



The Benefits of Developing a Periodized Training Program

The goal of any training program is to become “better” in your sport (that is, more competitive) or more healthy in general. Why is it, then, that so many people experience little improvement or even a decrease in their performance or health? And why do some athletes acquire injuries at a higher rate and get sick more often? The answer is periodization — or, more accurately, the lack of it — that leads to decline, injury or illness.

Periodization is the process of breaking your training into specific cycles or phases in order to control the volume and intensity. By varying your training in phases, you control your training adaptations and fitness to achieve peak performance or better health on a more predictable basis. Many people don’t understand the concept of variability in your training. Try thinking of it this way — your body adapts to a specific training stress in 4 to 6 weeks. Therefore, you need to vary your training or you will arrive at a performance plateau.

It’s not uncommon for average athletes to train without any sense of what they need or want to accomplish. Setting specific goals is the key to incorporating a periodized training plan. It is by planning performance gains that you are able to accomplish them. Athletes who take the time to set performance goals will see few plateaus in their performance and fitness. In the long run, these athletes will experience a greater training adaptation and get better. Getting better is why you’re training in the first place.

Another common mistake is to obtain a generic training program from a Web site, magazine or book and follow it without individualizing it. We are all individuals and a “canned” training program will only accomplish a limited amount of training adaptation. To be successful, you must take the canned program and tweak it to fit your precise periodized model, physiology and goals.

The ultimate key to successfully implementing a training program is developing and committing to your plan. Don’t give up on your plan before it’s had a chance to work!

Developing Your Annual Plan:

It is crucial that you begin the training process by sitting down with a calendar and determining which events (races, tournaments, etc.) will be the focal points of your coming season. If you are not an athlete who does competitive events, then you should plan specific dates for achieving specific goals (such as a loss in weight, loss in percentage of fat, the ability to run a certain distance, etc.). Once your target dates are set, then you're ready to plan your training. Remember, the goal of training is to be "better" after a specific amount of time. Plan in reverse – from your goal dates backwards, assigning specific training phases to your program.

General Preparation/Base Building Phase (12 - 24 weeks):

This phase of training is arguably the most important aspect of a successful annual plan. This phase forms the foundation upon which all subsequent training is built. An effective base training phase prepares the athlete to achieve higher performance. It also is related to a decreased risk of injury. In the world of professional sports, this phase is also called the "train-to-train" phase because it is the work performed during the base phase that will allow the harder work to be done during spring training or mini-camps. The base phase is the time to focus on improving your overall physical capabilities and your skill efficiency. Training for efficiency means working on developing your skills at very low intensity levels. The other major aspect of this phase is the overall volume of training. The base phase will consist of the largest total amount of volume for the entire training year. This means you will do very low-intensity work; however, you will do many sets, reps, miles, hours, etc. In cycling terms, these are the long, slow days in the saddle.

Pre-Competition Phase (4 - 12 weeks):

This is the phase where you work on increasing your intensity. You will begin to do some interval training, tempo training, some short explosive training and maybe some actual speed work. If you are a runner, triathlete or cyclist, you may be racing during this phase, but the training emphasis is still primarily on long-term development. Remember, you have specific key dates ahead, and the goal is to achieve peak performance on those dates.

Specific Adaptation Building Phase (4 - 8 weeks):

This is the time for focusing on a few (or just one) specific adaptations needed for your key races. An example would be climbing in cycling. Houston is an area short on hills to climb on bicycles. Most of the big bike races in Texas are in places that have real hills. You must do specific phases of training to enhance your ability to ride up an incline. The same can go for physiological adaptations like jumping ability, power, speed, strength and muscular endurance. Every athlete will not need this phase. Think of these few weeks as a time to work on that specific trait you need to succeed in your competitive event. If you are not competing, this is a great time to work on an alternate goal. An example would be to work on running speed instead of just jogging around Memorial Park.

Peaking Phase (1 - 4 weeks):

Usually the shortest, this phase immediately precedes your biggest and most important events. Peaking is possible two or three times a year; however, allow an appropriate amount of recovery time between peaks. Depending upon your sport, the peaking phase will vary greatly. Some will do a very low volume of training with very high intensities (e.g., Olympic weight lifting). For those competing in long-course triathlons, the "peaking" phase is really a tapering phase, due to the very nature of training for an Ironman distance event.

In summary, using a periodized approach to your training will help prevent training plateaus. Training with a planned performance approach will take you to higher levels of performance, help minimize the occurrence of injuries and make your training more enjoyable overall.

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