

## Method to the madness

Mark Allen helps you make sense of the good, the bad and the ugly training and racing advice

*By Mark Allen*

**Nov. 27, 2006** -- For many triathletes, in addition to the health benefits of the sport, the promise of achieving a new PR or reaching personal milestones can act as powerful lures. To feed this hunger for improvement, companies spend countless dollars innovating and bringing to market go-fast race gear, scientifically jazzed up nutrition and lightweight aero components. But with all the options now available, it can be tough to discern fact from fiction and to get the most bang for your triathlon buck.

I had to navigate through the same kinds of choices when I raced to come up with the equipment and training methods that worked for me. Many of the training approaches, gear and nutrition strategies I tried did not live up to their previously touted effectiveness, but some of them did, and, on rare occasions, even exceeded my expectations. So below are a few guidelines to help you make sense of the competing claims and counter-claims. I've divided the list into three categories: equipment, nutrition and training advice. But before we look at these three areas, it's important to be clear about some of the sport's fundamentals.

*Rule #1:* Know yourself and your goals. If you are a weekend warrior who simply competes for the fun of it, then you might not be any better served by specing your bike with a new set of trick \$1500 race wheels. However, if you are a competitive age grouper and you can afford a step up in your approach to training and racing, then you may well gain an advantage by selecting the right high-performance gear.

*Rule #2:* Set your budget. Have a reality check with your checkbook before launching into your search for products and services. Decide on a rough upper limit for what you can comfortably spend on coaching, nutrition and gear. This can help eliminate a lot of the headaches associated with shopping for triathlon products and services simply because some choices will be outside your budget.

*Rule #3:* Cover the basics. The most significant improvements in your performance are going to come from swimming, biking and running repeatedly over an extended period of time. Before you debate whether your race wheels should have 12 or 14 spokes, make sure you have a sound training strategy in place, proper nutrition to fuel your body before and during events plus a clear picture of your goals and budget. Everything you do to get faster will add up. However, never lose sight of the most important aspect of improvement: putting in the work.

### Gearing up

Let's tackle equipment first because of the three key aspects of race performance, it is often equipment selection that sparks the greatest discussion. No matter what it is you are searching for, from running shoes to a new bike, a good starting place in the selection process is product reviews that magazines and trade publications produce.

A second great source of information on equipment is local shops that specialize in the stuff you want. Look around in several locations. It will only take two or three stops to begin to see trends in recommendations.

Once you have a couple of good options in the categories you are searching for, you are ready to consider the single most important factor in equipment selection: fit and comfort. From bikes to shoes to clothing, it does not matter how technologically advanced the product is, if it does not fit your body it won't do its job. Try it on, give it a test ride, run on a treadmill for five minutes-do whatever it takes to make sure the product is in sync with your body.

Caution: Find other athletes who have used the products you are looking at. There is nothing like hearing feedback from someone who has put in many miles on a particular bike, run with the

shoes you are hoping to race in or actually swum in the wetsuit you are considering-and can compare them for you.

### **The right fuel for the job**

This topic is often associated with a myriad of potential obstacles and uncertainty that can undermine even the best-laid plans. The physiology of a human being in the lab can be quite different from what an athlete can actually experience in the heat of competition. Because of this, products that work well in training can completely backfire in a race.

To determine what might work best for you, start with the basics by determining what your body needs on a day-to-day basis for fueling and rebuilding. Seek out articles on sports nutrition written by qualified individuals. Nutritionists and exercise physiologists can offer excellent insight, but so can athletes who have a depth of practical experience. If a given expert has an appropriate educational background and has worked with athletes, then you have solid grounds for taking his or her advice as a good starting point for developing your own plan.

*Caution:* Be wary of extreme claims by the makers of nutritional products. If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Once you decide to try a nutrition product or plan, give it a fair trial. One day of using a supplement will not change your entire physiology. Six months or a year might. Use the products under training conditions that simulate your races as closely as possible. If you get the results you're looking for in such situations, then try them in low-priority races. Don't use the latest miracle bar for the first time in your most important race of the season.

### **Designing a training program**

Begin your search for training advice with some self-assessment. First, ask yourself what it is you feel is lacking in your training program and what will bring you the greatest improvements. For example, let's say running is your weakness and is holding you back from a breakthrough race. This could be because your overall training program is failing to develop your fitness correctly. In this case, a good triathlon coach might be the answer. You might be shortchanged on your run simply because your form and cadence need a bit of refining. Here, a good running specialist could help.

Once you have a handle on what you feel your limiters are, be sure to seek out credible information and feedback. Triathlon is a relatively young sport. Experts who know how to blend three individual sports together into a seamless whole are just now emerging. What makes someone an expert really depends on the results athletes have seen under that person's guidance. Has the person whose advice you are considering actually helped other triathletes improve? Is his or her particular strength an area you need help with?

*Caution:* Titles following a coach's name do not necessarily mean the individual has the knowledge necessary to help you improve. Ask others who have worked with a coach about their experiences.

My second caution is to make sure that, once you feel comfortable with your choice in training advice, you give it enough time to work. Sound training practices can take time to pay fitness and performance dividends. A month spent working with someone is not necessarily enough time to see sustainable results. Give the program a full build-up, taper and peak race to see whether the advice is really living up to your expectations.

A third caution is one that few people think about. It has to do with getting fit too quickly from a particular program. This is often a sign that the training program you are on is one that will cost you in the long run with burnout or injury. Consider it a red flag if you find you are hitting top form after just a month or two rather than over the course of a season.

My final piece of advice regarding training information is to be open to trying methods that have worked well for others. Try not to limit yourself to training advice that supports the way you

already train. If you search long enough, it is usually possible to find someone who will tell you to do exactly what you have been doing. And that is fine as an affirmation of success if you are happy with your results. However, if you are trying to improve, something in your program may have to be altered. Be open to another approach, then go with it long enough to maximize its effectiveness.

Best of luck with your training. See you at the races.