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3 Skills You Need Outside of Fitness

The offseason is a great time to reflect on the things that went well and not so well over the course of the season. As you do, it is natural to find yourself focusing on your results such as your 5k sprint-distance run time or your half-IRONMAN bike speed. When you focus on results, you tend to set fitness-related goals. While fitness goals should be on the front of your mind at the start of a new season, remember that triathlon requires you to be more than just fit. Triathlon requires you to master physical skills such as handling your bike around a tough course or nailing your transition. It requires you to master mental skills like executing a race plan under pressure or continuing along the run course despite a nagging cramp. In addition, triathlon requires you to master general life skills like modifying your schedule, planning ahead and getting organized. Because these general skills are not easily measured, we often forget to reflect on how we did in these areas and set new goals to become better in the season to come. If you reflect on and set goals in this area, you will reduce stress and indirectly improve your ability to perform on race day.



Here are three specific examples of how the athletes I coach struggle with these general skills on a regular basis and some questions to help you reflect on your own struggles and set new goals.

Planning Ahead

Meal planning is one specific area that challenges the athletes I coach when it comes to the general skill of planning ahead. When life gets busy, we tend not to plan. This leads us to; (1) make decisions about what to eat every day and what we need to prepare that food (as opposed to making all the decisions at one time in the beginning of the week), which contributes to decision fatigue and decision paralysis; (2) eat out, which can be expensive and unhealthy; (3) go to the grocery store for only one meal at a time, which wastes time; (4) eat the same thing each week, which does not always provide the variety of foods we need to remain healthy; (5) and, tempts us to buy unhealthy fast food alternatives like freezer meals at the grocery store, which do not fuel our workouts as well as homemade food.

A solution could be to sit down for 20 minutes at the beginning of the week to plan your menu. Be sure to include one or two easy recipes in the case that you find yourself in a time crunch. Type up your menu, the recipes and a grocery list organized by food category (vegetables, meat, cheese, etc). Save the list to your computer. As this becomes a part of your routine in the offseason, you will build up a stock of weekly menus of meals that you like. When your schedule gets crazy during the season, you will not have to create a new list every week. You can look back to your saved menus, print out your grocery list, and head to the store right away. Those who master the skill of planning ahead save time and energy, like that which goes into creating new menus each week.

Reflect back on the times you did not plan ahead this year. What will you do differently in the coming season to be more proactive in your planning?

Modifying the Plan

Many of the athletes I work with struggle to modify their training plan when it comes to the general skill of modifying the plan. I also see this with non-coached triathletes who follow a general stock training plan. When athletes first start out, they talk with their coach or find a solid plan that fits their life schedule well. As the season progresses, however, an inevitable family or work commitment comes up and consistently prevents them from getting in, say, a Monday night swim. The athletes continue to try to make the swim work on Mondays, but, more often than not, they miss that session. This stresses them out.

Obviously, there is a simple solution: Modify the plan. Swap the Monday swim with the day off, attempt to find a different time to swim on Monday, or place the swim before a bike or run on a different day. There are typically two reasons why athletes do not modify the training plan. First, athletes are so busy that they are unaware of consistently missing their swim. A solution for this scenario might be to log the workouts on TrainingPeaks and reflect back once a month to decide if the current training plan aligns with their life schedule. From there, the athletes can make changes. Second, athletes realize that they constantly miss the swim, but are not confident in modifying the plan. For most age-group athletes who are training at a low volume (8 hours or less), it is OK to move the workout so you can get it in. If you need to double up workouts and have never done this before, ease into that second workout and cut it short if you are not feeling good. See how the adjustment in the plan feels on the body after a week or two and reassess. Those who master the life skill of modifying the plan and find creative scheduling solutions will train more consistently and perform better on race day.

Reflect back on the times you did and did not modify your plan this year. Was there a time where modifying your plan may have helped you reap better results? What will you do in the coming season to ensure that you modify your plan when necessary?

Organizing Your Stuff

Many of the athletes I work with struggle when it comes to organizing their stuff, particularly when it comes to organizing their triathlon gear. We waste time running around before a workout looking for our misplaced HR monitor, water bottles, helmet, socks, etc., because our gear is not organized in one place or did not make it back to its rightful place. As we get more fatigued from training, this problem tends to get worse.

Spend some time in the offseason creating bins so all your gear has its place. Commit to returning your gear to its place immediately after the workout. Send yourself a weekly email reminder to organize your gear if it is out of order. If you get into the habit of doing this in the offseason, you will be more likely to keep your stuff organized during the season. Those who can master the skill of organization will limit their stress, decrease the time it takes to prepare for a workout and increase the time they have to work out.

Reflect back on the time you were disorganized this year. How did it effect you emotionally? What will you do to be more organized next season?

As I said, triathlon is not all about fitness. There are a lot of skills that go into a great performance and some of these, like planning ahead, modifying the plan and getting organized are very general life skills. Take some time to reflect and set goals to improve in each of these areas. If you do, you will set yourself up for your best performance on race day.

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