

Recovery:

Why doing nothing is the secret to triathlon training and racing success



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An effective recovery program is essential to triathlon success, writes Wayne Goldsmith.

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Want to know the secret to improving your triathlon training and racing performance?

Train harder, more often. **Maybe.**

Improve your swimming technique? **Could be.**

Master your bike handling skills? **Very likely.**

Enhance your running technique and running speed? **Possibly.**

Take precious seconds off your T1 and T2 transition times?

Potentially.

Get better quality sleep, rest more and spend more time and effort recovering from training and racing? **Absolutely.**

The triathlon world has gone recovery crazy.

Over the past 10 years, recovery has gone from something you only thought about when you were tired to an essential and integral aspect of every training session, every day, all year round.

First it was massage. Every triathlete started scheduling a regular massage as part of his or her recovery program. Then came the countless variations of hydrotherapy: spas, saunas, ice baths, contrast showers, high-flow shower massage, wading pools, hydro pools – you name it. Next, recovery nutrition came along: creatine, sports drinks, gels, bars, slushies...

Now, the focus is on sleep: sleep research, enhancing the quality of sleep, determining the optimal quantity of sleep, timing of sleep, the effect of power naps, managing sleep, monitoring sleep and, believe it or not, scientists are even researching the genetics of sleep. Many coaches and triathletes are now making recovery just as high a priority as hard physical training.

So, it's time to recover from recovery: let's consider recovery in perspective and look at how triathletes can use recovery as the secret weapon in their training and racing programs.

What is recovery?

A good practical definition of recovery is 'the deliberate use of interventions aimed at enhancing an athlete's capacity to adapt to the physical and mental demands of preparation and performance'.

In other words, recovery is doing something that is likely to help an athlete recover more

effectively from their training or competition loads.

How can you enhance recovery?

There are many, many ways to enhance recovery.

A good way to remember the different recovery techniques is with the acronym WASHUP.

Water: Water is a great recovery tool and is relatively easy and affordable to access. Use water in various forms, including cryotherapy (ice), hydrotherapy (contrast showers, hot-cold baths, spas, saunas, swimming pools) and more.

Active rest: Do something physically active other than your primary training or competition activity; for example, walking, swimming or cycling instead of running.

Sleep: Ensure adequate quality and quantity of sleep.

Hydration and refuelling: Drink the right fluids and eat the right foods at the right time, in the right quantity to enhance recovery.

Unwind mentally: Mental and emotional recovery is just as important as physical recovery.

Physical therapies: Include massage, physiotherapy, stretching and yoga.

Is recovery important for triathletes?

Absolutely.

There's no doubt recovery is critical for triathletes. To train hard and dedicate effort, energy and enthusiasm to a recovery program is fundamental for success at all levels of the sport.

The one thing we know for certain about achieving success in endurance sport is the need to train hard on a consistent basis. It is the one certainty, the one thing that is proven to enhance triathlon success.

Using WASHUP recovery techniques allows athletes to recover faster and more effectively, and thereby train harder and more often.

So, how did the recovery revolution come about?

In the 'old days', the pathway to sporting success was primarily focused on hard, physical preparation. The culture of most sports – particularly Olympic sports, where physiology is such a critical aspect of performance: running, swimming, rowing, gymnastics, diving, triathlon and cycling – was to work and work and work until you couldn't work anymore.

With the growth of the sports science industry and the deeper understanding of applied sports physiology, people began to recognise that an important limiting factor in the physical aspect of sports performance was the athlete's ability to recover.

This led some athletes, coaches and even countries to try to find ways to enhance an athlete's recovery ability – by any means necessary, in some cases – and the unfortunate rise of substances such as anabolic steroids and other illegal, artificial, recovery-enhancing drugs and techniques.

In more recent years, the race has been on to find better,

smarter – and more importantly safer, legal and more ethical – ways of accelerating an athlete's capacity to recover.

What's the bottom line?

The reason athletes and coaches introduce smart recovery programs is to allow the athlete to work harder. And this is where the concept of recovery has got out of control.

Too many athletes and coaches have misinterpreted the recovery principle and decreased their training loads while increasing their emphasis on recovery.

Again, at the risk of labouring the point, the reason an athlete or coach would introduce a smart, WASHUP-based recovery program is to accelerate the athlete's rate of recovery and therefore provide the opportunity to work harder, more often.

So, how do you know when it's time to increase your recovery program?

It's important to incorporate WASHUP recovery practices into your daily training program.

However, it's also important to monitor your mind and body for signs of fatigue and overtraining to help determine if you need to increase the focus on your recovery program.

The five 'fatigue factors' below are key aspects of your physiology and psychology that will give you an insight into how well you are – or aren't – recovering from training. See Table 1.

Fatigue factors explained

Quality of sleep: A score of five means you had a sound, restful sleep. A score of one means you had a terrible night's sleep and woke up feeling worse than when you went to bed.

Fatigue factor	1	2	3	4	5
Quality of sleep					
Muscle recovery					
Energy level					
Mood/attitude					
Training readiness					

A 'fatigue factor' monitoring chart – an important tool for every triathlete, every day.

TABLE 1

Muscle recovery: A score of five means your muscles are recovered and feel great. A score of one means your muscles are sore, tight and fatigued.

Energy level: A score of five means you are feeling great, with high levels of energy. A score of one means you feel flat, slow, low and lethargic.

Mood/attitude: A score of five means you feel upbeat and positive, and a score of one means you feel down and negative.

Training readiness: A score of five means you are looking forward to training with enthusiasm and can't wait to get started. A score of one means you are looking for excuses not to train and see training as a chore and as something you have to do rather than want to do.

As a general rule, if you score two or lower on any fatigue factor, take a full day off training.

If you score two or lower on two fatigue factors, take three full days off training.

If you score two or lower on three or more fatigue factors, take a full week off training and, just to be cautious, maybe go and have a chat to your doctor about how you feel.

The recovery/hard training balancing act

When it comes to managing training and recovery, you have four options:

1. Don't train hard and don't

Session time	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Morning	Ride	Recovery	Recovery	Ride	Day off	Ride	Recover
Afternoon / evening	Swim	Hard track session	Swim	Run		Swim	Recover

Example of a work/recovery training week for a triathlete training twice a day

TABLE 2

introduce a WASHUP-based recovery program

- Outcome:** It doesn't make sense if success is your goal
2. Train hard but don't introduce a WASHUP-based recovery program

Outcome: This works for a while but eventually illness, injury and fatigue will limit your potential for success

3. Don't train hard but introduce a WASHUP-based recovery program

Outcome: Unlikely to produce anything but a well-rested, but under-prepared, athlete

4. Train hard and introduce a WASHUP-based recovery program

Outcome: If you work hard, recover well and do it consistently, success is almost inevitable

Summary

Recovery is one of the buzz words around triathlon at the moment, but like all fads and fashions, it needs to be considered in balance with all other aspects of your training and competition program.

Keep it in perspective – the key to recovery is remembering its purpose is to accelerate your capacity to adapt to the

COACH'S CORNER

Understanding recovery and how to implement an effective recovery program into the training and competition programs of triathletes of all ages and abilities is critical.

As a general rule, if you increase the load of a triathlete's program, say by increasing training volume, training intensity and/or training frequency, you need to increase the focus on recovery. If you work harder, you need to rest harder.

Another good coaching practice is to schedule a recovery training session before and after hard, challenging and demanding training sessions. For example, if your athlete has a tough track running session scheduled for Tuesday evening, schedule a recovery session for Tuesday morning to ensure the athlete is rested and recovered to be able to complete the run session effectively that night, and again

on Wednesday morning to help the athlete recover physically and mentally from the tough track session (see Table 2).

It is also good practice to insist that every triathlete in your program has a complete day off all training each week. Their day off should be used to get some extra sleep, organise a massage, spend time with family, rest, recover and regenerate. It can be difficult to convince triathletes to take a day off training, but in the long term their performance and longevity in the sport will benefit.

Importantly, educate your triathletes to MMM – monitor, manage and maximise:

Monitor their fatigue and training load very carefully, using the fatigue factors chart
Manage their training/recovery balance constantly

Maximise their performance by ensuring they are as committed to recovery as they are to training.

physical and mental demands of your training and competition schedule. Faster recovery means you can work harder, more often.

Systematically introducing a smart recovery program

incorporating the WASHUP techniques can enhance your capacity to rest, restore and regenerate, and be more ready for your next training session or competition. **T**

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