

RIAK.

F I T N E S S

BALANCE - SIMPLICITY - ACCESSIBILITY

RECOVERY STRATEGIES FOR YOUR MIND

Part 5: Time Pressure

In this part, we will discuss one of the biggest worries that an athlete working a normal day job can experience, **time pressure**.

One of the most frustrating things about fitting in training around work and social commitments is having your favourite break-through session planned for the morning and then realising your assumed 90-minute slot is really a hectic 45-minute session followed by what feels like a 90% chance of stress induced pulmonary implosion as you leg it for the train minutes after a monstrous run set.

The best words of reassurance I can give anyone struggling for time in this way, is that it is the accumulation of **quality** training volume that breads performance development. By this I mean that short, well-structured sessions performed at the appropriate frequency can be far more productive than your mate who seems able to churn out 18-hours of unfocused training a week. Do your best not to obsess too much about individual session duration or total weekly volume and concentrate on making sure that each of your sessions has a clear purpose that complements your overall training plan.

Managing the enormity of a challenge with the time available

Before we get into the minutiae of how you can approach training to better manage your time, perhaps we should start with the big picture and address concerns you might have as to whether you are even physically capable of building to that triathlon or marathon.

If you think back to school and when you were set a project or an essay to do, it could be terrifying because you had no idea where to start! The same can be true when thinking about your next event or challenge. You need to break it up, put in place some stepping stones or paragraph headings. Then once you have the framework of a plan, flesh out the detail. So, if you have zero experience in endurance sport and wake up one morning and decide you want to train for a marathon or Ironman, do not dismiss it after the bracing clarity of a warm shower and the chastening reality that you are not currently marathon fit. Decide where you need to get to, work backwards putting in place the stepping stones and you will quickly see that most challenges will not in fact require you to train 6-hours a day, 7 days a

week. It depends on the event you choose, but a few shorter mid-week sessions with longer sessions at the weekend will get you most of the way.

Finally, remember that you can do anything you want to do. Approach it like the most daunting essay from school, give yourself time, break the challenge down, set yourself some interim goals, build slowly and get some good advice from various sources and you **will** crush it!

Be realistic about your time availability

After worrying whether you are capable, the next consideration will likely be whether you have time to train for your challenge. This might seem like a slight contradiction of the above and it is one of the very few areas where I discourage enthusiasm and urge cold-hearted objectivity, but it is because the best will in the world will not turn a 5-hour training week into 15.

To help inform the discussion, one of the first things we send new clients is a time availability questionnaire. We ask them to rank hourly slots for the whole week according to a grading system ranging from always available, sometimes available to never available. This helps with the planning process but can also help the athletes themselves realise how time poor they really are.

When you are considering what challenge to take on next, I would recommend spending time assessing your time availability in a similar way. When you do so, make sure you factor in things like travel to the pool, time for stretching post-session, showering etc. etc. You will quickly see how time can disappear.

You also need to take a very critical look at what you can realistically sustain. For instance, I know that I struggle to sustain more than about 6-7 hours mid-week. I have more time available, but I know my body is not capable of recovering quickly enough between sessions if I do more. I have garnered this over time but if you are new to endurance training, your approach should be to start low and build the volume slowly. There is absolutely no point getting overexcited about a challenge and training 14-hours a week when your body has no experience of this kind of volume.

The above is not intended to rain on your parade but the averment that you really can achieve whatever you want in an athletic sense, must be tempered by the acknowledgment that the shortest route to your goal is being able to accumulate quality training volume. As described above, this means each session has a purpose and is performed well and not in a chronically over-trained state or whilst battling injury/illness.

There is no golden number of hours to train as it depends on your event and your objectively determined time availability. I would argue however, that everyone has the time to train for a marathon or Ironman, it just depends where it sits in the pecking order of priorities. This is not to say that you should prioritise training over a normal social life or work, in fact, my point is that you should take a moment to explore how important to you the goal you have set is. You really should not worry if you realise that pushing on at work and still going out regularly will take priority if push comes to shove. That is just where your loyalties lie and there is nothing wrong with that. As I keep saying to my coaching clients when they get frustrated with their own time availability, this endurance sport stuff is meant to be fun! So, do not apply unnecessary pressure to yourself, just take your new time availability chart and decide how much of that availability you are willing to set aside for training.

You will now have a clear idea of where training lies in your list of priorities and how much time you can and are willing to dedicate to reaching your goal. If that goal is no longer realistic, do not panic, it just means you need to find a more appropriate goal and there are tonnes and tonnes of events out there that will challenge you but might not require the same level of weekly training volume. Just because your event might not be the pinnacle in terms of scale, does not mean you cannot impress your mates by becoming damn good at it!

Block or reserve weekends in your calendar as 'key training weekends'

If you have ever gotten to the week before a big event and thought, "oh God, I'm not sure I have the mileage in my legs for this", then this section is one to pay attention to.

When you are first deciding on your main event and putting together your overarching plan, I would strongly recommend picking a few weekends in the months leading up to that event and blocking them out in your calendar. Ensure the final one is about two to three-weeks before the event depending on how long your taper is.

The point behind blocking out these weekends is to ensure you have assurance that you will perform certain key sessions before race day. Perhaps these could be the long or even over-distance sessions that will give you confidence; or if you are a triathlete, transition practice so you know how everything works.

Building in recovery

Achieving sufficient recovery between workouts is a never-ending challenge and there is no perfect strategy, but you do have to be disciplined in this respect.

Often for those new to endurance sport training, the assumption is that more training means greater fitness. This is often exacerbated by sports brands and even professional sports people espousing slightly misleading mantras such as, 'just do it', 'no pain no gain', or 'train whilst the competition is still sleeping'. This sort of stuff makes a great backdrop to a training montage and I bloody love a montage! However, training as hard as you can as often as you can is actually the best way of developing chronic fatigue, illness and/or injury.

The truth is, you need to string together as many **quality** training sessions as you can whilst incorporating adequate recovery in that chain to allow for supercompensation. Supercompensation is the body adapting to a stimulus (you becoming fitter) and can only really take place in the absence of stress. In other words, you need to train hard but then allow for enough recovery before you train again at intensity. The harder you train, the more recovery you will require.

So, what this means is you will achieve better results if you purposefully build recovery into your plan and religiously stick to your rest/recovery days, than if you miss a session and decide to sacrifice a rest day to slot it back in. The logic is simple, if you remove that rest period to incorporate another training session you might have missed, it means you will not be properly recovered before the next block of sessions.

This is important from a time pressure perspective because I have seen it numerous times (and foolishly done this myself). Missed sessions get pushed further and further back in the week, overflowing onto rest days and the athlete descends into chronic fatigue and finds that training has become yet another layer of stress (and not in a training stimulus sense). You must stick to your recovery protocols and if a session gets missed, forget it, move on as there will no doubt be plenty of hard work to come from the remainder of your training plan.

Break up your training week

To help with ensuring you can string sessions together consistently and provide for enough recovery, I always recommend breaking up your training week or even doing away with the set-piece training week entirely.

This is more difficult for those with children as they might need to set specific days during the week for family time, but at RIAK Fitness we try to steer our athletes away from a regimented weekly routine. Instead, we encourage our athletes to work in 3 to 4-day blocks followed by a rest day. The reason for this approach is not based on any research into the physiological benefits of 3-days on one day off. We just think that more than four days of training in a row is quite a lot to manage **psychologically** when you have a busy working week and social commitments. The major benefit of this approach is that every now and then, our athletes have a weekend day totally off. Breaking their training up into small chunks like this before a rest seems to improve motivation levels as they know they have a short push before they can relax again. It also means they have regular recovery built in to the plan and because it is a part of the plan, it is guilt free!

Of course, there are still sessions that our athletes might want to do each week and we will try to accommodate. For instance, some might want to go to a swim squad session. We can incorporate this as there is absolutely nothing wrong with two days on and one day off when there is a clash with that session as worthless.

You obviously do not have to follow this approach but the point I am trying to make is break up your week so it is not such a slog! Do not feel a slave to a strict weekly structure. A 7-day week is merely a social construct delineating working and non-working days. It does not have to define your training and non-training days too!

Scaling your workouts

So, what to do when despite being super realistic about your time availability, having broken your week up and incorporated an appropriate amount of recovery into your plan, you still experience a situation much like that described in the intro where a 90-minute session suddenly becomes 45-minutes? Well it is useful to know what approach to take in order to scale your workouts to accommodate the time you do have to train. It should be noted that something is almost always better than nothing (unless you are chronically fatigued, ill or injured) so 45-minutes rather than 90 does not mean you need to ditch the session.

The place to start is the cool down. The cool down at the end of a session is important in a physiological sense as it allows the heart rate to slowly return to non-exercising levels and avoid blood pooling in the lower limbs. It is more important in my opinion however, from a psychological sense because it allows you to ease down and transition between the intense focus of a hard training session to what might inevitably be, rushing to work or home. That five minutes at the end of a session is actually pure gold for allowing your mind a few minutes of dead space. You will often see people skipping the cool down at a gym class because they are 'in a rush' but really, they probably just want to be first to the showers. Ordinarily, I would encourage you to enjoy these few minutes of relative calm and to avoid moving from rushing around in a training sense to rushing around in a stressful sense as otherwise, when does your heart and mind get a break?

Nonetheless, if you find yourself with too much session and not enough time to complete, the first thing to reduce or remove is the cool down.

Next is the warm-up. The physiological benefits of a warm-up are generally known in that it gradually elevates the heart rate, introduces warmth to the muscles and allows synovial fluid (the lubricant in your joints) to get to work before true intensity starts. Having a good warm-up followed by some dynamic stretches before the main set also helps to break the session up so it is not one mass of pain. However, if you have already had to do away with the cool down, look next to reduce the warm-up. **Avoid dropping it entirely**, but if your normal run warm-up is for example, 15-minutes of building the effort, reduce that to 10 or 5-minutes. Anything less than that is probably asking for trouble if you have an intense main set to follow and I would certainly still follow with some sort of reduced dynamic stretch protocol.

Okay, so we have reduced/removed the cool down and reduced the warm-up. If you have a pre-main set, that is the next part to reduce/remove. The pre-main set is usually there for activation and as an extension of the warm-up, perhaps introducing a bit more intensity before you get to the main set, which might be very intense. We have not reduced/removed this before the warm-up because a shortened warm-up is less of a concern if there is a pre-main set to continue the warming up process.

Finally, if it has to be touched, reduce the main set only when absolutely necessary. If your session has been whittled down to a shadow of its formed self, that is absolutely fine and try not to stress about it. As aforementioned, it is almost always best to do something rather than nothing and a long endurance session reduced to a 30-minute low intensity session is still extremely valuable. If your life is as hectic as to require two-thirds of a session to get slashed, then you are probably expending a lot of energy and this new 30-minute session might be the recovery session you desperately need!

You will notice that I have not yet mentioned post-session stretching. There is a lot of debate over whether static stretching aids recovery. My argument in favour of post-session static stretching is that regardless of whether it speeds up physical recovery, it certainly has injury prevention and flexibility benefits associated with lengthening and reducing the tension in a muscle. But perhaps more importantly, it means that you are more likely to reach your next training session less stiff and achy, thereby increasing your chances of completing that session. Therefore, I would recommend stretching after **every** session as we are always training with one eye on being prepared for the next session.

Thank you

We have come to the end of this series of articles and so I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for reading. Hopefully you have found the discussion interesting and thought provoking.

The human mind is incredibly complex and as you will have seen, for an athlete, there are a myriad of issues to consider when it comes to maintaining their mental well-being. I have tried to offer a few practical tips to help you keep your mind in-shape, but I truly believe that we need to change our attitudes to how athletes and sports people approach mental recovery and how it fits in with the rest of life. Life is incredibly fluid, our approach to training must be structured and consistent but equally, we have to admit that it too has to remain largely fluid as well or it becomes the lid on a pressure cooker of stress.

You should take what you wish from this series and not worry if you do not agree with everything I have said. The intention was never to provide the route to nirvana but hopefully to provoke you into assessing your current approach to training and to assess whether it is honestly making you happy. Sport is meant to be fun and I worry sometimes that competitive and successful individuals lose sight of this and allow it to become yet another layer of stress in a hectic lifestyle.

Take back control of your mental well-being and do not accept that things are simply how they are because trust me, trying to put the rabbit back in the hat once it has all become too overwhelming is so much more of a challenge than taking the time to put in place a few preventative measures.

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