

Why do I need a coach?

I know many athletes who have been successful and self-coached; however, it can be difficult for many people, especially people with busy schedules who do not have the time to plan out a training program or need feedback to correct some skill deficiency. I will put forth the following argument for hiring a coach.

First, let me point out the word “hire” at the end of the previous paragraph. USA Cycling firmly believes that coaches should be paid for their time and knowledge just as other professionals are paid. We do not expect to learn other tasks and skills for free, why should becoming a better cyclist or more fit be any different? People pay both personal trainers and golf instructors to assist them (often with the dream of turning their kid into the next Tiger Woods or Annika Sorenstam).

Many people opt to buy a book with a training plan in it. That can be done, however, the particular training plan used from the book will not be able take into account your uniqueness in terms of fitness background, currently abilities, time restraints, illness, injury or other disruptions. If you want to get ready for a specific event or type of event, the coach can assist you in developing a plan to meet those needs. As USA Cycling IT guru Bill Griffin says, “When that (the book plan) doesn’t work what will you do?” This is what keeps the book publishers in business since you go to the next book on the shelf such as *Tour de France Training for Dummies*.

A coach provides objective feedback on how the training is going. The coach offers adjustments to the training plan as an athlete progresses or has set backs which allows them to keep the athlete on track and to a plan. Are you going to be able to call the book author to help you tweak your training program? If so, you will probably need to pay him or her! I have a theory that sticking to a plan, as long as it is reasonable, will lead to improvement, but people are often too willing to abandon one plan for the most recent plan they see in a magazine or book.

In a review article¹ published by Asker Jeukendrup and James Martin in *Sports Medicine* (a peer reviewed scientific journal) in 2001, the authors analyzed studies in the scientific literature to examine how resources (time and money) should be spent to get the “biggest bang for the buck”. The authors specifically examined time trial (TT) improvements rather than mass start racing. Some of the results are described in a separate document..

Coaching is much more than merely writing a training plan. Coaching involves developing technical and race skills and strategies. A book can describe how to improve or develop a skill, but having an observer critique the skill and provide feedback is far easier than trying to do it yourself. As someone who tried to teach himself how to ride some technical sections of local trails, I wish I had had a coach during that time to save me some red blood cells and skin.

A coach helps the athlete set goals and select events for which the athlete is prepared. The coach also challenges the athlete to push the envelope a bit and also can work with the athlete to hold back so as not to injure the athlete. Athletes can often be overzealous. Sometimes the 40 year old weekend warrior tries to train like he did when he was 21 despite the extra years of inactivity; a coach can help ease the athlete back into fitness and training.

Sometimes just having someone who will hold you accountable, or at least feeling that way, is a prime motivator in sticking to the training plan.

¹ Jeukendrup, AE and Martin, J. Improving Cycling Performance: How Should We Spend Our Time and Money. *Sports Medicine*. 31(7): 559-569, 2001.

A coach can serve other roles including teaching the athlete the nuances and history of the sport as well as linking the athlete into the local cycling scene. A coach can assist you in becoming a racer or a better racer.

What should you expect to pay for coaching? Many coaches have tiered coaching services. Less expensive packages might mean less contact with the coach. The cost depends on numerous factors (this list is not meant to be exhaustive):

- **Your location.** As with anything else, some high cost living areas might mean higher cost for coaching.
- **Competition.** If there are more coaches in an area, you might get a better deal or be able to negotiate a better deal just as you can with many other services.
- **Your needs.** This is probably the biggest factor. If you need a lot of attention, expect to pay more per month. If you want a lot of contact with the coach, you might be expected to pay a premium.
- **Set up costs.** Many coaches charge an initial fee when you sign on as a client since there is a lot of work involved in gathering a training history, setting goals, doing initial assessments, etc.
- **Coach's knowledge.** This might be hard to distinguish and different coaches have different specialties or areas of interest.

So, the next time you are trying to figure out how you are going to train for the time trial against your local rival, consider hiring a coach to assist you with your training. However, do not expect the coach to work a miracle in 4 weeks! You will find most coaches require a minimum six month contract with their athletes in order to give both the athlete and coach time to “dial in” the training program for that specific athlete. It takes a lot of work on the coach's part to put together the correct training plan, constantly reviewing the athlete's data in order to make sure their body is responding appropriately to the physiological stresses being put on them. If a coach works you too hard, then you run into an possible overtraining issue. If they don't work you hard enough, you don't see the improvement you should. Coaching is as much of an art as it is a science, with the coach constantly walking a fine line of balance in order to get the most out of each of their athletes. This is really what you are paying them for and this is where the good coaches shine.

The next time you find yourself with some money to spend on cycling, consider hiring a coach. It could be an investment that reaps a larger reward than spending a thousand dollars to reduce your bike weight by 5 grams.

When selecting a coach, consider a USA Cycling licensed coach. USAC licensed coaches have completed home study and/or attended clinics and seminars to improve their knowledge and become better coaches. For an explanation of the different coaching certification levels and a list of USA Cycling licensed coaches, visit the Coaches area on the USA Cycling website.

Happy riding and better racing!

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