

Mark Allen's 6 Essential Tips for Your Best Race Ever

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Have you ever had this experience? Your training went well, you set PRs in every key workout and you even worked through your list of to-do items in record time—but you ended up having a terrible race anyway.

Or maybe you're familiar with this scenario: you've beaten your training partner in just about every workout, but then he or she served you notice on race day by easily pulling away on the first hill on the bike course. The list goes on.

We train so that when a big race comes we are ready and have the results that our fitness should allow us to have. But this does not always happen. And while there is no failsafe method to guarantee your best day when it counts, there are a few steps you can take to maximize your chances of being the one to pull away and cap your list of training PRs with a great race-day performance.

The core of any great race starts with your training. And, of course, what you do just prior to your race and then during the event itself will have a tremendous impact on your performance. Spelling out the details of these two areas could fill the pages of *Triathlete* magazine for the next 10 years, but there are a few steps you can take regardless of the training program you are following right now to help boost your chances of achieving your goals.

1. Overdo Distance and Under-do Speed

Overdoing Distance: You are an endurance athlete. What you need most is endurance. Within your grab bag of favorite workouts should be one key swim, bike and run workout that stands out above all others. This is going to be a session that pushes the limits of your current endurance and transforms your body's perception of whatever distance your race is going to be and brings it into the realm of possibility.

Do this workout once during your offseason buildup, and then do it again in the summer far enough out (four to six weeks out) from your key race so you won't experience any residual fatigue from it.

Under-Doing Speed: This is not necessarily a call to do shorter sessions or less overall speed work but to make sure that your absolutely best speed effort is on race day and not on the group ride the month before. It means going as fast as you can in your speed work, yet still holding back a percent or two from your maximum capacity.

Instead, schedule just two intense speed sessions per season: one in the spring prior to your first race and then one more three to six weeks out from your key race. Bottom line: Don't give your maximum effort every week. If you do, I guarantee you your ideal race will not happen.

2. The Taper

Just about every athlete alive knows how important tapering down for the big event is, but very few actually do it. I'll chalk the reasons up to pre-race anxiety and wanting to do one last big effort to make sure everything is in working order.

Note, however, that you really don't want to test yourself in any big way once you get into the final two to three weeks before your biggest race. Train...yes. Do speed work...yes. But save that really great performance for race day. Store it up and have confidence in your fitness and the work you've put in.

3. Sharpen Up

This is the one easy test you get to do to alleviate the nerves and let just enough steam off to hopefully prevent you from overdoing it. This will be your final main speed session to shake the bugs out before you go into cruise mode for race week.

Swim

For swimming, it should be a set of 4-8x100 with each of the 100s at close to top speed but relaxed. The rest interval should be 50 to 100 yards/meters of very easy swimming plus another 15 seconds once you reach the wall before starting the next 100.

Bike

For cycling, the workout is going to be 6-8 x 1-minute fast with another 30 to 60 seconds very easy recovery in a low gear spinning. Again, the fast segments should be near top speed but relaxed.

This served two purposes. The first is to prevent you from going completely all out and taking the top off your energy reserves for the race. The second is that it patterns into your body the ability to go fast but to still stay relaxed. This uses up significantly less energy over the long haul than it does to go fast and remain tense.

Run

For the run, the perfect sharpening workout consists of 1-1.5 miles on the track (preceded by a warm-up and followed by a cool-down) where you accelerate to near top speed during the straights and then float at an easy pace through the curves.

Again, this activates all the energy systems but is about as low of a stress on the body that a fast workout can be. And since you are only running the straights fast, there is little chance you will try to sneak in one more 400 PR.

4. The Last Three Days

These are the most important days leading up to your race. Three days out, complete a swim, bike and run workout with each sport done basically one right after the other. Do the workout in the morning and have the total workout length last between two to three hours.

This is going to help deplete your glycogen reserves a bit, after which it will be time to fuel up for the race. It takes roughly 72 hours to replenish all your glycogen as well as to hydrate (covered in the next tip).

Two days out from your race is the time for total rest: no workouts, and get as much sleep as you can. Go to bed early and sleep in. The rest you get the night prior to your race will have very little influence one way or the other on your performance, but the night two days prior can have a significant impact, so stock up.

Then the day before your race, do a very short swim, bike and run workout with about 500m of swimming, 30 minutes easy on the bike and another 10 to 15 minutes jogging. You can do some accelerations up to race pace that last a total of about five to 10 seconds—nothing strenuous.

5. Eating and Drinking

Three days out is the time to start loading up for your race. Humans are not like camels. We cannot absorb big volumes of liquids. We need to stock up over time, sipping as we go. Sports drinks work well in addition to water to give you both calories and fluids.

Food is the same. Lots of snacking and smaller meals is the best way to approach your meals in the final three days. Big portions will slow your body down and cause insulin to be released, which will turn off your fat-burning aerobic engine.

The same amount of calories spread out over a day will not have the negative effects of a big binge. You can skew your calories slightly more toward carbohydrates, but don't forsake good oils and protein. You will need some of these as well to race at your peak.

6. Race-Day Secrets

Ah, just what you've been waiting for.

- The first tip: Realize that no race will ever go as planned. Have this be part of your race strategy, and be prepared to deal with the unexpected.
- Second tip: You don't have to feel great during the race to have the race of your life. In fact, you could feel bad the entire day and still come up with the race of your dreams.

Any negative effect that feeling bad might have on your race will be accentuated by placing importance on having to feel good to race well.

- Third tip: Eating, drinking and pace are the three most important variables that you can work with to maximize your body's ability to keep going. Reach for those first if you are feeling like you need something extra or that your energy is dipping. Eat a little to get energy, drink a little to make sure you are hydrated and slow your pace down just about a half a percent so you relax for a moment and see if this brings things around.
- Fourth tip: The most important element overall is going to be your attitude. With a positive attitude miracles can occur. With a negative one, disaster is certain. The catch is that in the midst of going as fast as you can and having your body going into full mutiny over it, a positive attitude can be just about impossible to conjure up.

Solution? Think no thoughts. Yes, stop that brain of yours from getting in the way of what you are trained to do. Have no thought. Have you practiced it? Can you do it under pressure? This simple skill will help take you past impossible moments when your logical brain is telling you your goal is way out of reach. It keeps you on track when thoughts would derail your efforts. Simple yet powerful.

There you go. Now you are ready to have the race of your life. Enjoy!