

Should I train with a group?

This comes up all the time with the athletes I coach, and like many coaching issues, the simple answer is “it depends.” It depends on the sport, the athlete’s strengths and weaknesses and the athlete’s goals. For some, the social aspect is the overriding consideration. As triathletes we spend quite a bit of time training alone and getting together is a great part of what we do. It makes the training fun and sometimes the training is even secondary to the training effects. If so great, enjoy the group workouts. If however, performance is your overarching goal, then let’s explore this further.

Swimming. Without a doubt, the vast majority of triathletes will improve their swimming by attending a weekly Masters Swim session, especially those that do not have a swimming background. This is for two primary reasons. A triathlete without a swimming background will generally get some technique instruction during a Masters session. For most triathletes, poor swim technique holds you back. The second reason to attend, especially for triathletes from non swimming backgrounds is that it makes you *swim hard*, probably harder than you would on your own. For some reason, those without swim backgrounds are reluctant to really work hard if they swim only by themselves. However, it can be a drag to hear that alarm go off at 4:20 am....

Cycling. There are lots of group rides varying in intensity, distance and competitiveness around town. This also depends on the time of year, with winter time being easier consisting of more “base” miles. Generally winter group riding, if you don’t mind the cold, is a great way to stay on the bike and keep or build your base. The group dynamic really encourages athletes to get out and ride much more so than trying to ride by yourself for 2 hours on a cold windy winter morning (or sitting on your indoor trainer for endless hours). It is also a great way to learn bike handling skills and how to ride with more than one person. However, as you move closer to into your main training block, when your workouts need to become much more specific to your event, the usefulness of a group ride decreases depending on your event. *Basically, the longer your event, the less useful the group ride becomes.* Typically, a group ride has a variety of paces from all out 10-20 second sprints to super easy pedaling. For athletes that train for longer distances, Ironman and Half Ironman, you need to focus on maintaining long, steady uninterrupted efforts. You won’t get this in a typical group ride. If you train for Olympic distances group ride are more helpful and I advise mixing them in once or twice a month. If you train for sprints, a good hard group ride is a great way to get in your long bike each week.

Running. I will say right off that I am generally not a fan of group runs, with the “Tuesday night track session” being my least favorite of all. In fact, I think group running can sometimes do more harm than good. Running has the highest injury rate of the three sports and puts the most stress on your body. Therefore, the time, distance and speed of each running session is crucial. Run too short and too slow you waste your time and don’t gain fitness. Run too long, too far and/or too fast and your chance for injury shoots through the roof.

Weekend long runs. When you run with someone else, the chance that they have the same workout as you and will perform it at the same pace as you is pretty slim. When it is a long group run, no chance. Someone in the group is doing the wrong workout, hopefully not you. These runs are ok if **you** dictate the pace, distance and duration to the group. In essence, make everyone else do your workout. If not, you are doing someone else's workout and you are better off doing it on your own.

Tuesday Track workouts. Whereas there is a pretty good chance that you are doing the wrong workout if you are doing a group long run, I guarantee you are doing the wrong workout if you are doing a group track workout. Interval/track workouts are complicated affairs with many moving parts including purpose of the workout, distance, number of repetitions, recovery between sets, recovery between individual reps and the pace/speed of each repetition. A change in any of these components can drastically affect the nature of the workout. The odds that you can show up to a group track workout and have each one of these factors be exactly right for your fitness level and where you are in your current training cycle is pretty much zero. Generally what happens is that you do a workout assigned to your group and then you do that workout ***much too hard***. The problem is that you put in the effort of a hard workout, run the risks associated with a hard workout and need to spend valuable time recovering from that workout. However, you do all that work without the associated benefits because the workout is at the wrong pace, distance, number or recovery (or all of the above) for your fitness level, your goals and where you are in your training cycle. My advice is to skip the group track workout, do your own workout and meet the group for beers afterwards.