

The Road to Recovery

In last month's article, I touched on Recovery as one of the four aspects of training that all cyclists should do. Because it is so important, and because so little is written about it, I'm devoting this entire column to it this month.

First, let's start off defining what I mean by 'recovery'. Recovery is the healing process your body goes through after a training bout. I'm not referring to recovery following an injury, although that is another type of recovery. The type I'm referring to in this article is recovery from training. When you train hard, or ride a long way, you do damage to your body's tissues, mainly the muscles. This may be very minor, such as after a long endurance ride, or it may be fairly traumatic following an intense weight workout. When you workout you create acids in your system, such as lactic acid, and other waste products from metabolism. You also do micro trauma damage to your muscle fibers. Recovery is the process by which your body removes waste products and heals itself. It is this healing process which rebuilds the muscle fibers, and when healed, they end up stronger than they were prior to the workout. That's the basic premise underlying training. Stress your body and it adapts and becomes stronger.

"Training Tears Your Body Down, Recovery Makes It Stronger"

So which is more important, training or recovery? Well, that's kind of like asking which is more important to making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, the peanut butter or the jelly? If you don't train, there is nothing to recover from or build upon. But if you train without adequate recovery, eventually you will wear yourself down and not be able to train effectively or rebuild your body and therefore don't improve. Recovery is equally important to the fitness equation.

Recently I heard the phrase from Joel Friel, author of *The Cyclists Training Bible*: Form = Fitness + Freshness. This means your current form is a balancing act between being fit (well trained) and rested. In order to be rested, you have to cut back on your training which limits your fitness. I equate this to studying in college. You could stay up all night cramming for an exam but be tired going into the exam and not perform well even though you knew the material. Or, you could stop studying the evening before and get a good night's sleep and perhaps not study everything as well, but you will be rested so that you can recall what you know and use it. If you train hard right up to an event (ride or race) you won't be at your best and probably will not perform up to your potential. It is better to rest going into an event. The good news is your fitness won't drop too much with just a few days away from hard training. Cramming doesn't work for studying or training!

Therefore, for competitive events, racers will 'taper' prior to a race. This may be simply taking it easy for a couple of days prior to the race. If it is a major event such as the National Championships or Olympics, athletes will follow a very specific tapering protocol which may last two weeks or more. Won't they lose a lot of fitness if they taper for two weeks? Yes, they would if they simply rested and rode easily. But that's not what tapering is. During a tapering period, the training volume is much reduced (say, 100 miles per week compared to 300) but they still do some short but very intense workouts. The intensity will keep their fitness at a razor sharp edge but they don't do enough volume to run themselves down, and this allows them to recover and be very fresh.

But you don't need to be an Olympic athlete to benefit from recovery and tapering. Everyone benefits from it. Let's say you do two long rides on weekends. You will probably be tired come Monday so you should take at least one day off before riding hard again. Recovery period is determined by how hard you rode, how tired you are, and how old you are (we take longer to recover as we get older). You may take two days to recover following a hard ride. A rule of thumb is you should take at least one day of rest and recovery following two hard days. Avoid riding hard three days in a row. So a typical week might include a hard ride on Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday. This allows Monday, Wednesday and Friday as your rest days. Four hard days of riding a week is plenty if interspersed with rest days, five is really pushing it and three might be all you can handle.

Keep in mind, training is a stress on your system. If you have a lot of other stress in your life (work, family, etc), that takes its toll and will be additional stresses your body has to deal with. You may struggle to handle 100 miles of riding a week if your life has a lot of other stress.

So how can professional cyclists train 400-500 miles a week and ride hard 5-6 days a week? Three reasons: 1) They are young and can handle a lot of physical stress. 2) Cycling is all they have to think about so they ride, sleep and eat and let others take care of them – they don't have a lot of other stress. 3) They recover extremely quickly. This is actually one of the most important attributes of successful professional cyclists. They can recover overnight and come back the next day and train hard again. Have you ever heard a Tour de France cyclist say that he is in better shape at the end of the Tour than at the beginning? That's the result of a lot of training and quick recovery.

How should you recover? There are two key ways – 1) simply take the day off from riding, or 2) do active recovery. Active recovery involves some sort of exercise or activity which moves your muscles, helps to flush out waste products and loosens up tight and sore muscles and joints, but doesn't create enough stress to further damage your tissues. An easy spin in a low gear for 20-30 minutes actually does more good than just sitting in a chair. Or, go for a walk or do something else involving movement.

So ride and train hard, but make sure you make time for recovery. Don't forget, it's the other half of the equation, and allows you to benefit from your training.

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