

TRAINING - IT'S LIKE FINDING THE RIGHT BIKE

There are numerous different types of bikes available for triathletes to choose from these days. Cycling has become a very popular sport for not only for triathletes but also the general public and different bicycle manufacturers work hard to get people riding their bikes.

Road bikes, time trial bikes, mountain bikes and touring bikes all range in price from a couple of hundred dollars into the thousands. Weight, group sets, wheels, brakes, price and look all play a role in helping a person decide what bike they want.

Most will look around for a while, get recommendations from friends and forums and then make a decision on what suits them. Quite often after riding that particular bike for a while they realise they might need to make some changes. New wheels, a different fit, new seat, new group set or even a new bike all together.

The reality though is all bikes perform the same function to an extent. Some may perform better some are faster but they all do the same thing. Training for triathlon is much like finding the right bike for you. What feels right, what do you get the best results on and how does it feel when you ride it?

The internet means there are no secrets when it comes to training. Anyone can go on line and see all the different types of training programs available for all the different events from sprint to Ironman. Some advocate quality over quantity, some say long slow distance is the way to go, some it is all about numbers – wattage, heart rate, specific swim sets, some believe in rest days others don't.

In many ways it is like trying to find that right bike. Until you try it you won't really know what works for you. However like a bike all these different types of training do work as long as you have a couple of key ingredients – consistency and recovery. No matter what type of event it is or the type of training as long as you achieve consistency and recover properly, it will work.

The key however is finding out what works best for you. Do you need to take a rest day? Does intense training leave you complete smashed and unable to train the next day? Do the long easy rides leave you too tired to get up and go to work the next day? Do you get injured or sick if you don't take a few easy days every 2-3 weeks and if you race too much in a season, do you fall in a hole? What about work and family?

These questions can only be answered with experience and trying different things along the way. There is no one size fits all with a training program and many different factors need to be taken into account. Age, work situation, injuries, family commitments, previous experience, do you train better in a group or on your own, strengths and weaknesses etc.

As a coach my job is trying to work out what type of training a particular athlete needs to achieve their goals. If they come to me and say they want to go on program for a particular event I need to know as much as I can about their life and their athletic abilities. That is one of the reasons I don't do on line programs.

For me as a coach I need to see an athlete train. I need to see what's happening to their body when they train, how do they look, are they tired, are they grumpy, are they falling off the pace at training,

are they digging in when it gets hard. I can't see that with an on line athlete and so being able to see an athlete train lets me know how they are going and if the training they are doing is right for them. Additionally feedback surveys, time trials and lead up races also indicate if we are on the right track.

To highlight some real life examples and how training is different from one person to the next we only need to look at some of the athletes within BTS training for or completed an IM. I believe any IM program has a couple of key sessions every 7-10 days – long ride, long run broken up, strength ride and swim/ride brick. What will change for the athlete is the volume and intensity of these sessions depending on their experience and life situation (work/family).

What also varies is when they do the sessions. Typically many IM programs advocate the long ride Saturday followed by the long run Sunday. Again this approach may work but is it the best way? For the most part I think the long run is better done during the week and using the weekend to ride on both days with the Saturday used a swim/bike brick.

Brad Hector for example recently did his first IM in New Zealand and up until 4 weeks from race day he was travelling from Brisbane to Gympie and Sunshine Coast every day for work. Being his first IM and with that much travel meant Brad would only do one session per day during the week and that would be in the afternoon after he finished work and before he drove back to Brisbane.

Typically most IM athletes would do 2 sessions per day for at least 3-5 days per week but we couldn't do that with Brad so we had to be a little creative and come up with sessions that allowed him to replicate triathlon where possible but still do the key sessions.

For example once a week Brad would do hill reps of about 6-8km on the bike at Palmwoods on the Sunshine Coast and at the bottom of every rep he would get off the bike do 10-20 push ups. This fatigues his upper body much like when we swim and get on the bike and because Brad couldn't perform regular core sessions due to time constraints this was a way we could work around it. It is not a session you will find in the text books, but who says it is wrong?

Another session Brad and many others have done is a 30 x 100m pull in the pool with 5-10 push ups after every 100m. This is a great strength endurance session for IM. Again not one you'll find in the text books but does that mean it is wrong?

Brad has also had issues with stress fractures in the past so his longest run was 1hr 45 but he then got straight in the pool for a solid 45 min to 1hr water run to reduce the risk of injury. For others I will recommend running up to 2.5hrs (never longer) in the morning with 30-45 min the night before to break up the run and reduce the risk of injury.

Paul Scroggie is another athlete training for his first IM and who we have had to be creative with due to his shift work and commitments as father/husband to 2 teenage children. Paul does 12 hr shifts typically 2-4 days in a row and then a few days off. Often we will program no sessions or an easy 30-40 min run with some push ups on his work day and then work hard (double sessions) on his days off from work.

What it means also is that Paul doesn't typically have a designated recovery week like most people due to having those easy days blocked together each week. So far it is working well with a 4.51 first up half IM at Noosa a few weeks ago, a pb at Mooloolaba and some pb's in recent time trials.

Also for a first time IM athlete like Paul and Brad I will recommend that all of their long rides and runs are done at an easy aerobic pace. There will still be some intensity in their overall training program as this is an important part of any program regardless of distance but if they go too hard on those long rides and runs they will not sufficiently develop their aerobic capacity. Also it compromises their recovery as they have not built up enough training history to be able to handle such sessions.

However when Scott Budd did his 21 min pb at Port Mac IM 2 years ago we changed his training from what he had done in the past. With Scott having such a big base (years) of training and a lot of experience (already had been to Hawaii) we felt it was time to increase intensity and reduce volume. So his longer rides were done at a faster pace, we did some track work and worked on his running efficiency. The result was a 9.47 (21 min pb) at age 45 and another trip to Hawaii.

That type of program would not work as well for Paul or Brad at this stage. They could do it and finish IM but not as well as if they followed a program more specific for them. All programs though had those same two key points, consistency and recovery.

So if you have just started out in this sport and regardless of the type of event your training for, be patient. It takes time to work out the best training for you and like Scott you could be setting pb's at 45 so age is no barrier.

To finish off with and highlight another approach a good friend of mine from the Sunshine Coast Stephen Gage recently won the 40-44 age group at IM New Zealand and placed 10th overall. Stephen was a great supporter for me when I did the 3 IM in 3 days in 2008 being an integral part of my support crew during the event.

He was kind enough to answer a few questions on his NZ performance and the type of training he does. You'll see again it is different but it works for him.

Congrats on your performance at IM NZ. Winner of the 40-44 age group, 10th overall and a pb of 9.10 in difficult conditions. What were your expectations prior to the race?

Cheers thanks Mark. The overall result was/still is, a bit of a surprise actually. I knew I was close to the front of the race, but it wasn't until after I ran down the finish chute that I realised I was top 10.

I only had one specific goal for the race and that was to run a 3 "o" something, ie 3:09:59 would have been great. I ran 3:10:04 - bugger, so I'm a 5 second failure! No, I reckon I can still go a few minutes quicker on the run next time around, with minor adjustments to my training.

If I look at all my races, the key to a good result for me, (and I think most people) is a strong run. So a solid run was my only goal. I didn't feel as fit going into this race, however, I was very relaxed and had a slightly longer taper (due to the weather). I try to stay away from the hype race week, too many people walking around looking super fit with flash bikes and handing in their race day disclaimers to fellow competitors (I have a bad back, sore knee, the dog bit me etc). So I do what I need to do (register etc) very quickly and try to spend the week like I'm having a holiday with my family, sightsee, eat icecreams, sit in coffee shops.

I didn't ride the bike course or look at the run course (figured I wasn't going to be first anyway) and did a light run, rode into town a couple of times and did one 15 min swim. I am not a nice person to be around race morning, anxious/nervous heart rate zips to around 100 for about an hour beforehand, but I really try to keep things as normal as possible for as long as possible in the lead up.

After the race we spoke about the type of training you were doing leading into the race. Can you give us an idea of a typical training week and what you were trying to achieve each week?

I'm fairly sure most people read the Damien Angus article posted on firstofthebike recently. I thought I'd do the same thing and log my hours. I have never met Damien and certainly don't profess to be in his league, but I have read some of his stuff over the years and it made sense to me. Over a 20 week period I averaged 10hrs, and for the last 12 weeks (which is my typical race specific training period) it was 12.5hrs per week. Now I know there are going to be heaps of people who say, "yeah but, that guy is a natural at this or that", but my background isn't typical for a decent athlete - see below.

What was I trying to achieve?, I try to make the week-end pretty close to doing an IM time wise (ie around 4-5hrs on the bike approx 3hrs worth of running) but above anything, consistency. Week in week out the same format really drills home those efficiencies and skills.

So what are your key IM swim, bike and run sessions each week or fortnight?

I don't do a great deal, so every session I do is key, ie there is specificity to every session.

I am a reasonably strong swimmer, so I tend to load my last few weeks with swimming when I back-off on the run and bike. For a peak week, on the bike I was doing one 1hr wind trainer set, one ride over 3hrs and a ride over 4hrs (my longest ride was 4 hours 46mins). The bikes are progressive loaded towards the back end. I don't muck around on the bike, I try to only stop once, (if at all), I start with 5 bottles (4 on the bike one in my jersey) and I like to do these rides either alone or with one or two others that are riding the same pace. I figure that IM is a lonely sport come race day so it really bugs me if I have to wait for others whilst training and muck around stopping for water, toilet stops, picnics by the beach etc. - As you know I'm happy to muck around in the down times, but if I've got a commitment to a race, I don't like to waste time - coffee rides are for the off-season!

Same with my runs. 1 x 1.5hr negative split run over a hilly course during the week and a 2hr progressive over hills or trail on Sunday morning. Oh and for 6 weeks straight I consistently ran 1/2 off the bike after the 4hr bike. First season I have ever run off the bike consistently and I think I'll do it from now on.

What sort of recovery practices do you adopt? Do you get massage, have a rest day each week, wear compression garments, cold water immersion, anything in particular that works for you?

Eating/reloading properly immediately after any session is very important - if you've waited 1/2hr - you've waited too long. ie, If we run in the bush, then I make sure I have something in the car for the trip home.

Rolling, an unashamed plug here for tptherapy.com.au but this stuff works. I was the worlds laziest when it came to keeping suple and limber, but its so easy to do in front of the box at night and, done consistently, you sleep/wake up and train better.

I do wear compression socks - but only to bed at night (Danielle thinks it's pretty sexy) I don't believe in rest days. However there are times when fatigue creeps up on you. You need to learn what this feels like and continue to work through but tone down your training to suit, back off the intensity.

- Get 8 hrs sleep
- Eat as well as you can, plenty of fruit salad fish veges and nuts, cut out the bread, booze, but reward yourself with rubbish once a week or you will go insane!
- Most importantly - don't take yourself too seriously - its only a race, and 99.9% of the world doesn't care that you like to wear lycra and came X in some silly race they have never heard of.

That type of training you did for IM NZ is a little different to what you were doing in your early IM events a few years ago. Why is that?

There are a stack of good long distance athletes up here on the Coast, but the overriding theme when I started was long slow distance- LSD. In the early years 2005-2007 I was doing 25hr peak weeks, but that smashes your home life, and your work life and I was getting sick every season at least once or twice. All that aside - it just burnt me out. I wasn't enjoying training. It was you Mark, who actually put me onto the new path, suggesting I hook up with a coach. It was a bit scary, as the volume backed right off and initially I had a couple of average races - both due to nutritional problems - but I feel we have got the formula right now.

I know you like to keep some detailed training diary notes and have always tried to learn as much as you can about training and what works best for you. Tell us about some of the athletes and coaches you have trained with that have played a part in your development.

Well Michael Mckean got me into the crazy sport. But guys like Robbie Andrews, Bruce Thiele, Brian Barr and Tony & Leanne Southwell initially taught me the ropes. I was very lucky to have their knowledge and as I'm a bit of a sponge when it comes to understanding a process, I'm sure the questions got tiresome! Then John Carey who races pro (but now owns a bike shop on the coast, so he's a very busy man), and now Kristian Manietta, I've learn many things from all of them.

I keep a diary and rate each session I do. This way I can track my progress but also see if the sessions and just as importantly, the structure of the sessions, work for me. I am always willing to try something new, but if I've done it 3-4 times and don't feel like it's working for me, I tell Kristian and we change it around. You need to get to know your body, how it responds to different training methods, how it responds to daily loads, and then structure a program that gives you maximum impact for the allocated time. Coaching is a two-way job, without being a burden on your coach; it's your responsibility as an athlete to provide feedback to the coach. I think this is one of the points Damien Angus was making and it's very important. We are all different heights, weights, backgrounds, rates of metabolism etc, so a good program is a living document and mine continues to change.

Before NZ what IM events had you done and what were your results?

- IM Forster 2005 was my first race - 9.43
- Port 2006 - 9.29 - got a flat!
- Hawaii 2006 9.36
- Port 2007 9.16
- Port 2008 9.14
- Port 2009 9.29 - another flat
- Busso 2009 9.37
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What was your background prior to triathlon and how did you get into it?

- Second slowest 100 metre runner in grade 12 at school
- Almost made the school cross country team when a mate and I cheated too well and crossed the line in 5th and 6th places. Luckily I was 6th and they only took 5!
- Swam at school but didn't make the relay team
- Misspent my youth, uni years and young adulthood by drinking and smoking. (Quit November 7 2004 , at age 34 after I qualified for Forster)
- Took a bet with a work mate whilst drinking rum and smoking at a work "bonding session" at Maroochydore bowls club. He announced he was going to do the Noosa tri and I said I'd do it if he could. (I was a bit of a wreck 95kg smoker/drinker). I missed Noosa, but did Mooloolaba then Yeppoon and qualified for Forster. So I decided to give up smoking if I was going to get serious.

You're married with 2 teenage daughters, your wife Danielle is also quite a good athlete, and you have a successful career with Westpac and have had some great triathlon results. How do you balance it all?

Well in some ways it is easier, both the kids are a bit older, and as we both do the same sort of things, we have an understanding for what it takes. But this wasn't by design. When I started in 2004, I would come home from a ride and talk about all these people Danielle didn't know. So I bought her a bike and she started riding as well. Before I knew it she was doing XPD races!

But we plan our years, ie this year NZ and TNF100 are my 2 goals. Then Danielle is also doing TNF100, and post this she starts training for the XPD world champs in Tassie at end October. So we swap peak training times to make it work. It would be great to be able to race a heap of other races ("so you're going to Hawaii?") but the reality is that it's an expensive (sponsors anyone?) and somewhat selfish sport , so its levelling to not get too carried away with it all.

What is next for you?

I'm still too busy drinking rum and living in the past glory of NZ to think seriously about anything else! I've lined up to do TNF100 again (reckon I can go much faster this time!) but post that it's time for me to support Danielle for XPD worlds. Next year I'm thinking Cairns and maybe Canada.