

6 Steps to a Strong Year in Triathlon

Jason Gootman, MS, CSCS & Will Kirousis, BS, CSCS

Tri-Hard Endurance Sports Coaching

USA Triathlon & USA Cycling Certified Specialists

Certified Strength & Conditioning Coaches

www.Tri-Hard.com

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As we embark on a new year, many of you are feeling empowered to make this your best year yet in triathlon. Many of you are really looking to have a great year. This of course means something different to each of you, but nonetheless many of you are led to the question “What can I do to make this a great year?” Hopefully, you are already looking past the traps of quick, easy improvement promised by a piece of equipment or a single kind of workout and are ready to look at some ways to genuinely improve yourself in ways that will allow you to move faster than you currently can. If you are, here are six steps you can take to create personal success for yourself in triathlons this year—six steps to help you become a faster triathlete!

1. Identify your reasons for racing triathlons.

You need to ask yourself one very important question: Why am I doing this? Take some time and reflect on this question. If it helps you, let your thoughts out onto paper or discuss your thoughts with a friend, family member, or fellow triathlete also reflecting on his/her reasons for doing triathlons. There are no right or wrong reasons. It is just important to know your reasons. Ask yourself the following questions:

- a. What do I most enjoy about triathlon training and racing?
- b. What are the best feelings I get to experience in my triathlon training and racing?
- c. When I first “fell in love” with triathlon, what was it that felt so great?

Your answers to these questions will help you get closer to your personal core reasons for participating in triathlons. Your reflection may tug at your heart a bit and remind you what matters most to you about participating in triathlons. All together, this process can help you to find out or to remind yourself why you like triathlons so much and why you are looking to have a great year.

You may be wondering what the heck this has to do with racing faster. The answer is you need to know what is most important to you in triathlon in order to structure your training and racing in a way that will allow you to experience and achieve what matters to you. If you don't really know what matters to you, you

can't really have any goals that have meaning to you. You will be left to pick goals out of thin air or to use someone else's goals. But by knowing what matters most to you about your participation in triathlons, you can deliberately go out and make it happen, consciously taking the steps you need to.

2. Create or assess your triathlon goals.

From your personal reasons for participating in triathlon, you need to create your goals for the season. There is a great deal of very good information written about creating good goals. A simple summary of good goal setting advice would be to set specific, positive, challenging but realistic, and personally meaningful goals. A full discussion of goal setting is beyond the scope of this article. We want to emphasize the personally meaningful aspect. In our coaching of triathletes, we come across many folks who make their goals based on what they feel they are *supposed* to do. We also come across many folks who look to us to help them create their goals. A good coach can help you to clarify your goals or to restructure them in ways that make them more appropriate and helpful, but the core of your goals needs to come from inside of you. We encourage you to create your goals based on the reasons you have identified as why YOU like to participate in triathlon. If you have already created goals for the year, assess them to make sure they are in line with your personal reasons. Doing so will help to ensure a year you can look back on with a sense of joy and satisfaction.

3. Train with direction.

From your well-established goals, you need to train in a purposeful manner to help you to reach your goals. Simply "putting in the miles" or mindlessly following the workouts of your friends or local training groups may bring improvement in the short-term, but will lead to a plateau in your abilities rather quickly. Instead, carefully assess your current abilities and what stands between your current abilities and the abilities you need to have to reach your goals. From there, create a plan of action that will help you to develop as you need to. If you need help with this, consider reading some of the good books available on triathlon and endurance sports training or consider working with a triathlon coach who can help to provide this direction for you.

4. Create health-enhancing lifestyle habits.

Health and performance are not two separate entities, but rather two qualities that go hand-in-hand. The healthier you are, the better you perform. Two major areas that impact your health tremendously are your sleep habits and your nutrition habits.

With regards to sleep, you should aim to get a minimum of 8-9 hours of sound sleep per night. Many ambitious triathletes sacrifice sleep in order to complete more training either early in the morning or late in the evening. Obviously, you

need to train in order to improve, but when the amount of training you are doing is limiting your ability to get enough sleep each night, you are fighting a losing battle. Hormonally, you simply need ample, quality sleep in order to improve as an athlete. The physiological changes that occur and allow you to improve and move faster will only happen when you consistently sleep well. We have often seen athletes improve substantially when taking out some of their training and sleeping more. Even though they were then training less, their bodies were better able to adapt to their training and they improved at a greater rate.

With regards to nutrition, you should aim to eat high quality nutritious foods throughout each day. Eating well does not have to be complicated. If you regularly consume whole, natural foods you will be assured of getting all the nutrients you need to support great health and your quest for improved performance. A few simple steps will help you in eating well:

- a. Base your meals and snacks around vegetables, fruits, meats, nuts/seeds, and whole grains/whole grain foods.
- b. Eat every 3-5 hours throughout the day to supply yourself with a steady incoming stream of nutrients.
- c. Eat breakfast.
- d. Drink water throughout the day.

While improving your nutrition habits, we encourage you to assign yourself a weekly nutrition task each week just as you would program your training. Your role each week is to execute this task just as you will execute your training. This allows you to gradually create better eating habits. A few examples of weekly nutrition tasks are:

- a. I will eat three large salads this week.
- b. When I go food shopping this week, I will stock my pantry with healthy foods like canned beans, canned tuna, whole grain pasta, wild rice, almonds, and cashews.
- c. I will eat a piece of fish for dinner two nights this week.

5. Consciously train your movement efficiency.

How efficiently you move when you swim, bike, and run is a very large determining factor in how fast a rate you can maintain in a triathlon. You will only move as fast as you are efficient. Both your ability to exert great amounts of force in sport specific movement patterns (sport specific strength/power) and your levels of aerobic and anaerobic endurance directly impact the rate at which you can travel in a triathlon. Triathletes commonly train these factors whereas consciously training movement efficiency is often neglected, despite its significant role in determining what speed we can maintain in a triathlon. We suggest making training your movement efficiency a larger priority. In fact, we suggest that you never train simply to gain strength/power or endurance at the

expense of movement efficiency. If you need help with how to train your movement efficiency in triathlon, consider working with a coach who can help you to do so or consider reading some of the good teaching materials available. The materials of swim coach Terry Laughlin (to learn more go to www.totalimmersion.net) and run coach Nicholas Romanov (to learn more go to www.posetech.com) are unique in their ability to help virtually anyone self-coach themselves to enhanced movement efficiency in swimming and running. For enhanced cycling efficiency, we suggest first working with an experienced bike fitter to ensure that you are suited to your bicycle in a biomechanical sense and then working on both your pedaling and bike handling skills each time your ride.

6. Rest as eagerly as you train.

Training without resting adequately is like trying to pour water into a cup with holes in the bottom; you just won't make any progress. Most triathletes are aware of this, but many ignore it. If you really want to improve this year, we offer the following suggestions for better resting:

- a. Every 3-6 weeks, take a Recovery Week where you train at 50% or less of your training load in your other weeks.
- b. Every week, take at least one Rest Day where you perform no training.
- c. When possible take a Total Rest Day where you perform no training, no work, and no chores. Sounds crazy, but what you do that day is REST. This is often most possible on a weekend day during a Recovery Week.
- d. If you are racing quite a bit, consider a mid-season break somewhere in the summer after a heavy period of racing. Take a week or two away from structured training and triathlon in general. If possible, you can take this break at the same time you take a family vacation. This can recharge your batteries and allow you to continue racing strongly in the later summer and fall.
- e. Try not to think of resting as "doing nothing". Many achievement oriented people get hung up on feeling like they are "doing nothing" when they are resting. Instead, try to think of resting as the act of resting which is a very positive "action" that leads to greater health and performance.

We hope that this advice gives you some help in creating a great year for yourself!

To learn more about Jason, Will, and Tri-Hard Endurance Sports Coaching, visit www.Tri-Hard.com.