

The Big Mistake

As the weather warms and we head into the main part of our training season, many triathletes start adding in the Tuesday night track sessions. While there can certainly be some benefits to be had by participating in these workouts, not the least of which is the opportunity to train with other athletes. We spend some much time training alone as triathletes that it is a really good mental break to train with other folks. However, this is only true if you avoid the “big mistake.”

There is a certain logic that creeps into athletes minds when they run track/interval sessions with other athletes. Here is how the logic goes: 1) I want to be a faster runner; 2) Bill or Mary is faster than me; therefore 3) I will run my intervals with Bill or Mary and I will get faster.

That is the “Big mistake.”

On the surface the logic seems to make sense. Of course, it does not answer the question of why don't Mary and Bill run faster too? Don't they want to go faster? Isn't Jeff faster than Bill and Mary and shouldn't Bill and Mary run with Jeff following that logic? Where would it end? Well I guess if we follow this logic to its natural conclusion we should all be training at the same paces as Ryan Hall.

More importantly, this logic ignores how the body actually responds to training. In a typical track/interval session, you might be assigned to perform 6 x 800 at 5k pace with 3 minutes rest between intervals. This type of session is designed to raise your VO2 max and 5k speed. We have found that that as long as you are performing at 90% of your VO2 max (5k speed), you are stimulating your VO2 max. However, once you hit 95% of your VO2 max, the stimulation does not increase. So, even though you are running an 800 faster than 90-95% of your VO2 max, you are not receiving any more benefit. In fact it is costing you much more in the terms of energy. Our goal in training is to do the least amount of training with the maximum benefit. Going too fast creates the opposite training situation. In fact VO2 training is about how much time you spend in the training zone, not how fast you are going (once you hit the 90% threshold). In essence, you are better off doing 6 repeats slightly slower than 5 repeats too fast.

Let me give you a real life example. Doug runs a 20:53 5k. Jennifer runs a 19:45 5k. They meet at the track to perform 6 x 800 at 5k pace. Doug should do the 800s between 3:33 (90% of VO2 pace) and 3:23 (95% of VO2 pace). Jennifer should do the 800s between 3:24 (90% of VO2 pace) and 3:15 (95% of VO2 pace). Jennifer decides to run her intervals at 3:15 and Doug, because he has always wanted to beat Jennifer, runs his 800s at the same pace. Doug is now performing his reps too hard (over 100%) and Jennifer performs hers correctly. What happened next? For Jennifer, nothing really and she continued doing the rest of her scheduled workouts the next day and throughout the week. For Doug however, he had to go too hard to keep up and do the workout. He had to take a rest day the next day to recover. In fact he ended up reducing his training load the rest of the week in an effort to recover from that workout. Basically, he ended up losing a week of training and risking a potential injury

A better solution? Since they had a little overlap in their pace, Doug could have performed at 95% of Vo2 (3:23) and Jennifer could have performed at 90% of Vo2 (3:24). If the workout seemed too slow or easy for Jennifer, she could have simply added one or two more repeats at the end of the workout. In this way they could have trained together, got the benefit of VO2 training, and not ended up going too hard risking burnout and injury.

In order to avoid this situation, you need to have a plan before you go to the track. The first step is to be honest about your current state of fitness. From there determine your proper training paces (The Daniels Running Formula or McMillan Pace calculator are good places to start) Determine your paces before you get to the track and stick to them. If the workout seems too easy, add an extra rep or two to the workout. If even that seems easy, then good news, you are raising your fitness to a new plateau and it is time to reassess your paces again.