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Do we LIVE TO PLAY... or PLAY TO LIVE?



Learn how endurance sports athletes do both — at the same time

By David Ertl



Live to play:

We live to do the sport or activity of our choosing. Whether we run, swim, ride bikes, rock climb or cross country ski, we can never get enough. We look forward to doing it after work, we read about it in the evenings, and on weekends we often spend many hours participating, training and competing. Our sport adds a sense of play to our lives. As kids we played by going to the pool with friends, running around and riding our bikes, not to get in shape for a triathlon but because it was simply how we played. What we now call sport was play. It still should be. Play adds a fun dimension to our lives. It's why we got into our sport in the first place, and if we aren't careful, it can become work instead of play. We should never forget that our sport is first and foremost a source of play. It's OK to train hard and compete, as long as we remind ourselves that it's to have

fun.

We spend most of our lives working at our jobs or at home. Even raising a family can seem like work. Our society drives us to be workaholics. Our sport should be a time for us to let loose and have some guilt-free fun, which benefits us in many ways.

Participating in sports gives us a totally different set of friends to hang out with. Even though we, as endurance athletes, often exercise for many hours in solitude, we also enjoy the camaraderie of being with other like-minded people. Our sport gives us a very different dimension of ourselves to develop, both physically and mentally. Sports can be the most challenging thing we voluntarily do to ourselves. It teaches humility. (There is always someone better, stronger, faster.) It drives us to be better. We never reach perfection. It's the journey and not the destination that matters. Perhaps this is why we work at our play so hard. Play gives us a sense of challenge, satisfaction and accomplishment like nothing else we do in life. Our little victories mean a lot, like beating a personal best by one second or winning a medal in a local race that doesn't mean anything to anybody, except those who participate. Ironically, our play teaches us about work — hard work. Sport teaches us that hard work pays off and that training does in fact work. If our jobs were as hard as our training and competing, we would protest and probably quit, yet we pay good money to enter races and subject ourselves to all this pain and torture. Why? Because it's fun in a distorted way that only endurance athletes understand.

Even at the highest level of sport, play is an important tool in maintaining motivation.

"Yes, so far I am still having fun," said Amanda Miller, a professional cyclist from Burlington. "The word 'play' to me means going out for a fun, unstructured ride. I sometimes go out and 'play' on my mountain bike. I just go on a ride and have fun without worrying about hitting a certain wattage or heart rate zone."

Our play gives us something our work most likely cannot — a sense of joy and accomplishment doing something we truly love and about which we are deeply passionate. An endurance activity is a great chance to spend time with ourselves and our thoughts. It gives us a chance to get outside



and breathe fresh air. Endurance sports almost require they be done outside. Participating in a sport allows us to continue playing into adulthood and old age. It gives us permission as adults to play. To me, nothing is more

fun than riding single track on a mountain bike. We revert to a bunch of kids out playing in the woods. Once we graduate from grade school, we no longer have recess, that is, unless we take up a lifelong sport. Our play is our recess.

The focus on a performance goal such as a race or major event keeps us exercising and training, not because we have to but because we want to. Training to compete in an event makes "working out" seem like play instead of work. We exercise and train because we want to.

"Workouts must seem more like play to be fun and help with adherence," said David Carpenter, a central Iowa endurance coach. "People's idea of play differ. For some, play is zone-five intervals. For others it's getting out on snowshoes with friends. And for others, sometimes it's competing in the weight room. Do what you love.

"The process has to be fun," continued Carpenter, "because the time training far outlasts the time competing."

Play to Live:

We play because we love to, but by doing so, our play gives back to us in a number of ways that we may not even intend or realize. Our play helps us live better, longer, healthier and more fulfilled lives. While we choose a sport to play for the fun, satisfaction and exhilaration, it provides a number of other benefits for us as an unintended consequence. I did not get into bike racing as a teenager to get in shape, to avoid a heart attack or to maintain my weight. I did it for the excitement and thrill, but these other benefits were always there and are now more appreciated than they were originally. Fitness, for example, is a side benefit of getting in shape for a competitive event. We want to be in the best shape possible to perform as well as we can, but in the process we get in really good cardiovascular shape. Our heart, lungs, blood vessels, blood chemistry, muscle tone and mental sharpness are better as a result of our training. Our risk of succumbing to a diseases such as heart disease, diabetes and cancer are reduced as a result of our play. Our play improves our health and our lives.

Our play helps us keep our weight in check. Endurance athletes tend not to be overweight because of the amount of time we exercise. If we compete, the incentive to maintain a healthy weight is magnified because we are motivated to be competitive. We look at our body as our engine and try to take care of it by feeding it the right amount of good food.

Not only does a playful attitude add years to our lives, it adds the joy of life to our years. If age is a state of mind, then we stave off old age if we keep play a part of our lives. This is not only because of the physical benefits of play but also from the mental, emotional and social benefits. We are as young as we feel, act and play. Watch the Senior Olympics sometime, or better yet, participate if you are 50 or older. There, you will see 70- and 80-year-olds playing, smiling and laughing while they are competing. When else do you see someone get excited about hitting a birthday with a zero in it than an athlete who is now the youngest person in his or her new age group? Our play gives us a reason to live and not fear getting older. Age isn't so much chronological as it is letting inactivity take its toll. By continuing to play, our clock ticks more slowly.



We often participate in our chosen sports because it is fun — we live to play — but along the way have discovered all the benefits it provides that help us have happier healthier lives. Or perhaps we took up a sport for the health benefits like losing some weight — we play to live — and ended up enjoying it and now participate because it is fun — living to play.

So which do we do? Live to play, or play to live? The answer is yes. We do both, at the same time.

Whether intentional or not, our play allows us to live better. It allows us to live healthier, longer, more enjoyable and fulfilled lives. We are never more alive than when we are playing. In Davis Phinney and Connie Carpenter's



book "Training For Cycling," they conclude with the following comments: "One marvelous aspect of cycling is that you are forced into the here and now...Children are fully engrossed in the moment when they play — so perhaps cycling is child's play. And for a few hours each day we become children — eager, energetic, and very much alive. This puts you in touch with yourself and is part of the appeal of simply 'going for a ride.' "

Live to play. Play to live.

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