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6 Simple Reasons You're Not Making the Gains You Want

You have the best equipment. The best bike. The best shoes. You even sprung for the ceramic bearings and carbon cages and the new model of those shoes you like.

You make the time. You get up at 4:30 a.m. and head to the pool. You take advantage of the lunchtime at work for a quick run. You get it done and still make time for the family.

You use every nutritional recommendation you can think of. You watch your nutrition habits.

So, why are you not making the training progress and fitness goals you are looking for? For most of us, it's simple.



No. 1: You keep training the same way you have been.

You're static. You do the same things. Tuesday is always your group bike ride. You've been in the same swim group for three years. You always run the same routes and distances. No wonder you don't make gains. Your body has adapted to your routines and is no longer being challenged.

Mix it up. Go run or ride trails — the lateral motion and constant accelerations demand a greater fitness than running on pavement. They also improve your ability to react to changing terrain and keep you more alert. Mix up your swim — open water, a different group and different strokes develop a greater overall strength that makes you a faster swimmer. Utilize swim lessons as well — invariably we all have improvements to be made on form. If you routinely train at high volumes wrong, you are still wrong. Triathletes: get a road bike. Join a group ride for dynamic power output. Roadies: go ride solo so you can actually ride in your aerobic zone and develop those abilities. Add in speed work — track sessions, sprint and interval training, and hill climbing are all advantageous and will make you stronger. Stronger equals faster and less injury-prone.

Nothing pushes you like external motivation. You can do solo intervals and tempo training all you want, but until you get around others, either on a track or in a race you won't feel real motivation to go fast. Join a track group who will push you on a regular basis. Jump into 5k and 10k fun runs as speed days and ways to push yourself. Better yet: ride to those 5k and 10k runs, then ride home. Join a swim team and race in swim meets. Learn how to dive off the blocks and learn butterfly.

Have an objective in each race that is more than overall time or place. Think deeper. If you tend to start too fast in races, your goal in your next 5k might be to make each mile faster than the previous, regardless of overall time. If you have poor transition skills, you may use a race environment as solely a transition skill day.

No. 2: You don't eat right.

Cheater. That's right, I'm calling you out. If you only eat right 95 percent of the time, that 5 percent you don't might be the 10 pounds you still can't shake. The needless afternoon junk food snack, the soda, the extra glass of lemonade (sugar) with lunch, the dessert right before bed.

You're a performance machine. It's important to treat yourself as such. You wouldn't put basic gas into a Ferrari, would you? So why put processed foods into the body you spend so much time perfecting?

You eat to fuel for your performances. Act like it. Read labels. Put as much care into fueling the thing that will last you your whole life as you put into the tires you choose for your bike.

No. 3: You don't recover.

There are two types of athlete. The one who has a 1,500-calorie protein shake after a workout where they burned 800 calories, and the athlete who does not refuel after 1,000-plus calorie sessions because they are watching their weight or intake. Both are equally detrimental to performance. Nominally, you will burn 600-800 calories per hour of strenuous exercise, but only about half of that is replenishable. In the 30-60 minutes post-workout, your body is physiologically primed to accept refueling much more readily. Take advantage of that time to refuel with a combination of carbohydrates (the primary fuel for aerobic exercise) and protein (for rebuilding muscle tissue). The combination in calories should be somewhere around 4:1 to 7:1 (carb:protein). Eating 200-400 calories total is enough for most 1-hour sessions; 400-600 for 2-3 hours. If you feel you need more after your 400-ish calories, then have a normal meal 1-2 hours after your session.

Physical recovery is just as important. Massage therapy, chiropractic adjustments, self-massage with the aid of foam rollers and similar equipment, and restorative stretching are all imperative to recover the body after we beat it up in training. Yes, training breaks down the body. It's designed to, as the body's response is to rebuild itself stronger in what's called super compensation. It's not the training that makes you stronger and faster. It's the recovery from proper training.

No. 4: You're not training with an eye on your goals.

What was your training objective for your run this morning? Specifically? If you can't answer that, I submit it may have been a wasted morning. Have reasons why your training session is what it is. If you don't have an objective, how will you know if you accomplish it? Or when it may be time to bag the session if you can't make it. If you drive on random roads without an overall plan, would you still get to work on time? Overall season goals beget training objectives. Training objectives drive your daily training sessions.

More importantly, warm up and cool down. If you get up, get on your shoes and start running, you run stiff and tight and your stride will shorten. If you do this routinely, you are teaching your body to run on a short stride and you won't have the range of motion to run faster or accelerate. Walk a bit to loosen, then accomplish 5-10 minutes of plyometrics before training. Remember butt kicks and skips from high school track? Yes, do those. And more. On the bike, this is single leg pedaling and higher cadence spinning. In the pool, drill work should be done as at least 15-20 percent of every workout. Yes, every one. If you can't answer why you're doing today's training session as it pertains to your season goals, then why are you doing it?

No. 5: You haven't mastered the skills.

You're limiting your ability based on skills. Typically we did some sports as a kid but picked up triathlon or cycling or running as an adult. When we're kids, coaches are great with skill development. As adults, we are short on time so we just train. We are limiting our ability and our longevity in the sport when we neglect skill development.

The plyometrics for the run we spoke of above are excellent skills. But specific skills are needed for the run. Join a coached track workout to learn the skills of running. Speed work and trail running also force good running skills. On the bike, join a skills class or clinic. Nothing beats a coached skills session and weeks of practice. Proper skills will make you a safer cyclist through the ability to stop faster or turn sharper and faster, or stay upright when in a tangle. Or be in the correct position when hit by a car. In the water, skill development is crucial. We beat that dead horse enough above. Overall skills training — typically at home with some free weights or in a gym environment go a long way toward injury prevention and sport longevity as well. You'll be stronger and more flexible, and will be safer and faster.

No. 6: You're afraid.

That's right. You're scared. There's a sense in all of us, the creative subconscious that finds a way out of painful situations. Failure is a painful situation. We all have an innate fear of failure, and when faced with the possibility of failure the creative subconscious will look for a way out. That exit door can manifest itself in many ways — fatigue, lack of focus, a sense that we're pushing too hard, even stomach or muscle cramping. If we have an excuse to fail, we can talk ourselves into a reason for that failure. It's harder to strive for a goal and fail just by not reaching the goal, but that's what we have to do in order to see where our limit truly is. Some of us are better at this, but it can indeed be trained.

Go into a race situation with the goal on something other than the overall finish or a pace or a time. Get your mind to focus on something you have complete control over — your power output, race fueling or mental focus. Gain power over that one aspect first. Then another and another. Meanwhile, practice positive mental imagery or visualization before the event, and only positive self-talk during the event. Lie quietly the nights leading into the event and visualize every aspect of the race. See the sights, smell the aromas, hear the crowds. Look at your watch or power meter and the timer at the finish line. Feel yourself feeling good. Hear your strong rhythmic breathing. Feel your muscles firing. Make it positive. If a negative aspect sneaks in, stop, rewind, and play again positively. Replay that on race day and only focus on the same positive aspects. This may take time, but one you can control your brain and your focus, you can control your entire race.

Train right. Train with a purpose. Train with a smile.

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