

Ride Less, Ride Smarter, Ride Faster

Base Training, blah, blah, blah.

Per a recent training article, use up your vacation days by taking off winter Fridays so you can rack up **essential** miles? Come to think of it, kind of difficult at this time of year if you don't live in San Diego. Learn to dread yet another marathon bike session months before your IM event... Do not question how you will somehow have a breakthrough Ironman ride when your long training rides have gotten progressively slower, and drudgery is the least offensive adjective that you can use to describe these outings.

Oh, and one more thing, feel guilty that despite all your efforts, you still will not have not done enough, even though the mere thought of a long hard bike outing makes you want to crawl into a fetal pose and say "no mas." You trained longer and harder last year, yet for some strange reason your race performance was a disappointment; the extra training hours must not have been enough? Still you think, some extra miles coupled with those new race wheels will help make the difference...

I have been involved in dozens of Ironman events, as an athlete, coach, and observer, and I continue to be amazed at the prevalence of the above-mentioned scenarios. Too many over-distance rides, too much redundant training, interval work with no clear progression and on legs that are already dead anyway, super-aero positions but from which one cannot pedal with any power, etc.

It seems to me that people are so paranoid about being unprepared that they almost need to do an Ironman in training to gain prerequisite confidence. Unfortunately, with so much overkill these athletes destroy what should be a fun and uplifting training process, and ruin their chances at performing up to their potential on race day. Many of these same athletes then go on in subsequent Ironman events to demonstrate the colloquial definition of insanity; that being to somehow expect a different result with the same process.

Kind of reminds me of a reggae song I heard on the radio recently whose lyrics go "I smoke two joints in the morning, I smoke two joints in the evening, I smoke two joints in the afternoon, and then I smoke two joints before I smoke two joints."

Can there be a more effective way to train? Allow me to say that with bike training hours less than those of many age-groupers, I was able to post fastest bike splits at Ironman Canada on both occasions, Ironman Japan by 17 minutes, and achieved a personal best bike split in Hawaii of 4hr34min.

The key to these performances was training 2-3x/week indoors, generally for a 1hr period. It is very rare that I ride more than 1hr20' during an indoor session.

I didn't always train with this apparent minimalist approach however. The truth is that I had long ago tried the "I'll train longer and harder than anyone" approach, and discovered that it didn't work.

My first clue that indoor training on the bike was effective was during the winter of 1991 when I trained in Boston. I rode indoors on average 4 sessions per week, and most sessions were 1hr in duration. My longest indoor ride was 2hrs and I did this only once. In fact, that 2hr session remains my longest indoor ride to this very day. The weather was such that year that I did not venture outdoors from December to April.

When a back injury that prevented me from running was finally cured, I flew to Spain where I was anxious to get back to training outdoors in the company of professional and semi-pro riders. My very first ride in Madrid turned out to be a 70mile hilly ride in the company of semi-pro riders, a certain recipe for disaster considering that my average ride during the past 3 months was 1 hour duration.

Much to my surprise, not only did I endure the 70 miles, but I rode very strongly throughout, despite my complete lack of "base." I remember thinking that there clearly must be something of extra value to training indoors. Nevertheless, now that I was in sunny Spain with its challenging roads, I could now take my cycling to an even higher level.

Two months later, I found myself noticeably slower than when I had arrived, despite an abundance of miles and good riding partners. Hmm, what had changed? And so it was that in the month of June, I searched Madrid's bike shops for a windtrainer. My Spanish friends could not help laughing at this American who traveled to Spain to ride indoors.

It was this same crazy American that was to have the last laugh however. Wearing a triple digit race number, I proceeded to set the bike record for the Ironman Canada bike course while enroute to a stunning upset of the sport's top Ironman athletes.

In addition to my own race experiences, I have coached dozens of athletes who have proven that stellar performances can be achieved with far less training than is generally recommended, or that they had done in the past. I am not saying that these athletes simply finished a race, but that they performed up to their potential, enjoyed the process, and can't wait to do it all over again.

Perhaps the most stunning example was an athlete that I coached from Boston, who competed in Ironman New Zealand in the month of March. This particular athlete was a veteran of many miles and some five Ironman events.

Yet despite averaging a mere 7 total training hours per week, not doing a single outdoor ride, and managing only a handful of rides over 2hrs with the longest being a 3.5 hour computrainer session, this athlete set a personal best sub 11hr performance. I confess that even I was shocked.

Most people look at Ironman events as vehicles with which to challenge and explore their limits. Yes, people want to finish these events and this accomplishment should offer ample reward, but they also want to have the sense that they have pushed themselves to the proximity of their potential. Yet, those little details like jobs, family, sleep, and only having 24hrs to a day seem to make maximizing fitness an entirely unrealistic goal.

The discipline which throws the biggest monkey wrench into your “be all that you can be” plan is the bike, because of all those miles upon miles you have been led to believe are absolutely necessary. In addition to the time spent racking up these miles, one also has to factor in the time spent getting in and out the door, as well as getting through stop signs, traffic lights, etc. to where riding is relatively uninterrupted.

Miles, base, more miles and more base, then onto “Ironman specific” training and yet more and more miles, and faster riding? Baloney I say.

When I won my Ironman events, my job was training, I wasn’t married and I didn’t have kids, yet I still found myself on my Computrainer 2-3 times per week, summer included. If you want to ride faster, then so too should you.