



October 5, 2011

Barbara,

I understand and agree with the opinions on burn-out that you discussed at the recent sports psychology conference. In 2009, I wrote a youth column "Fall and Winter Training" for the Performance Conditioning newsletter where I explained our position on burn-out and training in the *off season*:

"After a long road race season, we believe that our team members need a break – physically, but more importantly, mentally. Personally, I don't believe that the kids should race after the road season until the next road season. I've seen too many young cyclists burn-out and drop out of the sport before reaching their peak. Our mission is to grow our sport and to promote a lifestyle of fitness and exercise, so we want to keep our youths in cycling while avoiding burn-out.

We recommend diversity in training that still includes the road bike – year round. We recommend a break from competition after the road race season. The "off-season" part of our program includes activities and exercises that promote long term development while keeping the team together. Keeping the team together is essential to maintaining a year round program."

Also, I agree that whatever training we do in the off season must be managed.

With that preface, here are my objectives for the off-season and "cross season":

- 1) To maintain discipline, consistency, and good habits
- 2) To maintain essential fitness
- 3) To improve cycling skills and handling confidence
- 4) To AVOID burn-out (by changing the training scenery and adding variety without sacrificing consistency)
- 5) To remove pressure by emphasizing fun and reducing seriousness

BURN-OUT

Managing the off season has always been a challenge. The cyclocross season notwithstanding, I still believe a break is necessary, i.e. a mental break. Here are some of my thoughts:

Over the years, I've noticed that most team members experience a significant "training letdown" after the race season. Some of the team members have described this "letdown" as "burn-out". I'm not certain about what it is, but I know it exists. Regardless, this "training letdown" has led to some bad habits including loss of discipline, motivation, and essential fitness... And it is contagious among team members... the camaraderie of training vanishes. The "training letdown" has occurred even without any cyclocross competition. As I stated in my 2009 article, I feel that racing should wait until the new road season. Primarily, my position is based on my observation that the team experiences this annual "training letdown" following the road season.

In my opinion, this "training letdown" phenomenon has a negative impact to the next season. It is my observation that the "training letdown" has led to greater difficulty for many members when it comes time to restart their training for the new season. Indeed, as our team members have become stronger and more successful, the restart "gap" has increased and it has become a greater obstacle to overcome. I believe that there should be a "transition" period at the end of the season to allow for recovery, but at the



same time, I believe that maintaining consistency, discipline, and good habits are extremely important to make a smooth "transition" to the new season.

The "letdown" situation is not just a symptom of our juniors or our training program. It seems even more problematic for adults. I've witnessed it countless times. At the end of the race season, adults will "shutdown" for several weeks. They lose their "training" habits. It becomes "easy" to wait another week before restarting. Resuming training can be very frustrating because workouts, speeds, and power that were easily achieved during the previous season are often tough to attain. Unfortunately, adults often completely give up and quit because it is harder for adults to rebound, especially for adults over 30 years old. These people really need the accountability of coaching to guide their transition periods!

Although it is tougher for adults, in recent years I've noticed that it is becoming nearly as difficult for our top juniors. Our top juniors have reached high levels of fitness through an accumulation of several training years. By the end of the race season, they are highly fit. With the "training letdown" and "shutdown", they risk dropping a huge amount of fitness during the off season. The good news is that juniors have youthfulness on their side. The bad news is that they are immature and they depend on their youthfulness to bring them back. But as the old adage says, "The bigger you are, the harder you fall". So essential fitness is a priority during the off season. Here, again, I believe coaching is the answer, but typically, juniors don't have the maturity of adults, who understand obligations, responsibilities, and consequences. As a result, it can be harder to get juniors to follow coaching directions. This is why I have "To maintain discipline, consistency, and good habits" as my number one objective.

Besides the setbacks to discipline and consistency, the "letdown" can have health ramifications. I know weight is a touchy subject, but it's something that needs to be addressed here. For example, a few team members gain too much weight largely due to the drastic reduction in training volume. The reduction in training does not directly correlate to a reduction in food intake and eating habits! We try to monitor the team members' weights during the race season. We don't have any team members who are underweight, so being "underweight" is not our problem. However, during past off seasons, I've observed some unnecessary and significant weight gains. Weight gain compounds the reduced fitness problem, which, in turn, adds to the difficulty when earnest training begins for the new season. So monitoring weight is a year round consideration.

After the road race season, I've observed that many team members want to totally relax and take a "vacation" from the "demands" of race season training. Race season training is definitely demanding, especially for our top juniors. It requires consistency, dedication, concentration, persistence, routine (for some, even with a little variety in the routine, they become "bored", which is a "burn-out" symptom). Basically, some juniors "shutdown" and don't consider any future consequences. They don't realize that bad habits are easily formed. Also, they believe that they can make a quick transition back to training when the next season arrives.

It is my opinion that as coaches, we have a responsibility to resolve the "shutdown" problem. It is an age old problem and it has tradition even among the elite. I recognize that most everyone is tired both physically and mentally at the end of the road race season – a natural response to a long period of stresses. An obvious remedy for being tired is to rest, but I believe it should be controlled to avoid the pitfalls of bad habits. I believe that what the kids experience after the long race season is similar to what they experience after the school year - summer break/vacation. I remember when I was in school that during summer vacation, many of my friends changed their habits significantly from the school year... they stayed up late and slept in, they "goofed off" almost every day. On the other hand, my parents made sure that my brother, my sisters, and I stayed on schedule. We had chores, we had curfews, we had a schedule... we did not change our lifestyle when summer vacation arrived. As a result, there was no big transition when school resumed. We still had the relief of summer vacation because the "scenery" was



different, but the discipline, consistency, and habits were maintained. In the end, this promoted and instilled self-discipline in each one of us. My brother, sisters, and I owe our parents much thanks because the discipline, consistency, and habits have served us well in our lives.

In summary, again I need to say that I believe that "burn-out" is more mental than physical. Physically being tired leads to over-reaching and over-training, which does not lead the athlete to "shutdown". To the contrary, the athlete may even try to increase their training to the point of illness, injury, and/or exhaustion. On the other hand, mental tiredness will cause the athlete to "shutdown" and lose motivation to train - "take a vacation!" My position is that we manage my objectives while considering the mental tiredness of our athletes. So for cyclocross, I think we need to be very clear and make sure we present that "having fun" far outweighs "race results". In this way, the athletes can race without feeling pressure; they'll feel refreshed by the "change of scenery", and they will benefit from the aim of my objectives.

The other main topic that was discussed at your sports psychology conference was "Peaking". Here are my thoughts on that subject:

PEAKING

"Peaking" is an interesting subject. Regarding "peaking" for adults, I have found that it is predictable and reasonable easy to accomplish; however, for juniors, it's somewhat a different story. Growth has a huge bearing on juniors' physiology - changes in size, strength, power, hormones, emotions, etc. are unpredictable. I have observed that the younger the athlete is, the less applicable and less effective conventional periodization training is when it comes to "peaking". For older juniors (those who are exiting adolescence), training for competitive cyclocross could have a negative impact to peaking for nationals; however, I don't expect any impact to younger athletes even with a traditional training program. I think if we manage the older junior's cyclocross training (as laid out by my objectives), it can help develop the capabilities of the cardiovascular system (heart, lungs, blood, blood vessels) prior to concentrating on endurance training. Again, the mental side is important here... changing up the training by keeping it fresh while addressing the objectives that I outlined above.

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