

Stripped Down

Written by Kraig Willett

Sunday, 15 October 2006 01:00 - Last Updated Tuesday, 23 February 2010 04:01

I've been racin' bikes competitively since 1991 – during that time, I've tried lots of crap when it comes to training and performance. For example, I've used a sledgehammer (25+hrs a week) - I've limited my HR below a certain level "building my base" and laying a foundation for the "hard stuff" to come. I've done 3 wks on 1wk off – 3 days on 1 day off. Macrocycles, microcycles – dun that!

I've done vo2's before threshold - threshold before vo2's. I've periodized, reverse-periodized, rubbed my lucky charms on a necklace around my neck while chanting...stretched, lifted weights, done high cadence intervals, vo2's in the winter, low cadence intervals, SE, 2x20, 4x20, 6x4 min VO2's. I've used high tech fuel and energy replacements, lived on beans and rice for a few months, scarfed down toasterettes (too cheap to buy Pop-tarts!) - blah blah blah - lived, breathed, ate bike racin'. In other words, I've tried lots of stuff!

Interestingly, I thought I'd reached my genetic potential as a cat 1 bike racer back in the day when I used all the tried and true methods currently discussed on the internet, or laid out historically in popular books, and in the scientific literature...

Since gettin' a powermeter, radically changing my perspective on what actually drives performance, and thinking critically about a lot of the different, complicated, old and new crap out there in regards to training and performance, I've basically thrown it all out for now and decided to keep things simple. Essentially, I've stripped down my training to the bare bones in an attempt to gain insight on what is truly responsible for my performance. The original thinking in this continual n=1 training experiment, was, that if you strip out all the unnecessary junk, the only thing that one is left with is what actually drives performance. With the stripped down approach, there is no guessing or estimating, or relying on unnecessary assumptions to justify what one "believes" to be responsible for things. When there is only three to five hours of exercise a week, it becomes pretty obvious what is driving performance...

This concept of minimizing training is kind of like the challenge of instrumenting a mechanical system with sensors – one seeks to have a high signal to noise ratio in both cases, since that will mean more conclusive data. In my current particular training style case, I have almost no noise to contaminate the very weak signal that might be produced by any kind of prescribed training.

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As a result of my performance paradigm shift (where I've decided to focus on "going hard and resting hard"), I've re-discovered what I now believe to be the true [base](#) of performance and continue to seek out the most efficient ways to build my

[aerobic engine](#)

. Keeping things simple like this, I've gotten myself to a place I've never thought possible in terms of going fast on a bike - and I've done it with about 20% of the time I used to invest back in the day when I

[thought I was going to be a pro bike racer](#)

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Results?

Ya know, I don't have a real big motor, and I'm carrying a few extra kg's these days, so I don't win bike races (never did, really, even back in the day!) - for me, at this point in my life, performance is all relative and I'm having fun enjoying the process, learning along the way, and yes, going faster than I've ever gone before.

Despite my meager engine, and keeping with the internalized relative performance metric, I've recently managed to set lifetime bests at a local 20k distance TT I've focused on... I did this for two years in a row (simultaneously setting PR TT bike power numbers for the duration). I also had fun while taking 15 minutes or so out of my overall half-ironman time, despite swimming slower in my second attempt at the distance (I don't do just short bike ridin' TT's! :-)... Interestingly, I've managed to do this on approximately 3-5 hours of bike ridin' per week for the last couple years (longest week was 6h35m). I reckon I'm as powerful (or more so!) in my current areas of focus as I've ever been in my 15+ years of competitive bike racin'.

How

Here's the simple, "secret", recipe that has helped me focus my efforts over the past couple years (thanks Kirk!)

1. raise the left
2. fill the right
3. scatter the plot
4. run what you brung

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5. have fun

Raise the Left

If you want to improve your bike ridin' power, you've gotta go hard (while being mindful of also resting hard!). I think this has always been true, even when I was training with a sledgehammer. 10 years ago, I was just too naïve, inexperienced, and didn't have the right tools to realize what was really driving my performance back then. With a power meter (and some guidance from a skilled, experienced bike racer whose overall goal was to teach me to be my own training advisor) it became clear pretty quickly to me that during my 25+hr weeks back in the day, that I was wasting lots of time doing unproductive work, and generating unnecessary long-term fatigue that adversely affected my performance. In my experience, there is just no reason to be carrying 6 weeks of fatigue – it only serves to diminish performance. But hey, it's impressive to talk on the internet and to your buddies about how much training volume you've been doing lately, isn't it?

Personally, I've found that goin' hard is simply a way of describing the intensity which forces aerobic adaptations. I take the position that if an effort doesn't have a significant anaerobic contribution (i.e, goin' into the red zone), you really aren't efficiently forcing the body to adapt or maintain that adaptation. For me, I've pretty much narrowed down my goin' hard cut-off point to be 95% of my maximal 20-ish minute power. For reference, my 20MP to 60MP ratio is typically in the 1.10 to 1.15 range.

Identifying this goin' hard cut off point has simplified my training from a conceptual standpoint and also from a practical perspective. It's pretty darn easy for my caveman brain to schedule in two or three rides a week that get me 10-15 minutes above 95% of my 20MP during each ride. Why do I try to get 10-15 minutes per ride 3 times a week? Well, I've found that if I don't spend at least 30-40 minutes a week above 95% of my 20MP, I start to lose fitness (as documented by a 20MP, or longer duration, maximal effort field test).

A case in point regarding this 30-40 minutes above 95% of 20MP threshold, that was eye-opening to me at least, is my recent training – I am still riding the same number of hours a week as I generally do, but at “tempo” average power for the ride. These rides also contain significant chunks of time around my 60MP. As a result of this style of ride, I don't wind up getting much time above my goin' hard cutoff, and as a result, my 20MP is suffering. I am getting better at burning kilojoules though!

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In short, raising the left is all about going hard enough in order to stimulate or maintain aerobic adaptations. A stripped down approach to training facilitated the understanding of this concept for me and my caveman brain. The approach, when used in conjunction with a power meter made it simple to objectively quantify the idea that if you go too easy, well then, you really aren't being very efficient with your training time.

Here are a few of the core left raising rides that have been successful for me:

1. The 20MP:
2. The classic VO2:
3. The Chunk Ride:

Details of these rides can be found [here](#) .

(The fine print from Kraig: This is not training advice -it's simply my perspective. It's my opinion and is an accurate reflection of my current thinking. It does not necessarily reflect anyone else's opinion on the topic of training for bike racin'. Of course, I'm flexible enough in my personality to change my opinion based on new information. The experiment continues!)