

To Base Train or Not to Base Train?

That seems to be the question. In the first training article I wrote for Cycling Update last December, I talked about how much intensity one should do during the off-season. I'm bringing this subject up again because there has been quite a discussion on the USA Cycling coaching forum I read. There appears to be two camps, one which believes the off-season (Nov-Feb) should be strictly easy, long base miles. Another group is arguing that if that's all a cyclist does, they will lose aerobic and anaerobic fitness and so they shouldn't be doing base miles but rather more intense training in the off-season. My impression is these two camps are victims of all-or-nothing thinking

Here's some background on base training. Base training refers to easy, long miles done to prepare the body for more rigorous training to come during the preseason and racing season. It's sometimes referred to as LSD training, Long Slow Distance, or more preferable, Long Steady Distance. Old school thinking tells us to do lots of LSD training during the off-season and preseason to build back endurance. There is a belief if you charge into intense training without first developing your base, then you can injure your muscles. I agree that cyclists new to the sport need to develop a good base of endurance miles before attempting more intense riding, perhaps as much as a whole season's worth. However, I believe it's a different story for competitive cyclists and triathletes. First, seasoned racers have many years of riding experience. Training, especially endurance, carries over the winter well and you can build on it from year to year. This is one reason endurance athletes tend to peak in their 30's. It takes a number of years to build to their peak. Competitive cyclists and triathletes are not going to lose all or even a majority of their endurance over the winter. Second, competitors now have very long racing seasons, starting in early March and possibly going into November. Therefore, they have shorter off-seasons and less time to lose fitness. Look at an Ironman athlete – if she does Hawaii, she is in peak shape in October. If she comes home and takes it easy for a month, she isn't going to lose a whole lot of fitness. The same is true for a cyclist who does cyclocross in the fall. It's quite possible cyclocross competitors will be at peak fitness when their season ends in November. For these athletes, going back 100% to long, slow miles in the off-season is unwarranted and actually detrimental.

If you do nothing but long easy miles, you will build endurance but you will lose aerobic (threshold) and anaerobic (VO2 max) fitness. Unlike endurance, these types of cardiovascular fitness are harder to obtain and are quicker to lose. Why subject yourself to no training at these more intense levels for two or more months in the winter? A strict diet of LSD training will cause you to lose aerobic and anaerobic fitness.

Here's my take: I believe base training is not an all-or-nothing deal. Cyclists/triathletes should do more base miles in the off-season and preseason and less as they get in to the heart of the competitive season. Once endurance is built, it is easily maintained during the competitive season with a long ride or race every week or two, and these long rides will be done with more intensity, such as in the tempo range. But I also believe we should continue to do some intense workouts throughout the winter, not enough to stay in peak shape, which is impossible to do, but enough so that our threshold power and VO2 max doesn't completely evaporate.

Here's something to keep in mind. More intense aerobic and anaerobic workouts improve all the

systems that LSD training does, with the exception of endurance. This is because when you are working out at or above your anaerobic threshold, you are still using all of your aerobic systems, but also supplementing with your anaerobic (lactate system). So you are still getting the benefits you get at sub-threshold. There is also some research evidence that doing short, hard intervals can increase endurance, probably because of the fact that you are making your body more efficient, both aerobically and anaerobically.

Be cautious when you hear people advocating only one way or another to train. The truth most likely lies somewhere in the middle.

To receive my new cycling training newsletter, you can sign up for it on my website, www.CyclesportCoaching.com or click [here](#).

Ride on -- David Ertl

David Ertl is a USA Cycling Level 1 (Elite) Coach and NSCA Certified Personal Trainer. He coaches individuals interested in improving on their current cycling ability, whatever level that may be. He also provides cycling training plans and ebooks at his website.

Coach@CyclesportCoaching.com
www.CyclesportCoaching.com