

How to Beat the Old Man (Winter, that is.)

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Although the demands of our highly technological modern society have prevailed over our natural mammalian instincts, winter is supposed to be a time when we enter a modified period of hibernation. So as to protect ourselves from the harsh winter elements found in the northern climes, there is a tendency for us to want to sleep more, eat more and exercise less (I don't know about you, but I'm all for the sleeping part). And with the holidays beckoning, it's safe to say that we can easily create quite a nice layer of winter warmth without having to take a trip to the mall to buy a new coat, *if we so choose*. As endurance athletes, however, we choose to experience winter in an entirely different way. This choice, however virtuous it may be, is a difficult one to make and, perhaps more importantly, *to act upon*.

Winter is one of the most challenging times of the year for the endurance athlete – in particular for the cyclist or multi-sport athlete who needs to train on a bike. Not only are we faced with the temptations of the holiday season along with the cruelty of wind-chill and short days that minimize available outdoor hours on the bike, but we are also faced with the reality of the next racing season being just around the corner. For these reasons, we have to avoid hibernating and get on the bike.

At this point in the year (I am writing this article on December 23), the athlete should already be looking toward next season. In fact, for the endurance athlete in tune with his/her training, it already IS next season. After a well-earned rest and an honest assessment of the previous seasons' successes and failures, strengths and weaknesses – *in both training and racing*—we start to lay the foundation for the coming season by setting goals and beginning to work toward achieving such aims.

Depending on when your first race goals of the season fall on the calendar, the early season training period (December, January and February, roughly) should be geared toward the development, or deepening, of the cyclists' aerobic engine. There is a reason why some coaches call this the foundation or base period of training; it is the sturdy base upon which all of your fitness will rely and rest. Think about it this way: If you were to build a house, once you had the proper materials and a blueprint to work from, you wouldn't set out building the top floor first. You literally couldn't. You need to build floor by floor *from the ground up*. Training is the same as building a house. Your blueprint is your training plan and race schedule. Winter aerobic development is your groundbreaking and bottom floor.

For most of us, laying this foundation takes an incredible amount of self-control and discipline. In the winter, we are faced with a catch-22: When we have the opportunity to go outside, or if the weather is unseasonably warm, we want to push ourselves and go hard. This is especially the case if we're stir-crazy from indoor riding. When we have to be indoors on the trainer or rollers, we need to break up the ride and throw in some

variety to alleviate the ennui and cabin fever lest our brain turn to mush (see Mikael Hanson's *Tips for Riding Indoors* for some good ways of avoiding this nasty byproduct of indoor training). BUT, it is crucial that we avoid falling into the trap of doing too much too soon and becoming everybody's favorite "January Champion". In August, no one cares who won the state-line sprint or was first to the top of a climb on a ride in January or February. Remember, our training goal is *progression* toward our peak, not regression from it.

Speaking of indoor training, a few brief thoughts (just like my indoor sessions, brief); an hour on the trainer is sufficient *and* only ride inside if you have no other choice. Riding on the road is almost always better than slogging away on the trainer or rollers. Of course, if it's 20 degrees out, stay inside. If you can do an hour of riding outside and an hour inside, split it up and get your time in that way. And if you have never ridden rollers, I highly recommend getting a pair of high quality rollers and learning how to ride them. Not only do they provide a great workout and serve to dramatically improve your pedal stroke and bike handling skills, but they will also crack some of the indoor doldrums.

If you have not done so already, I would advise getting a pre-season lactate threshold or VO2 max test done to get the baseline for your training zones in order and use that information to structure your winter training. If you have a power meter, you can do some field tests outdoors or on your trainer to get your baseline for maximal steady state training. Watch your heart rate, *listen to your body* (Rate of Perceived Exertion) and if you have a power meter, stick to your wattage zones. Be strict about it. Invariably, your fitness will increase to the point where you can start giving it some stick come spring. While this training may feel easy at times, too easy in fact, this is where most of your fitness gains are made. Trust me, your patience will pay dividends. Without a sturdy endurance base, you might as well take up knitting. It is the cornerstone of a successful race season. This doesn't mean you have to stay away from the hills, for example, just climb them slower so that you can do MORE of them and gain strength that way rather than blowing yourself on one climb and being cooked for the next 3 days. And it goes without saying that rest and recovery are as important in the winter as they are in the warmer months when racing is in full swing.

Integral to any properly designed training program is a proper diet. I only want to mention one thing in regard to diet: If you are an athlete who needs to lose weight in order to improve in some aspect of racing next season, now is the time to lose that weight. The last thing you want to do is go into a caloric deficit *during* the season that will adversely affect your day-to-day recovery. If you need to lose it, lose it now (and up to the time when you start ramping up your training intensity). Here's a very personal example: I was 160-163 lbs when racing at the elite/pro level last year. Although, I was generally 5-7% body fat, I couldn't climb with the top guys in the big races, all of who were at least 10 pounds lighter than me. I had the hard work to do of losing muscle mass in my upper body. Over October and November, when my training volume was very low and intensity very light, I *carefully* dropped to 151 lbs and I am now climbing 2-5

miles/hour faster (depending on the grade) at the same power outputs as I was last year. I've still got some more to loose, but it's not much and I'm not racing until March. Significantly, when it comes to weight loss for already fit populations, be smart and consult with a nutritionist or registered dietician just as you would consult with a coach about your training program.

Now riding in the winter is not all about training in the right training zones. There is more involved, like appropriate clothing and equipment. You can ride down to some very cold temperatures if you are suitably attired (my cut-off used to be 25 degrees before I started running off to California for the winter months). If you come from a running background and are new to cycling, take heed of the following statement: *When you ride, not only are you battling the pure air temperature and the existing wind chill, but the wind chill that you create as well.* Proper layering is key to an enjoyable winter ride. At the same time, it is equally as important to not over-dress. Check the weather forecast; take note of the wind chill, and dress for how you think you will feel 10 minutes into the ride. You might feel a bit cool before your body warms up, but once you do, you're golden.

Here are some key items for winter layering that will keep you warm AND dry (not necessarily all to be worn at the same time. Common sense rules apply):

- Long or short sleeve base layer *with* wicking properties to keep you dry.
- Long Sleeve Jersey
- Thermal Jacket or Vest
- Wind Jacket or Vest
- Thermal Shorts w/Leg Warmers (many companies make thicker shorts for winter)
- Tights (w/chamois on their own or with shorts underneath if no chamois). I train in leg warmers in weather *below* 65 degrees. Once it dips below 65, my legs are covered.
- Warming balm or oil to cover the joints. Many brands are readily available for purchase through catalogs or at bike shops now, or you can make your own sauce as well.
- Rain Jacket (for those of you who won't be deterred by the elements)
- Booties or shoe covers (so, so, important)
- Winter socks
- Gloves (different conditions call for different gloves, have several thicknesses on hand...)
- Head band, hat, or balaclava (you may need to take some of the padding out of your helmet to get the right fit)
- Insulated water bottles. You need to hydrate in the winter, too (if you don't have insulated bottles, there are a few tricks that I use to keep my liquid from freezing...).

Of course, this is just a partial list of items that will make winter more bearable. For many of us, there are some homemade tricks to keep warm that work as well. Remember too, if there is any moisture on the ground or in the air, being dry is a necessary condition for warmth, so don't ignore waterproof items and don't fear the rain (fear the ice but not

the rain). Also, in the cold weather, your core will gather most of the heat to keep your body warm. Make sure that your extremities are covered. One of the biggest factors in cutting winter rides short are frozen feet and hands.

Winter is also the time – and perhaps the ONLY time – when you should be thinking about changing equipment and trying new things (like the new Look KEO pedals or even a new drink mix). Since you want your bike dialed in during race season, you want to make sure that your existing rig is in good shape. Go for a winter tune up and make any upgrades or changes earlier in the training calendar rather than later. Or, if you are getting a new bike for next season, buy it now. Get it fit properly and ride it through the winter so your body is one with the machine come race day. And don't be afraid to slap on some heavy winter tires, bombproof wheels, and fenders. Being relatively flat-tire free and having a dry bum are both virtues when the weather is cold. I'd rather be warm and dry on my ride than freeze the aforementioned bum off for the sake of high cycling fashion. Plus, if you choose the latter option, your ride is bound to be a lot shorter than if you are smart and gear up for the cold weather. Plus, if you opt for fancy wheels it's a near guarantee you'll wreck the bearings and the breaking surface on your nice set of carbon *race* wheels. I've seen what road salt can do to even the finest sealed cartridge bearings and trust me when I say that it isn't pretty.

One of the great things about winter, too, is that you don't have to be married to your road or triathlon rig. You can play around on the mountain or cyclocross bike. If you have a mountain or cross bike already, get on it. If not and you've got an old road bike hanging around, slap on some cantilever breaks, knobby tires and a few fenders and you've got a machine that will blissfully take you on trails and through the snow. Be inventive with your training. Take a friend of mine, for example: Although recently retired, he is one of the best pure climbers that this country has ever produced. He lives in Denver, Colorado. Before heading to Europe to compete in races like, oh, the Tour de France, he spent his winters training in the volatile weather of the Front Range of the Rockies. When it would snow, he'd pull out the cyclocross bike and go for a ride. For variety, he'd set out some cross-country skis and skate away. What did he take away from all of this unconventional winter training? The ascent record up Mont Ventoux in Provence, a Tour de France stage win, and other major results on the Division 1 European racing circuit. Not too shabby for a guy wintering in Colorado.

Bear in mind that this is a very *broad* overview of some of the things that will help you get through the winter and come out the other side fit, fresh, focused, and motivated to achieve your personal goals. Remember, if you are smart, resourceful, imaginative and creative, then winter can be one of the most enjoyable times of the year to train.