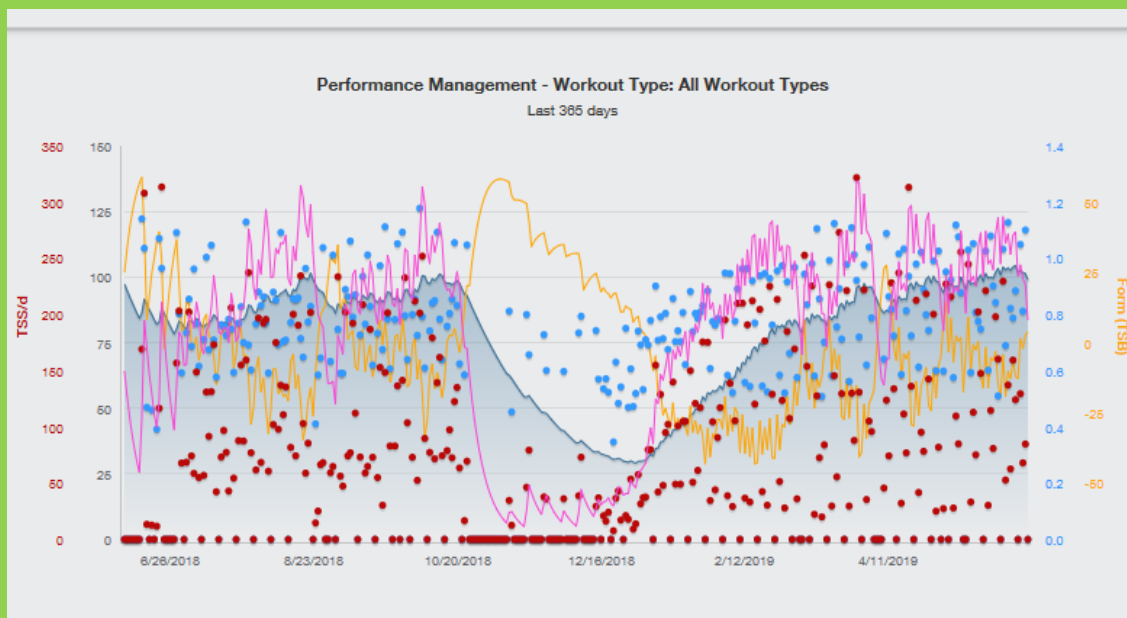


Defying perceptions of what it takes for an age-grouper to qualify for worlds.

-Trace Rogers, GroWings Coaching



For many triathletes, the ultimate goal is to qualify for the Ironman or 70.3 world championships. There also seems to be assumptions fuelled within the broader triathlon community that in order to get there, more is more. Tim is a 70.3 world championship qualifier. Perhaps after reading more about him, those perceptions will be challenged.

A little bit of background on Tim. Tim is currently ranked in the top 5% of his age group, worldwide. He competes in a highly competitive age -group category (ok, to be fair, that would describe most categories between Ages 30 – 60). Tim's average work week is around 50 hours per week and his average work commute about 1 hour per day. This means that out of a week of 168 hours, almost 33% of his time is dedicated to work. Add to that a fair amount of business travel and travel due to family obligations. Tim does not consume alcohol and his diet consists of a healthy balance of protein, fat, fruit and vegetables with very little processed food.

I have been coaching Tim for 5 years now. In that entire time, other than a few niggles, he has never been injured to the point of complete rest, he has had a total of 1 week of sickness that has stopped him from training, and he has never struggled with mental fatigue or motivation.

Above is a screenshot of Tim's Performance Management Chart on Training Peaks. For those not familiar with this, the PMC (as it is known) tracks the athletes progress in terms of combined training load (shown as the solid blue line and known as CTL), fatigue (tracking daily training load, shown as the pink line and known as ATL) and form (tracking recovery, shown as the orange line and known as TSB). In this case the graph reveals activity of the past 365 days.

What is immediately noticeable is that Tim is not a 24/7/365 kind of triathlete. We generally work towards a race goal and once that goal is achieved, other than Facebook banter, there is radio silence between us until the start of the next training block. How long the transition period lasts, depends on the next training goal. During this time, Tim occupies himself with family activities and other light training of his choice.

Next up, when Tim does get back into training, we add training volume and intensity gradually to ensure that he peaks in race week and not before. Volume as well as intensity are determined by both physical and emotional feedback. Therefore, how Tim's training progresses is specific to him. The only generic sessions on his training plan are the group swim sessions which are given only when appropriate.

Yes, Tim has a full day of recovery. Every week. As I said earlier, in 5 years, there have been no major interruptions to times' training brought on by injury, sickness or fatigue (go figure...).

Tim's average training week consists of about 9.5 hours split up over Swim/Bike/Run and Strength. That's all. I can imagine that at this point many experts reading this are gasping or shaking their heads. Who cares as long as the results are being achieved and Tim remains a happy and motivated athlete?

Before we go further, we need to look at what "fitness" is. The definition of fitness as per Wikipedia: Physical fitness is a state of health and well-being and, more specifically, the ability to perform aspects of sports, occupations and daily activities. Physical fitness is generally achieved through proper nutrition, moderate-vigorous physical exercise, and sufficient rest.

If you can agree with this definition, then it is easier to make sense as to why Tim has been so successful. Commonly, triathletes focus on training load (a combination of volume and intensity), many focus on nutrition but proper recovery is largely overlooked and, in some cases, trivialised or even disregarded completely. I have witnessed athletes favouring high training volumes whilst working in full-time jobs come apart before race day far too often.

The reality is simple. As an age-grouper, you do not have the luxury of training, eating correctly and resting for a living. Your family responsibilities cannot be put on hold whilst you prepare for a race and your race is probably of no priority to your employer whatsoever. The key to achieving optimal race fitness lies in balancing all aspects of your life. An athlete can train as much as they like but I would bet my life on it that come race day, if they have not had a happy domestic life, have been feeling the pressure at work and have put all of this ahead of rest, they will not achieve the desired result.

Secondly, train smart and you won't need to train as hard. With each season of triathlon, comes experience as well as training mileage. Learn from it, capitalise on it. Perhaps in the first two seasons of racing – volume took priority over intensity but ask yourself, is this the same priority in season three and four. Would spending 4 hours in a pool to shave off 5 seconds/100m on the swim be time well spent or would focusing on improving cycling efficiency and/or getting an additional hours' sleep per night give you more bang for your buck?

I do not dispute the fact that what works well for one athlete may not with another however I do believe that smarter over harder will win the race and that giving recovery as much priority as training will yield greater fitness gains than an extra 100km bike ride or a 15 km run. "A candle that burns twice as bright, lasts half as long."