

Training Log 07: Recovery

First up, an important commercial. I've written this before, but please feel free to send me emails with any cycling or training-related questions you may have. I'm more than happy to help you out with training any way I can besides putting these articles together.

Now to this fortnight's topic: recovery.

Last time, I wrote about how important it was to lay down a cycling-specific fitness foundation by getting in as much bike time as possible, with the ideal goal of ~10h/week during June and July. While training is important, the important thing to realize is that this is only half the equation. The important flip side of quality training is getting quality rest and recovery. Just as it's a problem in the weight room to work only on your quads (thigh) muscles and not your hamstrings because it will cause imbalances in your knees, too much training without adequate recovery will over-stress your body and cause it to break down.

Think of this analogy. When you break a bone, the fracture site grows back stronger than before to super-compensate for the stress. But if you don't give the bone rest, it's not going to heal and will only get weaker and weaker! In the same way, training is only the stress that you impose onto your body. If you don't let your body recover, it will get weaker rather than stronger. The ideal is that you place a load of stress (training) on your body, give it enough recovery to grow back stronger than before, then place a bigger load of stress on the next time.

What's the danger with overtraining anyway? First off, you've put your body into such a stressed state that all your physical capacity literally starts breaking down more and more. Your heart can't pump as efficiently as usual. Your muscles have not properly restocked with fuel, so it cannot handle your normal training load and can start catabolising itself (breaking itself down for energy). Your immune system also becomes weaker and cannot fight off diseases as well, with the result that you run greater risks of getting infections and further impairing your fitness.

The real hidden danger of overtraining is the mental aspect. Most athletes, when they see their performance getting worse, automatically come to the conclusion that it's because they're not training enough. So their solution becomes to train even harder, resulting in a negative spiral of breakdown!

What are some of the simple signs of "overtraining" then?

1. The first obvious sign is physical fatigue. You're just tired and sore, plain and simple.
2. Your heart rate at rest or when first waking up is much higher than usual (e.g. my typical resting heart rate when waking is about 52-56 beats per minute. I know I need to be careful if my heart rate is much greater than 60). Taking your heart rate by counting your pulse for 15 seconds and multiplying by 4 first thing upon waking (if it's to an alarm clock, give yourself a minute first to settle down) is a great way of monitoring fitness.
3. Mental fatigue is a huge indicator of overtraining, and it's important to monitor yourself for mood changes. These can include irritability, lack of concentration, and simply not wanting to go anywhere near the bike.

4. If you use a heart rate monitor during exercise, you should have a decent self-knowledge about what your heart rate should generally be with different efforts. If your heart rate is either much higher or much lower than typical, that's usually another sign of overtraining. If you don't have a heart rate monitor, you should still generally have a good idea of how hard a particular effort should feel, and you can use that to monitor fatigue in the same way.

When you have any or all of these symptoms, it's critically important to objectively analyze them and see whether they're real signs of overtraining or just "normal" fatigue. For example, in my racing training, I will deliberately schedule really hard weeks where I hammer myself NEARLY into the ground before backing off. The last couple of days can be tough physically and mentally. Therefore, I need to be careful in not going overboard if my body can't handle it, or determine that it's simple laziness!

However, in general, it is always better in the long run to err on the side of caution and do a little bit less than ideal rather than a little too much. Remember, this isn't a built-in excuse for skipping a workout, but a realistic and honest self-assessment.

So then what are some ways to avoid overtraining in the first place?

1. As I wrote before, be careful when you increase the volume or intensity of training. In general, you shouldn't increase the volume (duration) of training by more than 10% in a week. It's tougher to quantify the amount of intensity, but definitely don't jump from never doing any intervals to four interval workouts in one week!
2. I generally design training to be in four week cycles with built-in recovery weeks. So I would go with a hard-harder-hardest-easy pattern. The first three weeks get tougher and tougher, such that the final days of the third week can be mentally and physically gruelling. Then I back off in the 4th week with a really easy week to give myself that much needed break for recovery.
3. As I suggested with my training template, recovery is also built in over the course of a week. For example, I would have relatively easy days on Mondays and Fridays. This breaks a week essentially into two blocks of training – Tuesday through Thursday and the two weekend days. These easy days may be complete rest (preferable for newer riders) or "bike walks" – super easy days on the bike where I'm enjoying the scenery or running errands and just moving the legs over.

Ride strong and have fun!

Stephen

stephen.cheung@brocku.ca