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So What's Next? Transitioning from "In Season" to "Out of Season"

BY DAVID GLOVER

“Perhaps I am a bear, or some hibernating animal underneath, for the instinct to be half asleep all winter is so strong in me.”

- Anne Morrow Lindbergh
American writer and
aviation pioneer, 1906-2001

With the triathlon season winding down, one question we will be asking ourselves is, "What's next?"

The end of the racing season can be a huge emotional letdown for endurance athletes. In the words of one of my coaching clients, "finishing my race has left a void."

As athletes, we spend months and perhaps even years training for that special "A" race. Then it happens. One day of racing and you're done. Finished. Over. Your weeks of early morning swims and weekends of long rides and runs are no longer necessary. You have no events to look forward to for the next five or six months. The days are shorter and the mornings are colder. Personally, I have a tough time climbing out of bed in the morning to go to the swimming pool when it's dark and cold outside. I'd rather stay in my warm bed until at least the sun comes up.

There are three ways to approach the "Out of Season" period: keep training, do nothing, or find the happy medium.

Approach #1: Keep Training at Race Intensities

There's a common tendency for the goal-driven endurance athlete to want to keep training for something and want to try to maintain a high level of racing fitness through the winter. Although this might be appealing from the perspective of, "I've worked hard all summer. I'm in the best shape of my life. I want to keep getting faster, better, stronger, etc.," it may be unrealistic and potentially unhealthy.

It's unrealistic because you've been neglecting or ignoring other aspects of your life, like work, family, and friends. It's unhealthy because your body is just plain tired from the day-in and day-out heavy pounding that you put it through, and needs time to recover.

If you have taken this approach in the past, you might be familiar with the symptoms of burnout, such as: constant fatigue, poor attitude, lack of desire to train, and aversion to anything triathlon-related. Burnout can happen to anyone and is quite common after the end of a long training and racing season. The single biggest mistake you can make with burnout is to deny it and keep training. It can be tempting to do "just one more race," but

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continuing to train and race with burnout will lead to sub-par results and a poor ending to your racing season.

Approach #2: Do Nothing - Be Like a Bear and Hibernate

What do bears do in the winter? They hibernate.

As we end our racing season, we could do the same – metaphorically speaking, of course! The thought of fattening up in the fall then sleeping through the winter in a warm cave might be appealing, but again, not realistic or desirable, as you will lose a significant amount of fitness that will be difficult to recover in the spring.

Approach #3: Shift from Specific to Non-specific (Recommended)

I discussed two ends of the spectrum above: (1) keep training, which might result in burnout or (2) no training at all. The middle ground of non-specific training is where you want to be, in order to avoid burnout and carry over an adequate level of fitness to the next season.

Specificity is the principle that an exercise must stress the systems and muscles critical for opti-

mal performance in a sport, in order to achieve the desired training adaptations. In other words, to gain swimming fitness, you must swim. To get faster on the bike, you must bike faster. Etc. There are cross-over fitness benefits from doing different types of exercises – e.g., mountain biking can help maintain your run. In order to race well, you must do race-specific, higher-intensity training. However, the wintertime is the perfect time to do non-specific exercises to maintain an adequate amount of fitness until the spring when training should return to more sport-specific disciplines.

Strategies I recommended to my coaching clients for non-specific training through the winter include:

- Change to winter-friendly activities and move workouts back indoors. For example, spinning classes are a fun, challenging alternative to riding outdoors. Indoor rock climbing is gaining in popularity. Mountain biking can be fun even in cold, muddy conditions.
- Take advantage of environmental changes. For example, running routes from the summer will look and feel different when it's cold and there's snow on the ground. Leave the watch and heart rate monitor at home. Work on "feel", rather than the gadgets.

- Set goals specific to one sport that is oriented towards "fun challenge" rather than "get fast." For example, build up to doing 50 x 50 meters in the pool as a challenge – build up with weekly intermittent goals: 20 x 50 the first week, then 25 x 50 the second week, etc. until you reach the end goal.
- Work on skills and technique. Spend the time and money for swim lessons and practice drills. Improve form in the winter, and then develop speed in the spring.
- Develop strength and flexibility. Improving these will help you prevent injuries. For example, I discovered Bikram yoga almost three years ago. It's become an important and necessary part of my training in order to build stabilizing strength and flexibility.
- Focus on only one of the three triathlon events. For example, bump up swimming to 4x per week with only one bike and run to work on swim comfort and form.

Author of Full Time & Sub-Nine: Fitting Iron Distance Training into Everyday Life, David dabbles extensively in endurance sports as a professional triathlete, coach, writer, and race director. He has helped hundreds of individuals through coaching, educational seminars, and eBooks. As an athlete, his accolades include an 8:51 Ironman PR and being the 2007 inductee into the Vineman Hall of Fame. For more information about David, please visit www.davidlover.net. For more information about his coaching services, please visit www.enduranceworks.net.

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