The Art of Tapering

You have put in the work for your big race. Now that the longest workouts are finished, the challenge is to taper down and reduce training in order to bring fitness to a perfect peak on race day. During a taper, physiological changes, such as increased blood volume, increased muscle glycogen storage, and enhanced tissue repair, occur that aid performance on race day. Although tapering for a sprint triathlon differs from tapering for an iron distance race, there are some basic principles that apply to the final weeks before key events.

When to begin?
The length of the taper depends on the length of the race and your fitness leading up to the taper. As a general rule, the longer the race, the longer the taper. I like to design tapers of 1 week for sprint distance, 2 weeks for a half iron distance, and 3 weeks for an iron distance event. Some sources suggest as little as a 2 day taper, while others promote no less than 10 days. Factors such as fitness leading into the taper, individual recovery characteristics, and relative tapering of the 3 sports come into play in further designing a triathlete's taper.

Decrease Volume
A critical aspect of the taper is reducing volume by steps. A good formula suggested by tri guru Joe Friel is to decrease volume about 20% each week for a 3 week taper. For a 2 week taper, reduce volume about 30% each week. For a week to ten day taper, reduce volume about 50%.

Maintain Frequency
In reducing volume, cut back on the total number of training hours per week rather than the number of weekly workouts. You want to continue to swim, bike, and run frequently but in lesser amounts so that you do not lose the "feel" of the sports. The goal is for your neuromuscular system to stay sharp in performing all 3 sports while allowing rejuvenation to occur.

Maintain Intensity
Resist the urge to just "go easy" during your taper period. Intensity is a key factor in retaining training induced adaptations during periods of reduced activity. Studies have shown that eliminating intensity leads to lesser performances when compared to continuing with intensity training. Of course, "intensity" is different for a sprint triathlon versus an iron distance event, so stick with race specific intensity. The goal is to stimulate the energy systems you will be using during your goal event with intervals at race specific intensity. You are not doing intervals to gain fitness at this point, but rather to "prime the pump" for full readiness on race day.

Individual Differences and Relative Swim, Bike, and Run Tapering

An athlete with a greater fitness base may taper longer than an athlete with a lesser base. If an athlete has not trained enough to stress physiological systems, tapering is not

effective. In addition, because recovery times for swimming, biking, and running differ, the three sports may be tapered at different rates. Dr Phil Skiba presented a study at the American College of Sports Medicine Annual Meeting concluding that a triathlete's taper characteristics should be different for swimming, biking, and running. In particular, swim volume may be maintained with positive effects closer to race day than run volume; with biking volume falling somewhere in between.

Gremlins

During a taper, many athletes begin to feel little aches and pains they have never felt before. These "gremlins" appear out of thin air and cause mischief. You may suddenly feel a pain in an elbow or feel uncomfortable on your bike. In final analysis, most of these gremlins are imagined, and not real physical ailments.

A Final Note - Be Kind to Others

As training volume decreases, you may become increasingly anxious and irritable as race day approaches. Your pre-race jitters and irritability will likely be most noticeable to others. Try to lighten up and be kind to those around you. Remember that they have already put up with lot to get you to this point of your training, and you want them to cheer you through to the end of the race!