

The Seasonality of Training

We are lucky living here in Iowa. Not only do we have a nice trail network and a lot of miles of open county roads to ride, but we also have seasons. Boy do we have seasons! But seasons are a good thing for cyclists. It creates a natural annual rhythm to your riding and training. Can you imagine how boring it would be to live in a year-round warm climate where you could ride outside all year? Okay, maybe boring, but we'd all take it about January! But, we can take advantage of the seasons to build variety and variation into our training cycle. This article will discuss the concept of periodization as it pertains to an annual training cycle.

Periodization is concept where you train a certain way for a given period of time, and then change the training to force the body to continually adapt to different training stresses, or your body will become used to doing that type of riding and plateau there. In sports, periodization is used to build fitness by systematically increasing the workload on the athlete. In many sports, there is an annual periodization based on the competitive season. For example, football players have an off-season right after their competitive season (Jan-Feb), which may last a month or two. Then they get into base training again, and build intensity through the spring and summer and then transition to the competitive season in the fall. In cycling, the main riding season is the summer and for competitors, that's the peak season for racing, where fitness reaches its peak during mid to late summer.

So what does this have to do with the way you ride? Let me walk you through a 12 month cycle of training in Iowa, assuming you want to be in peak fitness for Ragbrai. We'll start with October, not only because that's what month it is right now, but because that marks the beginning of your 2009 training season. In October, the riding season is winding down, at least in terms of organized tours and races. However, there is still have a lot of nice riding weather so it's a great time to get out and ride just for the fun of it. If you have been following a structured training plan, now is the time to put that on the shelf and just get out and ride for the fun of it. Enjoy yourself and the weather. This is called the Transition period. This can last from one to two months. The purpose here is to take a break from hard riding or training and give yourself a mental break as well. It's your reward for a season of long, hard training rides.

Starting in November, you should not give up on training, rather you should shift your training indoors. Since nature gives us winter, take advantage of it and work on some areas neglected during the riding season, such as strength and flexibility. So November through February is a time to work on both upper body and leg strength using weights or even just using body weight exercises (e.g. lunges). It's also a time to get your indoor trainer dusted off. You should aim for at least two sessions per week on it. Don't make these long – they will drive you nuts, but you can get in a very good, aerobic workout in no more than 45 min per session. Also, if the weather allows, get out and ride outdoors as much as you can in the winter. A 30 min ride outside is almost always better than an hour indoors. You may also do spin classes which helps the time go by while getting a great workout in a group setting. Or even consider other forms of exercise during the winter: aerobics classes, kickboxing, yoga, pilates, ice skating, etc. The idea here is to keep your aerobic fitness by doing some form of exercise.

From March to April, it's time to start riding more outside and riding less indoors and tapering off on strength training. The focus should be on easy miles, getting your body acclimated to riding on the road again (indoor trainers just aren't the same). Work your way up to longer rides, rebuilding your endurance. As you get fitter, increase the intensity of your riding as well.

May thru summer is the time to hone your fitness. You will ride more, a lot more, and build mileage and intensity towards your goal, which is Ragbrai in this case. Your peak training mileage for the season will be in late June and early July. Once Ragbrai is over, keep riding to maintain your hard-earned fitness. Find other rides to keep you going.

So don't put your bike or training away for the year and let your fitness slide. Keep working out as the seasons change. The seasons simply give you some variety throughout the year and allow you the opportunity to work on fitness in different ways. So get going and start training for 2009!

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