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Smart Training

The 4 Key Strategies for Continued Improvement

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In the beginning ...

... there was you, an event, and no idea of how to train for it. This is how we all start, but we quickly learn how to get better.

You do a bit of training, and find to your surprise how well you perform and what events you are actually capable of doing.

You're surprised, you're pleased, it's intoxicating, it motivates you, and you think "If a bit of training gets me this far, then a bit more will make me really fabulous." And so it does.

Strategy one: "More is better"

You discover that the more you do, the better you go. You're at level one, the initial training strategy that most people adopt - the "more is better" formula. It's the Karate version of a White belt. This works fantastically for several years, you get significant performance improvements, and life is great.

Then after a while the performance increases don't come as easily as they used to for the time you put in. You slowly begin to hit a performance improvement brick wall.

You do more and more, for less and less. It's the law of diminishing returns. It gets really frustrating. You can't work out why things aren't improving. You might even get progressively more tired, your performance deteriorates, and you say to yourself "I know, I'll do MORE! That will get me out of the hole".

It usually takes about 2 years of dedicated effort to end up here. A lot of athletes continue to do more and more, and end up a long way down the overtraining road before they realise what they've done.

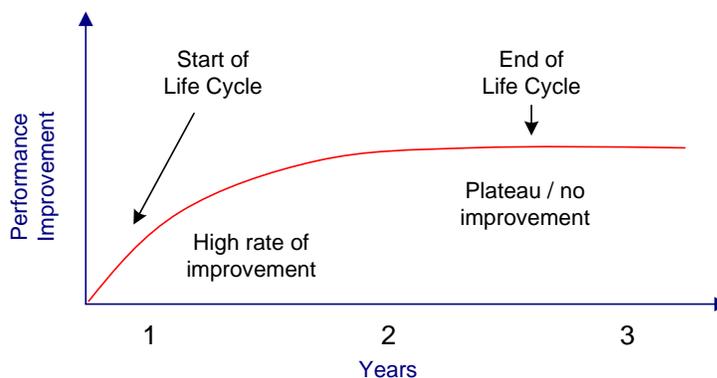
"The more you do, the better you go. Then after a while the performance increases don't come as easily as they used to."

At this point, some give up, some continue to bang their heads against the brick wall, and some say “What can I do differently?”

Overall, about 80% of the athletic population uses this strategy to improve.

Graph of Performance change for someone training on the “more is better” formula over a period of 3 years.

With no strategy change, performance improvement progressively stalls.



Strategy Two: “Long and Strong”

Some discover later in their sports careers that if you add more resistance to your training the big improvements come back again. The reason this works is based on the fact that in most events, most athletes muscles “go” before their lungs. If you ask a half marathoner, a marathoner, an Ironman, a Coast to Coaster, triathletes, mountain bikers and cyclists “What fails first in long distance events, lungs or legs?” most will say legs.

In the end you’re not gasping for breath, it’s just that the legs can’t keep pushing hard anymore. This is because the energy that powers the legs (glycogen) has only a limited supply before you need to stop, eat and recover, whereas the oxygen required to keep the lungs or cardiovascular system going is always available on all parts of the course. The supply is not limited.

So you’re less likely to have a problem here, particularly if you have been doing “more is better” for a while. The limiting factor, the bottle neck stopping performance, is rarely the cardiovascular system, it’s the muscular system that has to be strong to push hard for the whole event. So strength endurance becomes the preferred method of performance increase. It now provides the highest returns for time spent.

It doesn’t mean you only do strength endurance. You still do endurance and speed but you emphasise strength endurance in

“Strength endurance now provides the highest returns. You think the whole world should train like this.”

each build up at this stage in your sporting career (is career the right word? You know what I mean).

So for each of these phases I'm explaining what type of training you'd emphasise. Once again you've amplified your performance results for energy put in. At the two year mark, most athletes reach this conclusion and stage of training.

You've reached level two, the strength endurance phase - the "long and strong" formula. You've got a Yellow belt. Suddenly you're raving about the virtues of this. You're like a reformed smoker, you're evangelical about it. The whole world should train like this.

But sadly, after a while you hit that improvement brick wall again and you don't see much for your efforts in terms of continued improvement. You're back to being frustrated again.

About 10% of athletes are in this category, although a lot have missed this and moved straight to level 3.

Strategy Three: "Go Harder"

So now you reach level three, the intensity phase, the "go harder" formula.

You now start to learn that going fast is the new secret. It's the magic bullet. This is how you do it, the reformed smoker is back and raving that there is only one way to improve your sports performance. The subject is closed, it is not open to discussion. You know, you've been there, this is how it is, OK.

The type of training used here is obvious in it's title: Intensity. But the right intensities, the timing, and the number of sessions are crucial, otherwise you end up being someone who is injured, who has peaked too early and feels a little like burnt charcoal. Once again you're on the gravy train, you're a rockstar, it's all working. It takes 4 to 5 years to reach this point on average.

One of the major mistakes that most people make is to move straight from volume (more is better) to intensity (go harder) and miss the significance of strength endurance.

Moving straight from endurance to speed leaves out the crucial limiting factor, strength endurance. Speed will make you fast, but only for a short distance. It's like scaffolding: you can't build the third floor (speed), until you've built the second floor

"Going fast is the new secret. But the right intensities, the timing, and the number of sessions are crucial."

(strength endurance). If you build it in the wrong order, at some point it all comes tumbling down.

The second major mistake is that as some athletes move through their sporting career, others get left behind. They're stuck on a particular strategy and unable to modify their methods to move on. They can't understand why they are not improving. It worked the last time, so why not now?

Strategy Four: "Smart Training"

Then you finally reach the 4th and final phase. The smart training phase. This is the Black Belt.

You've done all the different types of training, so you can't find another type of training to emphasise, you've used them all up. But you can get more smart about what you do. You learn the skills of extracting the most out of your training, getting the most return for the time spent. Smart highly leveraged training.

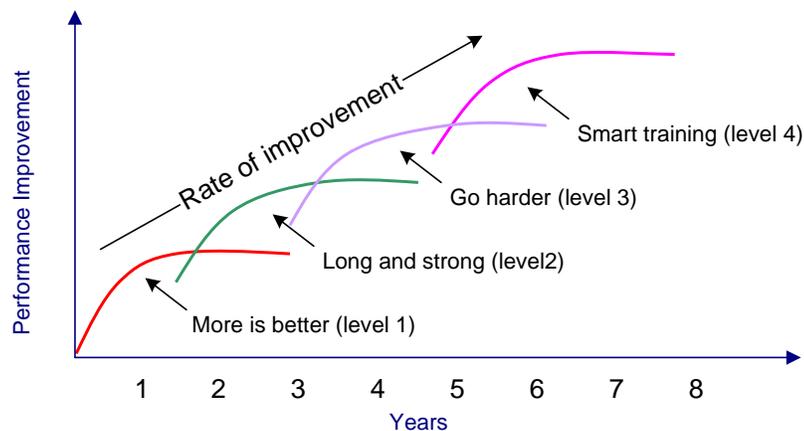
How do you do this training in the best, fastest and most effective way? Anyone can do lots of hard training, but only the best know where to concentrate most of their efforts, and know what to drop out because its not useful. In fact, in a nutshell, this is the secret to peak performance. It's possible to initiate the smart training earlier in conjunction with other formulas but this sequence is usually the order most people follow unaided.

I often get asked at Performance Lab what the secret to sports performance success is. The answer is it's not one secret - the secret keeps changing depending on what stage you're at.

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Training strategies used to increase performance, and how each is phased in over years just as the previous method loses it's effect.

This is known as "Beating the life cycle"



Summary

Improvement involves moving through a series of different training strategies over a period of years. Each is important at different times, and not using each strategy will hinder your long term potential.

The trick is to see when you need to change, and begin to move to the new strategy without getting bogged down or stuck on the old methods. You will know certain people that have been stuck in a particular strategy for years and years. It happens to us all at some time, but not everyone moves on.

Once you cease to get high returns for your effort, move on. The same situation occurs in business, what mastermind Charles Handy calls "Beating the Life Cycle".

So in summary, athletes get stuck in one or two of the strategies while you need all 4 to reach your maximum potential.

Maybe this will help you get out of a hole if you're in one. I hope it does.

Jon Ackland

Jon Ackland is an exercise consultant for Performance Lab who has been training athletes ranging from Novice to Elite for 15 years.

Jon is the author of a number of books including "Personal Best" and the best-selling "The Power to Perform", as well as "The Performance Log", "Precision Training" and "Spinning".

Jon created the training system and training plans for RowPro, the PC software for Indoor Rowing created by Digital Rowing Inc.