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SMART TRAINING

You can’t train luck.
— EDDIE BORYSEWICZ,
RENOWED POLISH-AMERICAN CYCLING COACH

WHY IS IT that some start their cycling career with little sign of physical talent and years later reach the pinnacle of the sport as elite amateurs or pros? Why do others who excel at an early age end up fizzling and dropping out of the sport before realizing their full potential?

Those who persevere probably had talent all along, but it wasn’t immediately evident. More than likely, the young athlete had a parent, coach, or mentor concerned about the long term—someone who wanted to see his or her protégé in full bloom and was wise enough to bring the athlete along slowly and deliberately. The successful athlete’s workouts may not have been based on the latest science, but a sensible training philosophy was established early in his or her career.

In contrast, the young cyclist who failed to make it as a senior may have been driven too hard by a parent or coach. The intentions of this adult guide may have been good, but his or her techniques left something to be desired.

When I begin to train an athlete, I start by getting to know him or her fairly well—but it still takes weeks to determine the most effective training methods to employ for that individual. There are many factors to consider in developing an effective training program. A few of them are:

- Years of experience in the sport
- Age and maturity level
- How training has progressed over the long term
- Most recent training program
- Personal strengths and weaknesses
• Local terrain and weather conditions
• Schedule of important races
• Details of the most important races: duration, terrain, competition, previous results
• Recent and current health status
• Lifestyle stress (work and family issues, for example)

The list could go on and on. If you are hoping to find a precise training plan spelled out for you in this book, you must understand that it is not that simple. There are simply too many unknowns for me or anyone else to evaluate you completely without extensive input from you. After all, right now no one knows you as well as you know yourself. Only you can make some of the critical decisions about your training. You do need tools to work with—a set of basic training principles and practices that apply in different ways to different athletes. That’s why I’ve written this book—so that you might understand the basic concepts and do a better job of self-coaching.

**SYSTEMATIC TRAINING**

This book is about systematic and methodical training. Some riders think that’s boring and would rather work out spontaneously. They prefer to train by the seat of their pants—no planning, no forethought, and minimal structure. I won’t deny that it is possible to become a good rider without a highly structured system and method. I have known many who have been successful with such an approach. But I’ve also noticed that when these same athletes decide to compete at the highest levels, they nearly always increase the structure of their training. Structured systems and methods are critical for achieving peak performance. It won’t happen haphazardly.

I should also point out that the system and methods described in this book are not the only ones that will produce peak racing performance. There are many systems that work; there are as many as there are coaches and elite athletes. There is no one “right” way—no system that will guarantee success for everyone.

There are also no secrets. You won’t find any magic workouts, miracle diet supplements, or all-purpose periodization schemes. Everything in this book is already known and used by at least some cyclists. No coach, athlete, or scientist has a winning secret—at least not one that is legal. Many have developed effective systems, however. Effective training systems are marked by comprehensively integrated components. They are not merely collections of workouts. All of the parts of effective programs fit together neatly, like the pieces of a complex jigsaw puzzle. Furthermore, there is an underlying philosophy that ties the parts together. All aspects of a sound program are based on this philosophy.

**THE OVERTRAINING PHENOMENON**

Is there a relationship between fatigue and speed? Are there studies showing that if a rider gets really tired in training and does that often enough, he or she will get faster? Does
starting workouts with chronically tired legs somehow improve power and other aspects of race fitness?

I pose these questions because so many athletes tell me that there’s no improvement unless they feel at least a little sluggish all the time. But when I ask these same athletes why they train, the answer is always, “To get faster for racing.” Chronic fatigue is a strange way to get faster.

Recently I did a Web search of the sports science journals to see if any research has found a positive relationship between fatigue and athletic performance. Of the 2,036 studies I came across on this subject, not a single one showed that an athlete performed better if he or she got tired often enough.

All of this leads me to believe that athletes who keep themselves chronically tired and leg weary must be making a mistake. Either that or they have a training secret. But I doubt it. More than likely, the reason for their excessive training is a combination of an overly developed work ethic and obsessive-compulsive behavior.

In fact, there are a few athletes I have been unable to train for this reason. When I allow them to rest in order to go into a hard workout fresh, they interpret the lack of fatigue as a loss of fitness and become paranoid. After a few episodes where they put in “extra” intervals, miles, hours, and workouts, we part company. My purpose in coaching is not to help otherwise well-intentioned athletes keep their addiction going. I’d like to see them race faster, not just be more fatigued and stressed-out than before.

On the other hand, I have trained many athletes in a variety of sports on a program of less training than they were accustomed to. It’s amazing to see what they can accomplish once they fully commit to their actual training purpose—to get faster. When riders go into hard workouts feeling fresh and snappy, the speeds and power produced are exceptional. As a result, the muscles, nervous system, cardiovascular system, and energy systems are all optimally stressed. Once they have a few more days of recovery to allow for adaptation, we do it again. And guess what? They are even faster.

**PHILOSOPHY**

The philosophy of training proposed in *The Cyclist’s Training Bible* may seem unusual. I have found, however, that if it is followed, serious athletes improve. Here is my training philosophy: An athlete should do the least amount of properly timed, specific training that brings continual improvement.

The idea of limiting training is a scary thought for some. Many cyclists have become so accustomed to overtraining that it seems a normal state. These racers are no less addicted than drug users. Like a drug addict, the chronically overtrained athlete is continuing a behavior that is destructive to his or her own well-being. That athlete is not getting any better, but still can’t convince himself or herself to change.

Read the philosophy statement again. Notice that it doesn’t say “train with the least amount of miles.” Another way to state it might be “use your training time wisely.” For
those of us with full-time jobs, spouses, children, a home to maintain, and other responsibilities, using training time wisely is more than a philosophy; it’s a necessity.

What this means is that there are times when it’s right to do higher-volume training, but not necessarily the highest possible. This is usually in the Base (general preparation) period of training. There are also times when high volume is not wise, but faster, more race-specific training is right. These are the Build and Peak (specific preparation) periods. (Periods are explained in Chapter 7.)

While it seems so simple, there are many who can’t seem to get it right. They put in lots of miles when they should be trying to get faster. And when they should be building a base of general fitness, they’re going fast—usually in group hammer sessions.

So up to this point in your training and racing experience, how have you been gauging your progress—do you typically go by how tired you are, or by how fast you are? If it’s the former, unless you change your attitude you will be doomed to a career of less-than-stellar racing. Once you figure out that fatigue gets in the way of getting faster and you make the necessary changes, you’ll be flying.

**THE TEN COMMANDMENTS OF TRAINING**

To help you better understand this training philosophy I have broken it down into the “Ten Commandments of Training.” By incorporating each of these guidelines into your thinking and training, you’ll be following this philosophy and getting a better return on your time invested. Your results will also improve regardless of your age or experience.

**COMMANDMENT 1: TRAIN MODERATELY**

Your body has limits when it comes to endurance, speed, and strength. Don’t try too often to find them. Instead, train within those limits most of the time. Finish most workouts feeling like you could have done more. It may mean stopping a session earlier than planned. That’s okay. Do not always try to finish exhausted.

Muscles will only contract forcefully a certain number of times before they refuse to pull hard again. When glycogen, the body’s storage form of carbohydrate energy, begins to run low, no amount of willpower can fuel the body and slowing down becomes the only option. If such limits are approached frequently and over a long enough period of time, the body’s ability to adapt is exceeded, recovery is greatly delayed, and training consistency is interrupted.

The biggest mistake of most athletes is to make the easy days too challenging, so when it comes time for a tough training day, they can’t go hard enough. This leads to mediocre training, fitness, and performance. The higher your fitness level, the greater the difference should be between the intensities of hard and easy days.

Many cyclists also think that pushing hard all the time will make them tough. They believe that willpower and strength of character can overcome nature and speed up their...
body’s cellular changes. Don’t try it—more tough training is seldom the answer. An organism adapts best when stresses are slightly increased. That’s why you’ve often heard the admonition to increase training volume by no more than 10 percent from week to week. Even this may be high for some.

By progressing carefully, especially with intensity, you’ll gradually get stronger and there will be time and energy for other pursuits in life. An athlete who enjoys training will get far more benefits from it than one who is always on the edge of overtraining.

The self-coached cyclist must learn to think objectively and unemotionally. It should be as if you are two people—one is the rider and the other is the coach. The coach must be in charge. When the rider says, “Do more,” the coach should question whether that’s wise. Doubt is a good enough reason to discontinue the session. When in doubt, leave it out.

Do every workout conservatively, but with a cocky attitude. When the coach stops the hill repeats at just the right time, and the rider says, “I could have done more,” stopping is not a loss—it’s a victory.

**COMMANDMENT 2: TRAINT CONSISTENTLY**

The human body thrives on routine. Develop a training pattern that stays mostly the same from week to week—regular activity brings positive change. This does not mean you should do the same workout every day, week after week. Variety also promotes growth. Later in this book you’ll see that there are actually slight changes being made throughout the training year. Some of the changes are seemingly minor. You may not even be aware of them, as when an extra hour is added to the training week during the base-building period.

Breaks in consistency usually result from not following the moderation commandment. Overdoing a workout or week of training is likely to cause excessive fatigue, illness, burnout, or injury. Fitness is not stagnant—you’re either getting better or getting worse all the time. Frequently missing workouts means a loss of fitness. This doesn’t mean, however, that you should work out when ill. There are times when breaks are necessary. For example, what choices do you typically make when you:

- Feel tired, but have a hard workout planned?
- Are afraid of losing fitness while taking time off because you feel wasted?
- Believe your competition is putting in more training time than you are?
- Feel like your training partners are riding too fast?
- Sense there is only one interval left in you?
- Think you could do more, but aren’t sure?
- Have a “bad” race?
- Seem to have hit a plateau or even lost fitness?

If your personal philosophy is “more is better,” you will answer these questions differently than if it is “do the least amount of properly timed, specific training that brings continual improvement.” Do you see the difference?
This is not to say that you shouldn’t do hard workouts or that it isn’t necessary to push the limits on occasion and experience fatigue as a result. It’s obvious that if coming close to your riding potential is your goal, then you must often face and conquer training challenges. The problem arises when you don’t know when to back off, when to rest, and when to do less than planned. The inevitable consequences of “more is better” are burnout, overtraining, illness, and injury. Extended or frequent downtime due to such problems inevitably results in a loss of fitness and the need to rebuild by returning to previous, lower levels of training. Riders who experience these problems with some regularity seldom achieve their potential in the sport.

Training consistently, not extremely, is the route to the highest possible fitness and your ultimate racing performances. The key to consistency is moderation and rest. That may not be what you want to hear about in a book on training, but read on to better understand how consistency will make you faster.

**COMMANDMENT 3: GET ADEQUATE REST**

It’s during rest that the body adapts to the stresses of training and grows stronger. Without rest there’s no improvement. As the stress of training increases, the need for rest also accumulates. Most cyclists pay lip service to this commandment; they understand it intellectually, but not emotionally. It is the most widely violated guideline. You will not improve without adequate rest.

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**And to All a Good Night**

Quality of sleep may be improved by:

- Going to bed at a regular time every night, including the night before races
- Darkening the room in the last hour before bedtime and narrowing your focus by reading or engaging in light conversation
- Sleeping in a dark, well-ventilated room that is 60 to 64 degrees Fahrenheit (16 to 18 degrees Celsius)
- Taking a warm bath before bed
- Progressively contracting and relaxing muscles to induce total body relaxation
- Avoiding stimulants such as coffee and tea in the last several hours before going to bed
- Restricting alcohol (which interferes with sleep patterns) prior to bedtime

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**COMMANDMENT 4: TRAIN WITH A PLAN**

Planning is at the heart of training, especially when your goals are big ones. You may have heard good athletes say that they don’t plan and do quite well anyway. I’d wager they really are following a plan, only it’s in their heads and not in writing. Athletes don’t become...
great by training randomly, and you won’t either. Fortunately, the heart of this book is all
about planning. Chapter 8 provides the details on how I lay out a seasonal plan for an ath-
lete. Chapter 9 covers workout planning, and Chapter 10 discusses stage-race planning.

A strong plan is fundamental to improvement in almost any endeavor of life, yet few
self-trained athletes do it. Sometimes I find riders who use a sound plan from a magazine,
but as soon as a new issue comes out, they abandon the old plan and take up a new one.
Most people will improve if they follow a plan—any plan. It can be of poor design, yet still
work. Just don’t keep changing it.

This book is all about planning. In Part IV you will learn about annual training plans
and weekly scheduling routines. These are the sections you will come back to year after
year as you plan for the next season.

Realize that all plans can be tweaked. Although you don’t want to start from scratch
every month, your plan will not be chiseled into stone. It takes some flexibility to cope
with the many factors that will get in your way. These may include a bad cold, overtime at
work, unexpected travel, or a visit from Aunt Jeanne. I have yet to coach an athlete who
didn’t have something interfere with the plan. Expect it, but don’t be upset when it hap-
pens. Roll with the punches and change the plan to fit the new situation.

I’ve learned that one of the most critical parts of any plan is the overall goal. Most
athletes think they have goals, but few really do. What most call ”goals” are actually wishes.
They are vague desires for grand achievements that are poorly defined. These often in-
clude imprecise words like “faster.” When creating a training plan for an athlete, the first
question I ask is, “How will you know if this season was successful?” I also have the athlete
identify long-term objectives by asking, “What is the greatest accomplishment you’d like
to achieve as a cyclist?” These really are dreams, but long-term dreams can eventually
become goals. They certainly can help you formulate goals, and in that sense identifying
your dreams is a good starting point.

Where do you go from there? To help athletes turn big dreams into specific training
goals, I ask questions such as ”How much?” “When?” “Where?” “Does this goal make you
reach and strive? Is it realistic?” Knowing precisely what you want is critical to success in
cycling just as it is in life. Goal setting is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 8.

**COMMANDMENT 5: TRAIN WITH GROUPS INFREQUENTLY**

There’s a real advantage to working out with others—sometimes. Pack riding develops
handling skills, provides experience with race dynamics, and makes the time go faster.
Riding with friends can also motivate athletes to get on the bike in bad weather or when
other commitments threaten to push aside workouts. But all too often, the group will
cause you to ride fast at a time when you would be best served by a slow, easy recovery
ride. At other times, you will need to go a longer or shorter distance than the group de-
cides to ride. Group workouts too often degenerate into unstructured races at the most
inopportune times.
For the winter base-building period, find a group that rides at a comfortable pace. During the spring intensity-building period, ride with a group that will challenge you to ride fast, just as when racing. Smart and structured group rides are hard to find. You may need to create your own. Stay away from big packs that take over the road and are unsafe. You want to get faster, not get killed. Use groups when they can help you. Otherwise, avoid them.

**COMMANDMENT 6: PLAN TO PEAK**

Your season plan should bring you to your peak for the most important events. I call these "A" races. The "B" races are important, too, but you will not taper and peak for these—just rest for three to four days before them. "C" races are tune-ups to get you ready for the A and B races. A smart rider will use these low-priority races for experience, or to practice pacing, or as a time trial to gauge fitness. If all races are A-level priority, don't expect much for season results.

Peaking also means training for the unique demands of each goal race. The principal factor is race duration. There are many differences in training for a 40 km time trial, a 45-minute criterium, or a 60-mile road race. Beyond this are course profiles such as hilly, rolling, or flat; windy or calm conditions; hot and cold temperatures; courses with lots of or very few turns; off-road and road courses; morning and afternoon start times; and a multitude of other variables. As you work toward peaking, your training should take on more of the coming race’s unique characteristics. In Chapter 10 you will learn how to write a race plan that takes into consideration the key variables over which you have control and teaches you how to deal with those you can’t control.

This book will show you how to peak for A races two or more times in a season. Each peak may last for up to a couple of weeks. You will still race between peaks, but the emphasis will be on reestablishing endurance, force, and speed skills to prepare for the next peak.

**COMMANDMENT 7: IMPROVE WEAKNESSES**

What do riders with great endurance, but not much speed, do the most? You guessed it—endurance work. What do good climbers like to do? Not surprisingly, they like to train in the hills. Most cyclists spend too much time working on what they’re already good at. What’s your weakest area? Ask your training partners if you don’t know. I’ll bet they do. Then spend more time on that area. *The Cyclist’s Training Bible* will help you identify your weaknesses and teach you how to improve them. Understanding your “limiters” is critical to your success in racing. Pay close attention whenever you run across that term in this book.

In endurance sports, with the possible exception of swimming, athletes tend to downplay or even disregard technique. Most athletes, especially those in their first three years in the sport, have lots of room for improvement of their sport-specific skills—
balance, cornering, pedaling, and bike handling. As skills improve, less energy is wasted, which means that you become more “economical” and can go faster using the same effort. Skills and economy for those new to the sport are discussed in Chapter 14.

When identifying your limiters, remember that mental fitness is just as critical as physical fitness. In Chapter 1, I discussed the importance of mental toughness, breaking it down into four elements: having a desire to succeed, mastering self-discipline, believing in yourself, and developing patience. What perhaps ties all these together is having self-confidence. What I look for in an athlete is a quiet, “can-do” attitude, the common denominator for all of the best athletes I have ever known. A great deal of self-doubt is the mark of someone incapable of achieving high goals regardless of physical ability. Working with a sports psychologist can help improve that limiter.

**COMMANDMENT 8: TRUST YOUR TRAINING**

There’s nothing worse than thinking you are making good progress toward achieving your goal and then on race day feeling that you are not physically ready. Few of us trust our training when it comes time to race, but this should be a vague adrenaline-generated fear, not a fact. To ensure that you can feel confident in your training, it’s critical to assess it during the year. If you see that you aren’t improving as expected in some aspect of fitness, you can correct it and change your training long before race week. There are many ways to assess fitness progress. Chapter 5 addresses some of these.

If you aren’t completely confident about your training base, then as the big race approaches, you may worry that you haven’t done enough or even train right up to race day. I’ve seen people the day before an important race go out for a long ride or compete in a hard race because they think it will help. It takes 10 to 21 days of reduced workload for the human body to be fully ready to race, depending on how long and hard the training has been. Cut back before the big races, and you’ll do better. Trust me.

**COMMANDMENT 9: LISTEN TO YOUR BODY**

It is vitally important to do the least amount of training necessary to achieve your goal. When I was a much younger athlete I thought my success depended on doing as much training as possible. What that led to was frequent injury, overtraining, illness, and burnout. It took me many years to listen to my body and figure out what I should be doing—only the training that is necessary to achieve my goals. Once I stopped pushing beyond my body’s recovery limits, I improved as an athlete. I’ve found it works the same way for those I coach.

It’s not just my experience. In the early 1990s, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, I attended a talk by the former head of the East German Sports Institute. After conceding that East German athletes had indeed used illegal drugs, which he felt was a minor aspect of their remarkable success, he went on to explain what he saw as the real reason for their great number of Olympic medals. He described how elite athletes lived regulated...
lives in dormitories. Every morning, each athlete met with a group of experts—an event coach, a physiologist, a doctor or nurse, and a sports psychologist, for example. The group checked the athlete’s readiness to train that day and made adjustments as necessary to the schedule. In effect, they were listening to what the athlete’s body was saying. The athlete trained only to the level he or she could tolerate that day. Nothing more.

It would be nice if each of us could afford such attention. We can’t, so we must learn to listen to our bodies for ourselves. If you listen to what your body is saying, you’ll train smarter and get faster. Cyclists who train smart always beat athletes who train hard. The Cyclist’s Training Bible will teach you how to hear what your body is saying every day—and train smart.

One important note: Even though I coach highly committed athletes, and they work very hard, I have learned the importance of having fun. This may seem obvious, but some athletes are so focused on achieving the right numbers in their logs that they’ve forgotten why they got involved in the sport in the first place, and it’s no longer fun. Many of the pros I talk to are amazed at how much training time the age groupers do on top of working 50 to 60 hours per week, getting the kids to soccer practice, mowing the lawn, doing volunteer work, and attending to myriad other responsibilities. By comparison, the pros have it easy! They just train 30 to 40 hours per week with a few naps sprinkled in. These pros also tell me that if it ever stopped being fun, they would quit racing and get a real job. Fun is the reason each and every one of us participates in cycling. You’re probably not earning a living riding a bike—never lose sight of that. You are not defined by your most recent race result. Your kids won’t love you any less if you have a “bad” race. The sun will still come up tomorrow. So smile more and frown less; you will enjoy cycling more and do better in the sport because of it.

**Commandment 10: Commit to Goals**

If you want to race farther, faster, and stronger this season than you did last season, you will need to train differently and may even need to make changes in your lifestyle. What could be holding you back? Maybe you need to go to bed earlier. Or perhaps you eat too much junk food. You may benefit from putting in more time at the weight room during the winter to build greater force. Maybe your training partners are holding you back.

After you set your goals in a later chapter, take a look at them and determine how they relate to your lifestyle and training. Determine that if change is needed, you can do it. Only you can control how well you race.

Striving for peak performance is a 24-hour-a-day, 365-day-a-year task. Racing at the highest possible level demands a full-time commitment that is not just training-related. The higher the goals, the more your life must revolve around eating, sleeping, and working out. Eating nutritious food fuels the body for training and helps speed recovery by replenishing depleted energy and nutrient stores while providing the building blocks for a stronger body. Sleeping and working out have a synergistic effect on fitness.
Every day you have lifestyle choices to make about diet, sleep, and other physical and mental activities. The decisions you make, often without even thinking, will impact how well you ride.

A fully committed rider is a student of the sport. Read everything you can get your hands on about cycling, sports nutrition, and the like. Talk with coaches, trainers, athletes, mechanics, race officials, salespeople, and anyone else who may have a unique perspective. Ask questions, but be a bit skeptical. If you’re to grow as an athlete, change is necessary. Other knowledgeable people are often the sources for this change.

Training to improve includes keeping a training log. Record workout details, perceptions of effort, stress signals, race results and analyses, signs of increasing or decreasing fitness, equipment changes, and anything else that describes your daily experience. It may all prove helpful down the road. Most athletes also find that keeping a log provides them with a sharper training focus and results in more rapid progress toward their goals.

A word about what I’ve learned about goal setting: If you set a goal at the start of the season and know you can achieve it even before setting out to train for it, then it wasn’t much of a goal, was it? The idea of a goal is to have something to strive for that will cause you to become a better athlete. A good goal will stretch your limits, forcing you to master a new skill, gain strength, or make a lifestyle change. Whatever this “something new” may be, it is critical to your success and requires that you isolate and improve this quality. I call this “fixing the limiters.” Chapter 6 offers more on this topic.

Another thing to realize is that the bigger your goals are relative to your abilities, the more things in life must be focused on achieving them. If your goal is to finish with the field in a local, short road race, then you can afford to be a bit sloppy with nutrition, sleep, stress, training partners, friends, stretching, equipment, workout analysis, and strength work—and still do well. But if your goal is to win the race or podium at a national championship, you will need to get everything in your life pointed at cycling success.

Although committing to your goals is critical, bear in mind that each of us has a comfortable level of commitment. For most of us, jobs, families, and other responsibilities cannot be forsaken just to ride a bike. Part of “committing” is finding your own personal balance between training and the rest of life. Chapters 15 through 18 address these issues further.