

PRT OFFSEASON COACHING

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How to Use Your Offseason

For many amateur athletes, the term “offseason” means they forget about their bikes, or simply noodle around a couple of times a month with friends. Beer, taco, and chocolate consumption increases, and overall activity wanes as the days grow shorter. Many athletes take several weeks or months completely off after six or nine months of working hard – sometimes too hard, leading to burnout.

Almost everyone can benefit from a break. Athletes with goals to improve on race performances, change body composition, or simply stick with the ‘A’ group on the weekend should take a modest break completely away from riding – the offseason is an ideal time to run if you enjoy running, hike with the kids, swim, or whatever activity you enjoy. It’s not the time to become a complete couch potato and let your fitness decline to the point where you’re back to square one – you’ve worked too hard for that!

Here’s what I recommend:

- **Take two to four weeks completely away from the bike** to refresh your desire to ride. Wait until you miss riding, then wait another few days.
- **Stay active** – run, swim, hike, even go for easy rides.
- **Review your 2020** – did you improve? What do you think worked? What would you like to improve for next year? Be specific. (For example, I have not sprinted well for years since an accident almost a decade ago. For 2021, I plan to overcome that and regain and compete my sprint again.)
- **Think about goal events.** Do you just want to race crits this year? Would you like to try your hand at a road race? Maybe a 5-hour century is your goal.
- **Incorporate strength training.** Many athletes think they have to lift heavy to make good use of strength training; others worry that they’ll gain weight to carry around the bike. For most endurance athletes, a simple progressive set of bodyweight or kettlebell squats, planks, pushups, and pullups would be beneficial and make them a better, more durable athlete. More on this soon.

Make good use of your downtime and you’ll come back mentally refreshed, physically recovered, and ready to ride. Progress is achieved with consistency, and productive time off can ensure you avoid burnout without dumping all your hard-earned gains.

A word of caution about off-season running: your aerobic fitness from the bike will tempt you to run faster and further than your legs can handle. Approach with great caution; I recommend starting with “embarrassingly slow” pace and relatively low duration to avoid days of muscle soreness afterwards!

The Most Important Ride

Everyone wants to know: what's the best way to get faster with the time I have? The vast majority of riders are time-limited. We read and hear about how professionals train and think, "if it works for them, it'll work for me!" The reality is, professionals often dedicate 20+ hours per week to their craft. They spend a lot of time in the saddle, and most of it is spent riding very slowly... well, slow for them anyway.

There are a lot of ways that the average rider can accomplish great things without 20+ hours in the saddle – no one way is "The Way" (Sorry, Mandelorian). If you've read or heard about various training methodologies, you've no doubt heard about Polarized training, Sweet Spot training, VO2Max, HIIT, high volume, and dozens of other buzzwords that are out there.

There is one thing all of those training methods have in common: for athletes to progress in aerobic sports like cycling, they need to build aerobic endurance. Every cycling discipline (with the exception of BMX and track sprinting) is primarily and largely aerobic. Anything greater than 90 seconds in duration will place a large demand on your aerobic energy system, so **it is critical that you build your aerobic capacity. And there is one "best way" to do that: The Long Ride.**

What makes a proper "Long Ride"? First off, ignore mileage. Mileage is a vanity statistic that is relatively meaningless. Focus instead on consistent time spent pedaling the bike forward at a moderate pace. Sure, your Strava ride time might be 4 hours, but if most of that time was spent in someone's draft pedaling at less than half your functional capability, you coasted for 30% of it and you left your time running at stop lights and rest stops, the reality is you pedaled much less than that. **A properly executed long ride is one where you are challenged by the length of time you spent pedaling, not how hard you pedaled.**

The duration may vary based on your experience and goals. **You should build your long "base" rides to be at least as long as your goal event, and no shorter than 2 hours in any case.** Most "A" level riders will see tremendous aerobic benefits from getting up to 4 hours or more.

A properly executed long ride is done at a "conversational" rate of perceived exertion (4 out of 10) – you're breathing at an increased rate, but not so hard that you can't complete a sentence without gasping. For those with heart rate monitors, you're aiming for something about 65%-75% of your Max HR (e.g. I do my aerobic long rides at 130-145bpm with a max HR of 191). For those training with power, I advocate monitoring HR alongside power. When your HR starts to stray high at the same aerobic power level, you're either cooked or you're going too hard. But if power is your thing, you should aim to keep power at 65-75% of your functional threshold (more on this later!), and limit surges at or above threshold to only when necessary, even on climbs.

So how do you best put this into practice? Here's my breakdown:

- **OK:** Get out with your friends and ride a long conversation pace ride, including stops, stoplights, water, coffee, nature breaks. Take turns at the front but keep the effort at the levels discussed above. This is nowhere near as effective as...
- **BETTER:** Get out on your own or with a partner. No drafting – if you need to ride single file, get six bike lengths or more apart. Do your own work. Pedal on the descents. Aim for zero “coasting” time and really limit your stops to only what's necessary. Keep the effort level as discussed above. Don't worry about speed on climbs; keep your effort consistent.
- **BEST:** Embrace the trainer. There's no more time efficient way to build your engine – no traffic, no stoplights, no hills. Jump on the trainer, set up erg mode if you've got a smart trainer or ride your trainer with power/HR as discussed above. Set out your bottles and nutrition out when you start. Only stop if you absolutely need to. Build your duration pedaling straight through.

I know that most people don't like sitting on the trainer for long periods. There's nothing wrong with the long ride outdoors, just make the most of it. Limit your stops, avoid coasting if you can, keep the effort consistent. Build your duration, and it will pay off when you start to train harder!