

Ironman and Over-racing

In preparing for an Ironman triathlon, athletes commonly try to use 1-2 long “training races” or many short “training races” races as part of their preparation. In preparing for an Ironman triathlon, however, this can create more harm than good. Some racing is helpful, but too many races in the buildup to your peak Ironman, referred to as overracing, hampers your Ironman performance. Overracing refers to performing more racing prior to your Ironman than would be required to feel sharp with your race specific skills like transitions and mass open water swim starts. The exact number of races that constitutes overracing varies depending on your experience level and your desired performance level. Overracing leads to reduced performance in your peak Ironman triathlon. Overracing creates three major issues that affect successfully building towards a peak Ironman triathlon:

1. Overracing creates excessive fatigue,
2. Overracing makes it hard to train specifically, and
3. Overracing drains emotional energy.

Excess fatigue can be caused by trying to race frequently while building your endurance as you work towards an Ironman triathlon. It is very difficult for your body/mind to respond to both the extreme stress racing puts you through and the strain of lengthening workout duration and training volume. The result of this combination is often the overtraining syndrome. If you are lucky, this will result in performances that are less than sharp over shorter distances and frustrating at the longer distances. If you are unlucky, overtraining could result in serious health problems and a DNF on Ironman day.

Truly specific training at the Ironman distance level is impossible. You simply cannot train 8+ hours in a row frequently and perform at your best. That said, racing a ½ Ironman will typically take a triathlete 4-7 hours (roughly 1/3 to ½ their Ironman time). So although racing a ½ Ironman involves all three disciplines it is not more effective in terms of developing your endurance, than well-designed and well-executed brick workouts. More importantly it is VERY hard for most athletes to truly “train” at a race. Races are for racing. One can say they will go “nice and easy” at the race (as coaches, we hear this all the time), but it almost NEVER happens. And really it should not. Races are for racing. The result is one expends a tremendous amount of physical, mental, and emotional fatigue in the race. Ultimately, this can really hurt your ability to consistently perform the specific training essential to a strong Ironman performance. Specific training, done on your own can really help build your fitness but can be done at physical, mental, and emotional levels that will not cause the same degree of fatigue that racing does.

Although it is usually only given a small afterthought, emotional energy is vital for an Ironman triathlon. Let's face it; it takes a lot of guts to complete an Ironman! If you overrace, it is likely that you will have spent a lot of emotional energy getting set for, traveling to and from, and racing too many triathlons. There are many positives to racing during your buildup to your Ironman. You can test your equipment, practice race specific skills like transitions and mass open water swims, and "remember" the emotions of racing. These are all great things that can really help your confidence heading into your Ironman. However, if you overrace, you will end up at your Ironman feeling sapped of emotional energy. You DO NOT want to be at the start line of your Ironman feeling like "Man, it's been a long season." You want to be at the start line feeling, "I am so psyched for today's race; I can barely stand it!"

Training for your Ironman can and should involve racing during your buildup to the Ironman. The trick is to keep your ego in check and remember that you have a really big fish to fry as your peak event. Respect yourself and establish (or work with your coach to establish) a sensible training plan that allows you to have the triathlon experience you want (including racing) while also landing you at the start line of your Ironman totally ready to go. Here are some general rules of thumb that can help you in this process:

- For the majority of triathletes, race no more than 3-5 times in your buildup to your Ironman.
- Try to perform most of your racing 10+ weeks out from your Ironman. This frees you to use the last nine weeks leading up to your Ironman for very specific training, tapering, and the storing up of emotional energy for racing.
- Do not do long events like ½ Ironmans or marathons during your buildup to an Ironman. These events cause too much physical and mental fatigue and need to be well respected with a light period of training before and after them. This really makes for trouble in your Ironman preparation.
- Enjoy the process. You are performing in an amazing event, an Ironman! Stay positive and learn along the way!

Racing can be a sound part of your preparation for an Ironman distance triathlon. Make sure you respect the stress and challenges racing can create and set up your training to get you to your Ironman as ready as you can be and having enjoyed the process as much as possible!
