with a recipe of high frequency and a challenging load. The good news is that this load extends beyond one training block and carries into season upon season.

**3. Training Group:** The final addition was a reintroduction into weekly training squads. The group environment would help Tim to flourish. Not every session was within the group, but adding two or three weekly, assisted in keeping swimming fresh and different.

**4. Functional Strength:** The final training component of note was the ongoing focus on functional strength, which is so often neglected by athletes. Tim was already a big believer and continued with a

programme consistently throughout the season. An important addition in 2014 will see a progression in focus and a shift toward more specific ballistic and max-strength type work in the main racing season.

### Results

Whenever there is a real intervention on training approach, we must review both training and racing, especially in the early stages of the change. The goal over the course of the season was to open up opportunity. I wanted to allow Tim to have racing options and not be completely reliant on his run strength to gain results. We wanted to limit the time gap in swims, to alleviate pressure or effort to 'bridge' into the energy-saving lead group on the bike, and we hoped to evolve the bike resilience and strength to open up options in how hard to ride.

Sometimes you try things with an educated guess and they work. In Tim's case it worked better than we initially thought. Beyond his emotional strength and smart approach to his sport, Tim also has incredible physical attributes as an athlete. Quite simply, he responded in a fantastic fashion to the work prescribed.

Tim's swim accelerated quickly to limit the gaps at almost every race, which instantly altered the dynamics he was faced with. No longer was it always a long day of catch up, and within the initial stages of the bike he was with the leaders of the race. Emotionally and physically this changes race dynamics and options. The training stimulus achieved all and more of what we hoped.

Tim developed so well through the season I would now be hard-pressed to label running as his strength. This should be scary for his competition because his bike now becomes a key strength and weapon to deploy within the group dynamics of middle distance racing.

Ironically, this bike evolution is not overly surprising, if you understand Tim's sporting background. While he is a talented runner, he has no running background. In fact, Tim has no history in any sport, which is rare for a top professional. It was his swimming - as good as it is - relative to his background, and his natural running ability, that made him appealing to coach. I had a sneaky feeling his bike may become the weapon of choice,

even before I had seen him ride.

These two changes allow massive changes in dynamics because an intelligent approach to each individual race allows smart race tactics. Is it an uneven bike course where Tim could ride very strong and gain time, or is it a flat and windless course where he should rely on his run prowess? With the evolution of biking ability, the tactics now become varied relative to both course and competition. In reviewing his top results, and files from these, it is clear that we did just that, and opened up the doors of opportunity on how to race to excel.

### The Future

While Tim's progression has opened up a season of great results, his journey is far from complete. If the entire mission focused on just middle distance, then we would be much closer to highly predictable top performance, as well as the chance for world titles, but the bigger picture involves Ironman. While Tim has developed as an overall athlete, and is on the way to becoming the balanced triathlete, that is necessary in today's sport, he has yet to develop the resilience and wisdom to make a massive dent in top-class Ironman. This is the next step of the progression.

In 2014 we will continue to focus on athletic progression and place our primary race focus on the Ironman 70.3 World Championships. We will also utilise this second season of progression to layer on some additional muscular endurance and resilience. We will build a season that incorporates two Ironman races, with the goal of learning the extended duration racing at the top level. This should then open the doors to 2015 being a fully committed season of Ironman focus.

To do this we will need to finish the swim project so Tim becomes a regular front-pack swimmer, as well as continue development and resilience in riding. You might ask whether Tim will 'under-run' as a consequence? Certainly not, because we will still pursue an evolution of run performance, but simply ensure that the running training is balanced for his needs and goals as an athlete. We won't under-run him, but we will certainly avoid layering mindless miles that don't contribute to speed. 🏆