



» MATT DIXON «

# MISTAKE PREVENTION

As we venture towards the start of the race season with many important races on the horizon, it's time to focus on all areas of your life. This month *Triathlete Europe's* resident coach, Matt Dixon, looks at the common mistakes athletes make in their life, training, nutrition and approach to racing. Many of these mistakes are preventable and once corrected will have a positive impact on your season. Now is the time to start work on maximising your potential to get the best from your training and racing.



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## TRAINING

The first place to start is by considering some of the great training mistakes that negatively influence the positive yield from the hard work completed. As you review, have a check-in with yourself, and be honest if you fall into any of these pitfalls.

- 1. Minimal divergence of intensity between hard and easy days:** Simply put minimising the variance of load or intensity between easy and hard days.

Many athletes fail to go easy enough on the lighter sessions, presumably chasing the confidence booster burn of a tough session, but the result is compromised effectiveness of the key tougher sessions. Easy sessions need to be just that, easy, but this opens the door of opportunity for a focus on form, technique and great execution. Lighter sessions and days should not be viewed as junk, they are a critical and relevant part of the plan.

- 2. Not valuing recovery:** You have likely heard me say it many times before, but this still remains gold. Those athletes who consistently skip the session, day or mini-block of lighter load, often due to a lack of confidence in themselves or the plan, typically end up fit and fatigued. Training hard is key but allowing recuperation and adaptations is the aspect that actually sets up performance gains. It takes confidence to recover.





**3. Basing training success on duration or hours accumulated:** So many athletes base nearly all training success and value on the number of hours or kilometres they have accumulated. If this is your metric of success, you will typically defer to chasing time or distance, and lose specificity or variance in intensity. Shift your lens and realise that simply accumulating kilometres doesn't equate high value training.

**4. Lack of specificity in race builds:** Training progression should create a year-on-year focus on becoming a better triathlete, but when you are preparing for your key race of the season, your focus evolves to training specific to the demands of the event. In lay terms, you have 'built the physiology', now train for the race. Swimming, biking and running sessions should be designed to fine-tune the experience, skill demands and effort of the race. This takes real thought and practice, but the more habitual race skills and effort becomes before race day, the more focus can be applied to pacing, fuelling and actually racing the race.

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**5. Ignoring accumulating fatigue from training/racing:** This often occurs in late spring through to the late summer, when you have been consistently training and racing often. The key races loom, but you are feeling a little stale and fatigued. It is way better to take the edge off, rest a little and have confidence in the platform of fitness you have created, than to ignore and simply keep driving yourself into the ground. Lots of hard work can be undone by showing up to your A-race extremely fit but fatigued.

**6. Making a religion out of measurement and metrics:** The tools we have at our disposal including power meters, GPS watches and other gadgets are useful, but they present a danger of diminishing the athlete's ability to feel. If you only focus on the reading of your output, you will never create your internal clock of pacing and effort management. In addition, you are much less likely to apply appropriate energy to doing it right. With form before force being a mantra for purplepatch athletes, we aim to place heavy emphasis on

riding and running posture, and form and skills application, instead of simply looking at a readout. Obsess only on output and you will never maximise your growth as an athlete.

**7. Skipping functional strength/mobility work:** As the season progresses the endurance training load climbs and the first weekly casualty is strength and conditioning, including mobility and prehab work. Remember, this is a part of the plan and should not be skipped. Retain it, or any prior benefits will evaporate.

### RACING

Without delving into the specific pacing strategies of racing, which would be an entire feature in itself, let's consider the common mistakes that occur in the approach to racing.

**1. Making every race a key race (with full taper):** Many athletes race themselves through the season like a pinball, hopping from race to race with limited progression or focus. Each race is treated like a world championship, and is approached

with a complete 'taper' or preparation. This merely decreases proper training progression and results in an emotional toll for those who race frequently. Instead, shift the framework of success on early season races and use them as opportunities to learn and test, provide insight into fitness and racing state, and use an overall stepping-stone to bigger things. Remember, you can still perform well, without placing equal emphasis on each race. You still race on the day with vigour and effort, but you review the race through the lens of where you are at in your progression.

**2. Under-Racing before an A-Race:** So you signed up for an Ironman? Great. It is going to be a great adventure but try to not arrive at race day without any racing completed beforehand. It is always optimal, regardless of race distance, to accumulate a few races before your key event. These are good fitness builders, opportunities for learning and testing, and enabling many of the specific race day situations

to become familiar and habitual. Wisdom is a good thing.

**3. Over-racing before an 'A' race:** It goes without saying that racing every weekend leading into your key race will not enable enough training time to properly prepare. Most amateur triathletes excel from three to seven races before their key race because this provides plenty of learning opportunity while allowing adequate time to train. This is an individual recipe but don't aim to 'race your way into shape' because this takes specificity and won't yield optimal results.

### NUTRITION

This is another big subject and here I simply highlight the most common areas and mistakes that we deal every season with all levels of athlete.

**1. Not fuelling post-workout:** If I was forced to highlight only one thing that has the largest impact on training consistency, recovery and performance, it might be the need for post-training fuel. The benefits are wide reaching with a reduction in stress hormones that accompany the stress of training, kick-starting recovery and restocking of essential energy stores, as well as diminishing cravings for poor food choices later in the day. Get this one right or face a series of negative results.

**2. Over-focus on starchy carbohydrates in regular meals:** The western diet has evolved to be overly reliant on starchy carbohydrates as a predominant fuel choice in every meal. We need carbohydrates in our daily eating but most of them can come from vegetables and some fruit. While there is little need to avoid some grains, place the emphasis on high quality protein and fat, and reduce the predominance of potatoes, pasta and breads. A word of warning if you do reduce the carbohydrate heavy meals, ensure you replace with protein, fat and veggies, as elimination without replacement will lead to athletic starvation.

**3. Restriction of high quality fat:** Related to the above, but our generation was (wrongly) taught that all fat is bad. As an endurance athlete you need fat and plenty of it. Don't be afraid of nuts, fish, olive oil, coconut oil and avocado. These are high quality and essential fats for health, recovery and our immune system.



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#### 4. Under-eating relative to training demands:

A cause of huge stress, fat retention and declining performance. Don't be fooled into thinking you can attain ongoing evolving athletic performance with a highly restricted caloric intake. Most triathletes under-eat relative to the demands of their training. The results can be catastrophic.

#### 5. Under-hydration between sessions:

We won't discuss hydration during training and racing, but you should always aim to restore hydration status between your sessions. This means you should drink plenty of fluids throughout your general workday. Water, with a pinch of salt and a squeeze of fresh citrus juice, is a great hydrating beverage. Add in some tea, coffee and other non sugar-based beverages, and you will maintain proper hydration status, and allow performance, recovery and consistency to occur.

### LIFESTYLE

The final area of focus is lifestyle, or those extra areas that can have a large impact on your readiness.

**1. Consistently compromised sleep:** Sleep is the elixir of performance and is your greatest (and cheapest) recovery tool. If you consistently ignore the need for sleep in favour of squeezing in workouts and training, you will end up under-responding to training, at least in a positive sense. Don't consistently skip sleep for training. Sometimes you need to put rest in front of work to allow your adaptations to occur.

**2. Ignoring life-stressors:** If you are a busy working professional or have plenty of life commitments, you cannot consider your training as mutually exclusive from the demands of life. If you travel across time zones for work, have a sickness, are backed up against big deadlines for work, you have to consider this within scope of the plan. Sometimes a reduction in duration, load or intensity is key to enable you to succeed in the big picture. It is as simple as a little consideration of the big picture, and a decision making process that focuses on logic, not emotion. I will admit it is easier to write about than execute in

the real world, especially for the motivated type-A triathlete.

**3. Training through sickness:** I am amazed at the level of sickness it will take for a triathlete to reduce training, or skip a session. They can have a high fever and bronchitis, but stubbornly be striving toward race pace at the track. Listen to logic, and logic says that while your body is fighting off the extreme physiological stress of a heavy sickness, it is in no place to positively adapt your training stress. I understand what you want, but you have to manage what you have on that day.

**4. Forgetting to enjoy it:** Remember this is your hobby. The biggest mistake I see athletes make as they venture into the meat and potatoes of the season is that they begin to see the process as a chore. Don't take yourself too seriously and have fun with it. The process is a fun journey and it will come with its own challenges, but if you become a slave to the grind you will end up becoming stale and, quite frankly, rather boring. Smile and have fun, we are all in this crazy journey together. ■