



National Triathlon Training Centre
Centre National d'Entraînement
en Triathlon

"Building Excellence in Multi-Sport"

Victoria, British Columbia Canada



Peaking for your Big Day

Lance Watson, Head Coach

August 15, 2003

Someone asked me the other day what the best feeling was that I ever had. The answer came easily to me; the joy my wife and I have experienced with our daughter since her birth three years ago. Of course, being a coach who thinks about triathlon 24/7, that question made me think about the best feeling that an athlete can experience, and after talking to the athletes I work with, I came up with an overwhelming winner. Tapering.

A taper is the culmination of hard training and proper season planning, in an attempt to reach your racing goals. You have reached a peak level of fitness, and worked hard to the point of substantial physical fatigue. As you rest and unload the muscles, you get to really enjoy your fitness and feeling fresh. All of a sudden you have incredible workouts, tons of energy, and a super positive mindset. Next to fatherhood, nothing feels as good as tapering. However, like parenting, a taper can go awry if not given the attention that it needs.

Tapering is the term used to describe the process of bringing the body to a state where peak physical performance can occur. At its most basic level, tapering is the cutting back of volume, frequency, or duration, while maintaining a speed component in workouts. This allows the body to fully recover and rebuild itself leading into the most important races of the season. The peaking process includes workouts that tie together the development of your aerobic energy system with the exact demands of racing. These races will be combined with recovery periods and workouts that target race or event specific demands. Tapering is the time for you to pull together all of the aspects that will bring you to a peak athletic performance.

Now, tapering may sound like the best idea since sliced bread, and you may be inclined to use the information in this article to taper every weekend for your local race series. It is necessary to realize that you can only have a really peak performance once or twice a season, depending on when you need to peak. Full tapering is only to be used when preparing for the most important race of the season, and it should only occur after maximum conditioning has been achieved.

“So, let me get this straight. You’re telling me that if I do less, I will go faster? Where do I sign up?”

Before you jump aboard the train, you have to understand that tapers only work when you have worked your body into a deficit throughout the winter and spring. This is not to say that you need to abuse yourself to the point that you are no longer able to roll out of bed, but rather that you need to work hard consistently and not allow your body to perfectly recover. This can be a tricky balance as there is a fine line between training hard and overtraining, and you need to follow a periodized training plan to avoid overtraining pitfalls. With all that said, you can't peak if you haven't done the work beforehand!

The key to a successful season begins in the off-season when you draw up your training plan and race schedule for the year. Use your race schedule to rate all your races in order of importance so that you will be able to focus on the one that is most important to you. From there count back two weeks and label that day as the beginning of your taper. You should be training consistently up until this point. Throughout the winter you will probably be working on base training while the spring brings with it some more aerobic threshold work. As the summer approaches speed work will become more important. Throughout this training you should be monitoring yourself to make sure that you are not approaching overtraining, and ensuring your body is still getting enough recovery so that it can reap the positive adaptations that regular training will bring.

Once you've worked your butt off all winter and spring, it is time to prepare for the coming race season. Many times psychological peaking is more important than the physiological or training aspect of peaking. You need to set your own goals and maintain your focus on the goals, and accept that the process will lead you to your ultimate goal. This means that if your most important race is in July, then your placing in races held in May is of little consequence. As mentioned before, don't taper for your "B" or "C" races. If your "A" race is in late August, then your taper begins in early August, not early summer. Cut back on training for the early races, but don't fully unload. These races are of value as they will help prepare you mentally, physically, and technically for your important race, but use them as training days rather than racing days. If there is an early race that is a "B" race, then you can use what we call a "mini-taper" – that is a taper of a couple of days rather than a couple of weeks. If you were racing on Saturday, you would back off your volume on a Wednesday and taper into the weekend, and then resume regular training on the Monday after the race. This will allow you to recover a little more for the race, but won't bring your body into perfect recovery.

When your most important race is approaching it is time to focus on getting rested. Two weeks out the taper begins. Your preparation has been going on for months, and now you get to reap the benefits of your all your hard work. The absolute key to a good taper is perfect recovery. This means that your nutrition should be as good or better than it has been all year and you are resting as much as possible. Use this as an excuse to sit on the couch and watch your favorite movies or triathlon videos ad nauseam. You should have a water bottle with you all the time during your taper to keep hydrated well in advance of the race, and you should be following pre and post workout nutritional guidelines. Also remember to stretch well after each workout, and try to get a massage 4-5 days out from the race, to keep those muscles loose and limber.

If you have a coach, then consult with him/her and discuss your taper schedule. A general guideline is that you should be decreasing your volume gradually throughout the two weeks while maintaining your intensity. Volume of intensity should also gradually decrease. You should take the day after a high intensity workout completely off or just have a short recovery workout. Your last few days before the race you need to make sure that you are not producing muscle tissue damage from hard anaerobic activities.

Your last workout with any sort of extended intensity should be at least three days out from race day, so that your body has ample time to recover. Those workouts should consist of short efforts to race pace (no faster!) with lots of recovery. Keep in mind that just because the volume or distance is way down it does not mean that all your workouts should be “sprints”! Make sure that you do not do anything much faster than you have during your previous training. You are simply tweaking your muscles and preparing them for speed. There is no fitness to be gained during the taper by training hard, only through resting.

Everyone has his or her own pre-race routine for the day before the race, and you need to find what works for you. Most of my elite athletes will do short, easy, sessions in all three sports over the racecourse. Each would last no more than 20 minutes and produce little lactic acid. A less-trained athlete would do less.

It is also valuable to include some psychological preparation for the race during your taper. Since your overall training time will decrease as you are in the peaking phase, you have more time to sit around and think about all the possible options. This is not always a good thing! Many fine athletes ruin their confidence in the final stages of taper simply because they can't relax and maintain confidence in their ability to perform. If you have a coach he or she will be able to give you techniques to use to reach your optimal zone of arousal, such as visualization, positive self-talk, relaxation, concentration and focus, and surrounding yourself with a support group. The physical work is done and now it is time to fine-tune yourself mentally.

A successful taper starts in the early season with a commitment to train smart and consistently. Only if you do the hard work will you see and feel the result of a great taper.

Good luck and enjoy that taper.