Spring fever

Patience and discipline in the last stages of your training program will pay dividends with optimal performance

BY CHARLES HOWE

"For every question, there is a simple answer – neat, plausible, and wrong." – H. L. Mencken (paraphrase)

In this last installment (at least for a while) on training periodization, an anecdote serves as the point of departure. Last spring, a local Category 4 cyclist faced the dilemma of whether to compete in an early-season race. On the one hand, he had not ridden more than two hours on the road during the off- and early-season, and had not raced since the previous August. On the other hand, the twin siren calls of competition and team companionship beckoned him to travel 75 miles to race on an unfamiliar course that would serve as the state championship road race later in the year. Ultimately, a specious claim would tip the balance in favor of going: a friend told him it was OK to race if his power output was "within 10%" of what he could produce at the same time the previous year.

Not too surprisingly, he was dropped on a steep climb and spent the rest of the race fruitlessly chasing the main group. Was the decision to compete the wisest possible use of time and energy in this case?

An informed choice

For both competitive and recreational cyclists alike, the combination of club/team loyalties plus springtime relief from the long darkness and bitter cold of the winter months form a powerful inducement to take get out and take part. Race and tour organizers take advantage of this, gambling against the higher probability of bad weather as they conceive and promote their early-season events, and with rider enthusiasm yet to be overtaken by fatigue and disappointment, turnouts can be surprisingly large.

It would be convenient if the decision to race were so simple that it could be determined by a single number on a powermeter, but at least in this instance, things were more complicated than that. As an old saying runs, do you train to race, or race to train? The answer is a judgment call based on a careful assessment of numerous factors:

1. Fitness level and relative capabilities – for the competitive cyclist, if available free time and motivation have allowed adequate off-season base training, and if the relative strength of the field of competitors will let you comfortably "sit in" and use the event as a training ride, it might make sense to race; you might even do so with some aggression, depending on where the race falls in relation to the goals you have selected. On the other hand, if life demands, weather conditions, or sickness have left you short of training, you are likely better off staying home and training, especially if you're, say, a somewhat marginal Cat. 4 and your only option is a combined field with the Cat. 3s.

   None of these concerns apply to recreational riders taking part in non-competitive tours, but consideration should be given to the length of the event as well as the terrain it covers. Choose an event with route options commensurate with your training.

2. Competitive goals – the objectives you have chosen and the strength of your commitment to them can help you to pass up events that are inappropriate to your goals and don't fit your training program. In other cases, your goals may direct you to use certain events as specialized training (more below).

3. Developing vs. mature rider – younger and less experienced riders need to spend as much time as possible building aerobic capacity, and competing too frequently interferes with this.

4. Finally, a power-measuring system can indeed be used to evaluate fitness levels, but 10% is actually the approximate variation a mature rider can expect between peak performance and the lowest level of off-season fitness.

Finishing touches

So perhaps you're persuaded to skip the season's first several races, and are wondering what to do instead. Well, our model of training periodization has called almost entirely for aerobic conditioning so far – at least 8-10 weeks of consistent, steady-state 'base' training, primarily on flat terrain, that culminated with some undulating endurance rides and hill intervals last month. For most recreational riders, this is about as far as any training program needs to proceed before getting out to some of the area's many tours, but for competitive cyclists and more aggressive 'performance' riders who frequently incur large oxygen debt by attacking hard, recovering, and attacking again, a period anaerobic capacity training is needed, within the following guidelines:

1. Such workouts should serve as a kind of "icing on the cake," coming *only* after aerobic fitness is as complete as possible, since the latter determines the basic level of performance. Once anaerobic training commences, it must be concentrated in a relatively short time, during which further aerobic conditioning is not possible.

   The so-called "lactate tolerance" this training builds is called upon when attacking, bridging gaps, and taking pulls in a breakaway, but always keep in mind that the higher aerobic capacity can be raised, the less anaerobic capacity will be taxed.

2. Anaerobic training should take place in 2-3 workouts per week, each separated by 48-60 hours, with a very easy ride of 30-60 minutes in between, for a total of 8-12 workouts over a period of 3-4 weeks. Those with greater tolerance for this type of training will be able to get in three workouts weekly, while others may have to limit themselves to two per week, and stretch things out over four weeks.

3. With respect to workout structure, the length of repetitions should fall within 30 seconds – 3 minutes; the precise duration is not as important as with the 5-minute, maximal aerobic power intervals discussed last month, however, 10-15 × 1 minute seems to have become something of a *de facto* standard workout, with recovery just long enough (i.e., 2-3 minutes) to prevent a large drop-off in power production the next interval, but this may be shortened to as little as 90 seconds. Terrain may be either uphill, flat, or a mixture of both, depending on the type of racing you intend to do.

4. One easy-to-moderate intensity ride of 2-3 hours is scheduled to maintain aerobic fitness, most typically on Sunday, at the end of the training week.

5. Alternatively, anaerobic capacity can be built through training races, but structured, targeted training is more effective.

Race/tour-ready

Once you finish this period, the training of each of your energy systems will be complete, but there is one more aspect of preparation to cover: 2-3 weeks of coordination/specialization which includes a 'spirited' group ride and a training race (or a race used as training) each week. The purpose of this is to 'put all the pieces together' in lower-key events and simulate the wide and rapid variations in energy output so characteristic of bike racing. The annual Races at the Lake in Munroe Falls, a criterium series on Saturdays in April and May, is perfect for this, while also affording an opportunity to brush up on pack riding skills and teamwork. (For recreational and touring cyclists, specialty training might simply mean a gradual lengthening of Sunday rides until the distance of the goal event is reached.)

After a week's taper during which volume is reduced by 40-50%, *then* you will be truly ready for a competition/ recovery period consisting two races per week, interspersed with short and easy recovery rides. How long it lasts before a recover/rebuild period (as previously discussed) is needed to regain form depends on the depth of the foundation you were able to lay down and maintain in the winter months.

Bicycle racing, it would seem, is akin to war, in that you can either plunge into it rashly and unprepared, "with the army you have," and suffer the consequences, or else count the cost, train optimally, then hit as hard as possible without letting up until it's over. Preparation makes the difference between an outstanding performance or a long morning that merely provides blog filler and leaves you searching for a silver lining – "failure to prepare is preparing to fail."