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“He who fails to plan, plans to fail” - Proverb

Planning is the basis of all successful athletic endeavor but it is often overlooked or rushed by athletes. The most successful elite triathletes are, more often than not, also the best planners. At the end of each season, prior to beginning base training for the next season, they will sit down with their coach and decide on their plan for the coming season or seasons. This is a process that every athlete, no matter level of experience or ability, can and should go through. Below are a few helpful pointers on how to get the most out of the planning process:

Goal Setting:

Whether you admit to them or not we all have goals. Realistic goal setting is the first part of the planning process. Your goals can take the form of specific performance targets (race time or position) or a process (enjoying the swim in an open water race, hours of training achieved per week).

If you are an experienced athlete then you can probably set your own goals and do most of the planning yourself. If you are inexperienced or you are setting yourself a big new challenge (an Ironman in a specific time for example) it's good to get advice from someone who has been there and done that who can give you some insight into whether your goals are realistic and also how you might plan to achieve them.

Set yourself 2-3 competition goals only. Keep them simple and specific. Then set yourself 2-3 process goals for each discipline. These process goals should be aligned to your competition goals, as markers of your progression.

Some like to broadcast their goals to the world whilst others keep them closely guarded, known only to themselves. Whichever way you are, it's a good idea to write down your goals somewhere. This makes them real and tangible. Some people don't like doing this in case of failure, but you shouldn't be afraid to fail.

Strengths and Weaknesses:

Now you have your goals defined you need to start understanding how you are going to achieve them. By first identifying your personal Strengths and Weaknesses you can devise a plan that will maximize your time efficiency and give you every opportunity of success. A good place to start is by going through past race results.

For example:

Your goal is to complete an Olympic distance triathlon in under 2hr and 30min. You can swim around 30min and bike around 75min but your run normally takes you 55min. At present you swim 2x per week, bike 3x per week and run 2x per week. When you get to the final planning stage I would advise increasing the frequency of your running sessions so you swim and bike 2x per week each and run 3x per week. Your run is your weakness and more time spent working on this will give you the best chance of achieving your goal.

Race Schedule:

A good race schedule is the next step in your planning process. Your race schedule should prepare you for your goal race or races and allow you to peak for them. Try to race two to three times before your goal race and use those preparation events to practice specific skills you will need in your main event/s. Try not to race too often though. You need to space your events so that you can get good blocks of training done between them.

Time and Training Available:

Now set out the total amount of time you have per week to train, and when that time is available. Maximize your time by looking at lunch hours and commutes as training opportunities.

Also look at what specific or group training sessions you have. Training with a coach or group is a great way to keep motivation high and get external input into your progress. Put all of this information into a spreadsheet.

Training Schedule:

Now you are ready to plan your weekly training schedule. Use all the information you have collected thus far - Goals, Strengths and Weaknesses, Race Schedule, Time and Training available - to put together a weekly routine for your training. Again use a spreadsheet to make sense of all the information you have.

Initially just keep it simple, inputting the days and times you will do each individual session so you end up with a weekly routine that works for you. Once you have your routine you can add the detail to each session, so you know what each one will broadly be made up of - Intensity, Duration, Location, with a group or alone etc. As a rule of thumb try not to have too many high intensity sessions back to back. Identify 2-3 key sessions each week and spread them out so that you have time to recover from them with easier sessions in between. Every 3-4 weeks throw in an easier week to allow yourself to recover properly and adapt to the training you have been doing, especially if you have been pushing yourself hard. Use your training device/s and software to monitor your progress and perform some testing every 4-5 weeks to make sure you are on track.

You should now have a specific and individualized training plan that is going to give you the best chance of achieving your goals. A good plan is never rigid so analyze and adjust as you go along. As you gain more experience you will learn what works and what doesn't work for you.

Good luck and enjoy.