

Seven Habits of Highly Effective Triathletes

OK, some of you might be “Accidental Triathletes”, barely remembering how and why you got into this sport. For some of you, it may have become a way to stay fit, or you like the image or lifestyle or like the friends you’ve made along the way. Even so, the majority of you are still drawn by the competition and want to actually get better.

I’ve been lucky enough to spend time with some of the very best in triathlon and I can’t help but notice that those who are maximizing their potential have some common habits:

1) They stay the course

The more successful athletes aren’t training more than you, and they aren’t training less. They are doing just what’s on their schedule. They’ve hired a coach who knows their goals. The coach has determined that the goals are realistic. They’ve made a plan that takes into consideration the key races, the time constraints, the athlete’s current fitness level and hopefully the plan includes some fun!

Are you one of those people who receives their schedule and looks it over then never prints it, or prints it and sticks it somewhere, never to refer to it again? Do you call your training partners and ask, “What are we doing today?” Do you get an email from someone who wants you to join their swim/bike/run and you don’t even consult your schedule – if it sounds like fun you say yes?

Good athletes almost never do that. In fact, the athlete who is suggesting that you alter *your* schedule to fit *their* plan, thinks he or she is a better or more dedicated athlete than you, and always counts on you to change your plan to do what they want. Chances are they are not inviting you because you will elevate their training. They are inviting you because they know that you don’t take your training seriously and will probably say yes.

What to do about it

OK, that insulting bit of news aside, there are ways that you can still stay on the guest list while sticking to your schedule. First, you must actually REFER to your schedule! Then, figure out a way to make it work for everyone. If your friend wants to run long, but you have a short run on the schedule, tell them you’ll meet them for part of the run. Different paces? One of you plays catch-up while the other gets a head start. If they are suggesting an entirely different workout (run instead of bike, etc), figure out if there’s a way to get them done at the same location. One of you runs the time trial course while the other bikes; both do the training at the gym; or you train separately but meet for coffee afterward. And, hey – why don’t you suggest they do YOUR workout. If they really like training with you, they will change their schedule to fit yours. Rookies train in a haphazard, random fashion. You are trying to do better than that.

Finally, if there’s one regular training session that you really want to take advantage of (and it makes sense for your goals) and it is not on your present schedule, ask your coach if there’s a way to work the schedule on a go-forward basis so that it is included. Otherwise, muster some discipline to just say no.

2) They are patient

I remember at the Level One coaching school we were told that elite athletes train consistently and with focus for 10 years before reaching the elite level (on average). We were told that again at Level Two coaching school. Almost every seminar I’ve attended has hammered home that point. What really made me think about that seriously is when I heard Mark Allen say it during a talk he was giving. He said it as though this news still amazed him. I think what is really amazing is the number of athletes entering the sport of triathlon who want to do an Ironman within a year or two of their first race. Now, if the

athlete has a good base of fitness and has realistic expectations about the amount of training involved and realizes that just finishing is a success, that's not so bad. But unrealistic expectations plague us all.

If you haven't been an athlete your whole life you might be surprised to find that the guidelines for fitness set forth by the Presidents Council on Physical Fitness for adults is "at least three 20-minute bouts of continuous aerobic (activity requiring oxygen) rhythmic exercise each week." Fast-forward to where we are now and you will find many of your training partners feel that if they don't workout for an hour twice a day, they are slacking. I have more clients tell me that they think their schedule is too easy, than those complaining that it's too hard.

But, your family thinks the workout routine to which you have become accustomed is obsessive, and your fellow cubicle dwellers think you are training for the Olympics. Then you hear about one of your teammates who did a 140 mile bike ride one day, followed by a tough Olympic distance race the next, and you immediately think you have to bring it up a notch. How are you to trust your schedule or your coach to help you reach your potential when you can't even remember what "normal" training is like?

Most of your training schedules include a workout every day and yet I know a lot of you add Pilates, yoga and weight lifting to the schedule. Some of you also play another sport and don't count that into the triathlon training. And still you are hard on yourself because you aren't as good as another athlete you know who can do a 1:05 for 100 in the pool or who always beats you at the bike time trials or because you can't run 7 min miles off the bike.

See, the longer you stay in this sport, the more likely it is that you will meet some amazing athletes. Some are younger, some are just more talented. You are also meeting a lot of new comers, but you don't pay attention to them, because that's not you any more. You've lost the first-year nervousness that includes, "I just want to be able to finish the race" and now you have *expectations*.

What to do about it

First of all, if you are still in this sport a year after your decision to throw your hat in the ring, congratulations! According to research at the University of Florida, 60 percent of people who start a training program drop out within the first six months, and 90 percent do so by two years. But training implies more than just exercising – it does imply improvement over time.

Remember, the only person you should compare yourself to is you. You also need to know what you should be measuring. How good a swimmer, cyclist or runner were you 5 years ago? How was your endurance? Would have been physically able to train 5-10 hours a week and compete in events lasting well over an hour on a regular basis 5 years ago? *Were* you doing that? What have you learned in the past 5 years while training for this sport? Had you even heard of GU, Body Glide, electrolytes, IT bands, double transitions, negative splits or IM qualifiers back then? How long have you been training to become really good at triathlon? Less than 5 years? You haven't even scratched the surface. More than 10? Are you over 35? You might become a *smarter* athlete than you were when you were 21, and you can develop more endurance, avoid injury, plan race strategy better and likely afford better equipment, but you are NOT going to develop more natural speed than you had back then. Sorry!

The real reason that developing patience is important is not so that you don't beat yourself up if every result isn't to your liking. It's so that you won't be tempted to add workouts to your schedule or train at someone else's pace. That destructive behavior

leads to peaking too soon at best, and serious injury at worst. It's smart to chart your progress, but look not at how far you fall short from where you dream to be, look instead at how rich your body of experience is.

3) They refer to the schedule

Remember when you first started training and you couldn't wait to get your schedule and see what you were going to do each day to get you closer to your goal? Part of the sense of accomplishment was just seeing your goal broken down and in writing. Each training block presented a new workout and you learned things like heart rate, pacing, gear ratios and swim terminology. Then after a while the training became habit and in your hurried life it became easier to remember: Monday: bike, Tuesday: swim, Wednesday: run, group run on Friday and Sunday. You stopped checking the schedule to see how long, how far, what pace and what heart rate. You stopped thinking about the purpose of each workout! (NOTE: EVERY workout has a purpose!) Perhaps work or travel or family patterns changed and you started skipping, shortening or rearranging workouts because life was less predictable and the schedule was no longer relevant – or so you thought.

What to do about it

Here's how you should use the schedule:

- Print it out. There's no way you are going to memorize it unless you abbreviate it to the 'Monday: bike' simplification above. Print a couple of copies and put one on the fridge or bulletin board and have another in your briefcase or desk.
- Look at it immediately. Notice if there is a pattern, if one day of running includes speed work, if there is anything on there that you don't understand. See if you can understand the goal for the month, and the goal for each workout.
- Compare the schedule to your work and family calendar. If you will be traveling and you have a swim on the schedule, what will you do to find a pool in the area? I have to tell you that I used to travel 3 weekends out of 4 from Dec-Mar in a previous job. I really looked forward to running in different cities and hooked up with many different running clubs. I first took spinning over 10 years ago at a club in California before spinning caught on here, and I've had the opportunity to swim at some amazing pools. Your travel schedule shouldn't necessarily mean that you can't train. It might just enhance your training!
- Look at it again the day before each workout and if you are meeting friends to train, make sure that you both get to do what is on your schedule.
- Make an X or a check mark in each square as you complete the workout. It's a great way to keep track of your workout "streak".

4) They take advantage of the coach

Interesting way to word that, isn't it? If I am your coach, you know that I am very accessible by email and I am always happy to explain a workout, provide motivation or deconstruct a race. I have two athletes who live in Texas and if they didn't keep in constant touch with me, I don't know how our coaching experience would work. The upside of the long distance coaching is that on a frequent basis we get to talk about how the workouts are going, how today's run felt, what are my thoughts on this or that piece of equipment, or is this tightness a symptom of an injury.

I know many of you are just quietly toiling away, and if you don't have a problem you don't "bother" me, but don't hesitate to email to tell me that your run is feeling great or that you bonked on the bike. I also know that some of you don't bother me even when the wheels are coming off the training plan! Some of you might be sick for 2 or 3 days, or have had to miss huge chunks of training time for various reasons and yet you never

mention it. Remember, you are paying for *coaching*, not just a schedule! That's the difference between me and the online programs you can buy. I'm here for you!!

Don't avoid telling the coach that you are off the schedule – especially if it's due to unexpected changes elsewhere in your life. If I am writing you a schedule that has you gradually improving pace and distance in the run, for instance, and you've missed several key running workouts, each subsequent schedule is not going to make sense. It's also a huge mistake to try to rewrite your own schedule or to double up workouts if you've had to miss a few days. Finally, don't try to hide things from your coach. If you'd like to do a race that's not on your schedule you really should tell your coach. Sure, you risk having the coach explain why it might not be a good idea, but what do you have a coach for? You can still decide to do the race against coaching advice, but at least get the advice. Your coach doesn't want to scold you and a good coach won't be "mad" at you if you vary from the schedule, but at the same time, if you trust your coach, you should respect their advice if they say that you shouldn't be doing an 18-mile run when you have 8 on the schedule and that yoga isn't the same as a run, or weight lifting isn't the same as swimming!

What to do about it

Everyone has their own communication style. My long distance athletes tend to send emails on a regular basis telling me how things are going. I have a couple of athletes who send me a monthly report and a few who are very analytical and send emails with lots of very good questions. Almost everyone lets me know when they are injured (thank goodness) and if they are preparing for a big race they have lots of questions as the race draws near. But if I see you all the time you might forget that you can ask me coaching questions or tell me if you've got a goal within a goal that you'd like me to help you achieve. Use me!

5) They take nutrition seriously

You all remember the weight loss contest we had last year. We will probably do it again, although my goal for everyone is to really learn better 'fueling' rather than getting you all to shed a few pounds. I try to send you regular healthy eating tips and the entire sport is learning so much about engineered food and how to fuel during races and long rides. But what really separates the elite athletes from the recreational athletes is the ongoing healthy lifestyle that includes clean and appropriate eating and drinking.

Probably the two areas in which I think all of my athletes can improve is eating enough good food and refueling correctly after training and racing. I think most of us have made carrying a water bottle with us habit, and we all are learning about the importance of complex carbs, quality protein and good fat in our diets. We've learned or are learning what we can tolerate during racing and training and how just one packet of GU with water every hour during training can make the difference between a so-so race and a great race. But I know I am as guilty as the next person about not refueling well after hard training. What's the first thing we do after a group run? Grab coffee. Sometimes we will have a muffin or water to go with that, but very few of us are getting the proper carb/protein ratio that has been proven to speed recovery.

Also, I probably have as many athletes who under-eat as those who over-eat. Exercise anorexia is common in triathlon, but not only is it as dangerous as any "starvation diet", the bottom line is, you won't perform well if you don't fuel correctly. Assuming that you still consider triathlon a sport and not a diet/fitness regimen, you've got to eat!

What to do about it

Refueling after workouts is simply a matter of habit. It's simple to get the right balance of protein and carbs if you want to use one of the many commercially prepared recovery drinks out there, but we really need to make that a habit.

As far as eating enough goes, that's a little more complicated. I'm not going to pretend to be an expert in eating disorders, and if you were drawn to this sport as a way to stay or become thin, nothing I say here will help. But if you really want to eat well and eat to perform well, remember to eat 5-6 small meals a day – one of which should be consumed within 60 mins after your workout. Grazing throughout the day has been shown not to work, as people tend to consume too many mindless and empty calories. If you eat enough fruits, vegetables, whole grains, good protein and fat (nuts, avocados, olives) you won't crave the junk. It's when you starve yourself that you eat the crap. Make a promise to yourself to eliminate one bad eating habit and add one good one for 2007.

6) They are prepared

Probably the number one reason for any type of success is being prepared. (That, and luck!) The number one reason for a bad race is poor preparation. Preparation can encompass everything from the training itself to some minor detail involved with the race. One of my athletes this year told me he hadn't booked a hotel room in advance of his race, so he had to camp the night before the race. He had a terrible night's sleep, woke up with a migraine and had to race like that. At one of my races this year I brought a wetsuit I hadn't worn in a while. I forgot that the zipper was so hard to undo and my transition was pathetic! And on, and on. You can't take for granted how important preparation is.

I think the first step is *learning* how to be prepared and the second is *remembering* to be prepared. When you are new at racing, you are not even sure how to prepare. You don't now how much time you should be spending training on each sport, what equipment you should use, what to bring for a race. As the years go by and you learn the various tricks of the trade, you start to get lazy. As mentioned above, maybe you don't consult the schedule during training. You get out of the habit of bringing your recovery drink after your long run or proper nutrition during the long ride. You show up at a race with the wrong equipment, or you don't warm up properly, or you bonk one mile from the finish line.

What to do about it

Really, employing the strategies mentioned above will keep you prepared. Check your schedule when you get it and keep copies of it handy. Read the emails from your coach and ask questions. Sign up for races before they sell out and make sure you have your accommodations, if necessary planned. Keep bottles of recovery drink and energy bars on hand. Keep your race and training clothes in clear plastic bins sorted as much as possible so you can find what you need quickly and always consult your Checklist of Items to Bring (several days in advance) when preparing for a race.

7) They try to keep learning

Learning comes in many forms so if you don't have the time or desire to be continuously reading books on triathlon, don't despair! If you read half of the emails I send, you are probably learning something. If you actually use your schedule and follow the warm-up, cool down and paces prescribed you are learning something. Every time you race you should learn at least one thing and a negative race or training experience can be turned into one of the best learning experiences out there (provided you DO learn from it).

I've been involved with the sport of triathlon for 13 years, with running for 15 and cycling since they invented the wheel but I still have a lot to learn. Sometimes something I learned a long time ago finally makes sense. New research and technological advances can be exciting but so can the application of old wisdom.

What to do about it

If you feel that you've stopped learning new things about triathlon or about your training, you might just need to pay attention. Perhaps your training has become rote, and you don't think about it any more. You do the same races year after year and are essentially rehashing the same experiences and hoping for a different result. If your training program truly is the same year after year, it might be time to get a new coach. But before you throw the baby out with the bath water, look at the program and make sure that there isn't something there that you are supposed to be using.

The other way to learn is to ask questions. A good coach won't be threatened by your questions. I love questions! It's one way I know you are actually reading the schedule. It also shows me you are interested. Maybe you want to know why I am having you run at this pace or at that heart rate. Or maybe you've been cycling or swimming so long you are embarrassed to ask a question that seems basic and might be unnecessary to your completion of the drill. Ask anyway! If no one ever explained it to you, how are you supposed to know?!