

Recovery: The Forgotten Training Tool

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It seems that everyone is searching for the "magic workout", the key(s) to training success. If you look at any number of magazines on the market these days, the predominant themes are along these lines:

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"Seven tips for your fastest 5K ever."

"Twenty workouts to your best Ironman."

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And so on and so on - and it doesn't change from sport to sport.

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While the search goes on for that one special workout that is going to make the critical difference in training results (or that one special exercise that will lead you to a miraculous recovery from injury), we've forgotten something elemental about the human body. It needs time to recover. All the "right workouts" in the world aren't going to make any difference if you've not done what you need to do in order to foster your recovery.

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What makes this matter worse is that there are a lot of commonly-held interpretations of "recovery", many of which are mis-guided to say the least.

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Recovery involves time. No matter what we want to believe, there is a certain inherent time factor involved with recovery from any given workout or rehab session. It could be 24 hours, or 72 hours. The training session essentially "digs a hole of fatigue" in which we try to adapt our way out of over time. If we are successful in doing so, we see a training effect. Some call it "supercompensation". I just call it "recovery and adaptation". But if we aren't successful, then we are just digging a bigger hole ... and will face the wrath of the injury gods before too long. So what is involved with recovery?

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Having the right fuel and building blocks on board is critical. The nutritional side of recovery is a topic unto it's own - but suffice it to say that if you haven't re-fueled with carbohydrate, you won't be able to effectively fuel the process of repair and recovery. If you don't have the necessary protein intake, you won't have the building blocks for tissue repair and recovery.

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Here's the twist though ... and it's something I see all the time.

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It's the premise of "active recovery" or, in many peoples' minds, the way to rationalize adding more miles without "breaking the rules of training".

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The concept of active recovery was initially formulated as a means of fostering the process immediately post-workout. The idea is to do the main part of the workout and then to keep moving afterwards. Gentle movement continues to keep the blood flowing to the affected tissues, which in turn helps to provide nutrients and remove waste products, thereby facilitating a good start to the recovery process. In more simple terms, true active recovery is the act of performing a cool-down. Nothing more, nothing less.

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But active recovery as it's currently perceived, and the dreaded "recovery runs", have become the bane of the endurance world. The concept of "going for an easy recovery run the next day" is counter-intuitive. Your body is already 12 hours (or more) into the repair and recovery process. "Easy miles" at this point are simply padding your training log. They are done at an intensity that isn't having any direct effect on your fitness, and they are, to some extent, simply continuing to dig that "fatigue hole". All this does is slow down the process of recovery!

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"Easy" could have a simple substitute - and it is called "off". Call it what you need to in order to rationalize it - off day, recovery day, no training day, mental health day - but more often than not, extra time to recover will in fact aid the process more than simply "training through it". Not only does it provide a benefit to the tissues, but it also provides a benefit to the central nervous system.

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I've seen far too many lethargic and overtrained athletes that thought that they needed to "get in the miles" instead of "building their fitness". I have also seen far too many athletes recovering from injury that have been so determined to do their rehab that they have forgotten to take some time to recover within this process as well. This is exactly why I have developed what I call "Recovery-Centered Training" - with equal focus on training (sessions) AND recovery (including periodization).

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"But Allan, elite athletes don't do this" ... well, yes they do. Here's an article on an elite cyclist that may prove interesting: Riccardo Ricco's Story. Here's a sample from the article from CyclingNews:

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Ricco² has not officially raced since finishing second overall in the Giro d'Italia, where he also claimed the young rider classification and won the Agrigento and Tivoli stages. The Italian was slated to race the Tour de Suisse, June 14 to 22, but decided to stay home at the last minute.

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"When the moment came to depart for the Tour de Suisse he said, 'I don't feel it; I really just want to sleep,' and so on," Algeri said. "I reassured him that he won't lose his form, not in just a week's time, and that if he is tired in the head, after two or three days rest, the desire to race will return.

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"He told me that I was right, 'I had two or three days of only sleeping and the desire came back. Everyday [after], I trained just a little bit more and just a little bit better,'" added Algeri.

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Ricciardi reportedly performed a mountain test near his home in Formigine (Modena) and recorded more or less the same time that he had set going into the Giro d'Italia. Algeri stated that Ricciardi will evaluate his form after the first mountain stages and decide if he will ride for the classification or not.

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I'll play devil's advocate here though and be frank in saying that you have to be honest with yourself and the feedback that your body is giving you. There is a fine line between "just ignoring a workout" and "I need to take an extra day to recover". You need to learn to trust your gut instincts, as they will invariably guide you in your body's needs. The human body functions very intuitively and provides us with all the feedback we need to recover and adapt effectively. Trust what your body is telling you! Time can be your friend.

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Let us not forget the words of Kenny Rogers ... "you've got to know when to hold'em ... know when to fold'em ... know when to walk away ... know when to run". Little did he know that his words would ring loudly in the world of sport!

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