But, as I can't speak directly to you, I'll do my best from the clues I have. Let's assume when you were a 'weekend' triathlete, you didn't train much. And when you moved up from sprint to standard-(Olympic) distance racing, you increased your training volume, increasing your overall mileage on the bike and run, and yardage in the pool. It stands to reason that increasing your training mileage means you began training more consistently. Regular, consistent training is key in improving in triathlon. This higher volume, consistent training helped make you stronger and faster on the bike and in the water. The mystery here is to figure out why your run got slower.

Which of the three sports do you have the most experience in?

The discipline you're most experienced in can be hard to improve after a certain point. If you're already proficient in an event, improvements come in smaller increments. And if you are completely new to a sport, you can make big advances quickly. This is often the case in the swim, where many triathletes make great advances simply by learning technique and swimming a lot.

Did you increase volume equally for each discipline?

Many triathletes love the bike, so spend most of their training time on the bike. I'm all for biking, but remember too much can slow down the run. A good coach helps you find just the right balance.

Are you doing the right speed work in the run?

If you are racing Olympic distance, the right speed work at the right time is a must. I find getting speed in the pool and on the bike is a little easier for athletes than really knowing how to up their run using speed. Ask a coach for help or attend a local running group's weekly speed sessions.

Do you train to run off the bike?

Some really good runners, who are new to triathlon, complain about their run getting slower. Specific bike-to-run or 'brick' workouts help athletes run well off the bike. I always remind my athletes there is a 'slow run' feel off the bike, as you've spent an hour or so riding faster than you can possibly run. As a result, those first steps off the bike will feel slow, even if you are going fast. Many athletes try to go even faster and end up having to slow down more and more. Stay within yourself for the first mile of the 10k, look at your split and adjust from there.

Also check you're not pushing too big a gear on the bike. If your rpm is too low, you may be loading up your legs – tiring them out too much for the run. Ideally, have your rpms be between 90-100 on the bike. Anything lower can make it hard to run well.

Body matters
STRETCHING

Q I've been into triathlon for a couple of years now, starting with sprints and this year I'm moving up to Olympic distance. My question is on recovery. Can you please give me a good warm down and stretch plan for running. I'm trying to improve my running, but seem to be hampered for days after a quality run session with stiff hamstrings and sore calves. At the moment I stretch each leg muscle after a run session for 20 seconds each, is this enough?

Neil Caitens, via email

Tim Pigott
Sports physio

Recovery is the name of the game, as it's the periods between training sessions where your body makes the adaptations to improve that can be tricky to manage if you are trying to fit in two or three sessions of each discipline in each week. Consequently, a lot of research into recovery has been carried out by sports governing bodies and national institutes of sports to give their athletes that competitive advantage.

Before you look at fancy recovery techniques and clothing, the basics must be nailed down. Make sure you're following a structured training plan so you avoid doing consecutive hard days, and those quality run sessions aren't being done on tired legs. How 'clean' is your diet? And are you getting enough proteins to rebuild your muscles? Link this in to your training; are you adequately fuelled up before your run sessions with simple carbohydrates? Then, in the 15-minute window make sure you are taking on a mix of carbohydrate and protein and rehydrating yourself (this can be simply with a glass of milk and some fruit). In the following in 30-60-minute window, make sure you're taking on some proper food consisting of complex carbohydrates and proteins.

Hold stretches for around 30 seconds to maximise recovery benefits

Sleep is the other crucial element of recovery that you need. On average, eight hours appears to be most effective, so make sure you're getting enough!

Following your run, the post workout warm down should be 10-15 minutes of active recovery consisting of sub-maximal training/low-grade exercise, ideally on an exercise bike or turbo, turning your legs over at 60-80rpm, keeping your heart rate at around 50% of the level it was during the exercise period. Alternatively, a light jog can also be effective. Interestingly, the uptake of carbohydrates and proteins back into the muscles in that 15-minute window is more effective if done during active recovery than at rest. Then do a light stretch of all the major muscle groups, holding each stretch for around 30 seconds, repeating this three to four times for the muscle groups that need most attention. Stretching needs to be specific to your body type and tissue state – if some areas aren't tight you don't need to spend as long on them, and vice-versa. Then have your shower, finishing with three to four rounds of 30-second cold-water blasts, and two minutes of hot water. If you have them, now is the time to put on your compression clothing for up to 12 hours, or until the next training session. Then spend another few minutes stretching the muscles you found most tight in the immediate post workout stretch, again, holding each stretch for around 30 seconds.

However, the one caveat with this is that although it will help reduce stress from the training session, the latest research says use these techniques sparingly during training periods as you want the stress to drive the adaptations that make you stronger and faster. So a careful balance needs to be struck between training stress and any techniques to reduce the training stress on the tissues.

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