

CHAPTER

1

The Importance of the Off-Season:

BACKING OFF WITH A PURPOSE

THE TRANSITION PHASE

For the same reason that you should build rest days into a week of training and reduced-volume/rest weeks into your training cycles, you also need a longer rest phase (4 to 5 weeks) within your yearly cycle. This phase, called the “transition phase,” leads your off-season, and it occurs immediately following your last competition and prior to the “base-building period.” Often, an athlete will refrain from any type of activity during this phase and become the proverbial “couch potato.” While a few complete days of rest can be beneficial, prolonged inactivity can lead to a dramatic loss of fitness.

Studies have shown that a complete cessation of training can cause between a 4 percent and 14 percent decrease in VO_2max (i.e., the capacity for oxygen consumption by the body during maximal exertion—also known as aerobic capacity and max oxygen consumption) in as little as 4 weeks. Endurance performance has also been shown to decrease as much as 25 percent during a period of 2 to 4 weeks of

inactivity. Further studies have demonstrated negative changes in blood volume, lactate concentration, lactate threshold, muscle glycogen, capillary density, and mitochondrial volume. Thus, it is important to *decrease, not cease, your activity during your transition period.* This will allow you to maintain your fitness gains, so that you have a solid foundation to build upon going into the remainder of your off-season.

What should you be doing during your transition phase to prepare you for the upcoming “base phase”? Think of this transition phase as a time of unstructured training. You having been living by your training log all year, and now is the time to train when you want. The following list should help you to relax and recharge, while maintaining a general level of fitness.

- Lose the training log and relax.
- Throw in a day or two (or three) of complete rest.
- Stay off the road bike and hit the trails on the mountain bike.
- Stay off the roads and head to the running trails.
- Try deep-water running or an aqua-fitness class.
- Lock up the heart rate monitor and gauge your exertion by feel.
- Try something new like yoga or Pilates™.
- Take long walks with family, friends, or your pet.
- Head to the lake for a paddle in a kayak or canoe.
- Stay away from your master's swim group.
- Swim on your own and do not count the yardage.
- Skip the weight room and perform only body weight exercises.
- Sleep in.
- Sleep in.
- Sleep in.

Some athletes report feeling “funky” during this time of reduced training. This feeling is similar to the “taper funk” that often occurs when athletes back off from large volumes of training. In essence, your body is going through exercise withdrawal and needs to get used to the feeling of less exercise. Do not let this feeling cause you to cut short your transition period. This mental and physical break is a much-needed phase within your entire training plan and, if followed properly, will prepare your body and mind to begin your next phase of training with eagerness—the Base phase.

LOOKING BACK TO PLAN AHEAD

With your race season still fresh in your mind and the unstructured nature of your current training giving you some newly found time, the transition phase is perfect to start planning for your upcoming season. But, before you start to map out your annual training plan (ATP), you need to look back at this past season's goals, objectives, training schedule, and race results. You need to assess the past before you plan for the future, and asking yourself the following questions will help you shape your training plans for the upcoming season.

Did you meet your goals?

Did you follow your training objectives?

Did you address your limiters?

Were you able to stick to your training schedule?

Were you satisfied with your racing results?

When planning the upcoming season, think about how difficult or easy it was to meet your goals. Were they reasonable, too easily met, or well beyond your reach? Once you met a goal, did you set another? Did your training objectives lead you to your goals? Training objectives are the stepping-stones to your goals and must be followed closely. Your training objectives should focus on your limiters. (Did you determine these?) In order to improve performance, you must focus on your weaknesses while maintaining your strengths.

Looking back at your training journal, were you able to stick to your training schedule? You need to set your training hours to blend into your daily schedule. Do not set yourself up for failure by scheduling more hours than you have available to train. Did you feel good about your race results? Remember to think about your race effort, and do not compare yourself to your competition. Did your race schedule fit into your life schedule? Not having enough races in a season can lead to seemingly endless training, yet having too many races can lead to burnout. Balancing your race schedule with a good mixture of "A, B, and C level" races ("A" being the most important, "C" the least) will keep you motivated to train and eager to race.

Looking back at your season and evaluating the good and the bad results will provide you with a solid outline to begin designing your training plan for the upcoming season. Chapter 2 will provide you

with some personal assessment forms that will help you pinpoint your strengths and weaknesses and determine what limiters you need to address to reach your goals.

The next step to a successful season is to design your off-season training plan. Remember, a varied and carefully planned off-season will provide you with the solid foundation that you will need to achieve your goals for the upcoming season. As you use the next chapter to design your off-season plan (Preparation, Base I, II, and III phases), you will define and set goals, determine limiters, and set appropriate training objectives. So, break out a pencil and paper and get ready to map out your road to results.

R E F E R E N C E S

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