



Question- I just recently completed an Olympic distance triathlon. My swim and bike were fine, but my run was just horrible. My total time was 15 minutes slower than a race I did 2 weeks earlier on a harder course, all because of my poor run. What went wrong? Dave M.

Based on the information you gave me, I don't think lack of training caused the problem since your fitness would not change that much in two weeks. Assuming you are not totally burned out and overtrained, my guess is that nutrition may be the culprit here: ***you bonked.***

Race day nutrition is a very big component of performing at your best. In fact proper nutrition is critical to performing at your best. You need fuel to race every bit as much as a race car does. Not enough fuel and the race car runs out of gas. Too much fuel and the engine floods and stalls out. Nutrition is a complicated issue, getting more complicated as you compete in longer events. It involves much more than eating a couple gel packets on your bike.

Race Week

Race day nutrition actually begins during your taper heading into a race. Even though you are probably cutting back on your workouts, you should not be cutting back on your calories. You should however change your percentage mix of carbs, fat and protein starting 3-4 days before your race (don't wait until the night before to add carbs to your diet. This has a very limited effect on "carb loading"). Increase Carbs to 70% of your diet, and reduce fat and protein to 15%. Also begin carrying a water bottle with you and drinking constantly. You should urinate frequently and it should be clear.

Night Before

The night before the race eat foods that are high in carbs, that agree with you, that are easily digestible and low in fiber. Now is not the time to experiment with new and different types of food.

Morning of the Race

On the morning of the race eat a meal 2-3 hours before the event starts. This meal should consist of low glycemic foods. Again try to avoid meals high in fiber. Toast, oatmeal, bananas, yogurt and fruit are all standard examples. Do not eat anything in the final hour before your race is scheduled to begin other than drinking water.

10 minutes before Race Start

Ten minutes before the race is scheduled to start, drink an 8-12 ounce sports drink. Timing on this is critical. If you drink it too early before the start of the race, the drink will cause your blood sugar to spike and then fall rapidly, the exact opposite of what you want to happen. If you drink it too late, it may cause an upset stomach. Practice this timing during your peak phase to see what works best for you.

During the Race

Things have been relatively simple up until this point. Now they begin to get a bit more complicated. There are a few things to keep in mind when planning your race day nutrition: 1) you have only enough carbs stored in your body to last about 90 minutes; 2) you can only absorb approximately 400 calories (100 grams of carbs) per hour; and 3) your body absorbs carbs most efficiently with water in a solution that is 6-8% carbohydrate.

So what does this mean? Basically you need to take in the proper amount of carbs and water based on the period of time you are competing or working out. I have developed a carb and water calculator for my athletes to use for their workouts and races, but in very rough terms an athlete needs to consume 50-75 grams of carbs and 24 ounces of water per hour.

In Dave's case, I am going to assume that his Olympic race lasted three hours. Based on the formula I use, he needs to consume 150 grams of carbohydrates and 72 ounces of water over the entire triathlon. Obviously you can not eat and drink while swimming (although you should drink a sports drink 10 minutes before you start). Therefore most of your nutrition must begin on the bike.

I would mix two 24 ounce water bottles with 55 grams of carbs per bottle (I use the Gatorade mix). This gives you a 7.64% solution which your body can easily absorb. Start drinking within ten minutes of starting the bike. Make sure you spread out the consumption throughout the ride and make sure to drink it all. By the time you are done with the swim and the bike you will have consumed 131 grams of carbs and 60 ounces of water. That only leaves you needing to get 19 carbs and 12 ounces of water on the run (although you may want more, which is fine).

Drinking on the run is hard. First I would suggest practicing drinking on the run just like any other skill that you use in triathlon. It is hard to do. The best way to do it is slow down, grab a cup of sports drink, crush it slightly and drink. Stop and walk if you have to. Do not skip the water station, particularly during the first three miles. If you cannot drink and run you are better off ultimately to stop and drink. If you drink sports drinks during the first three miles you should be able to skip the aid stations during the last three as you finish strong.

Beware of Gel

I mostly use sports drinks to provide my carbs although many people like gel packets. You need to be careful with gel packets because they do not contain water. If you eat them by themselves without water they will just sit in your gut. In order to absorb the

carbs, your body needs to get water from somewhere if you do not provide it. In essence, your body will draw water from other parts of your body (where you need it) to your stomach to digest the carbs. Or if you eat too many at once they may cause some digestive tract distress. I recommend that you take at least 12 ounces of water (a sports drink does not count as water here) with each gel packet.

After the Race

While you may not feel like eating or drinking right after the race, you will basically have a 15-30 minute window to effectively restock your body with carbs. This will facilitate recovery tremendously. You should roughly aim to ingest 100 calories for every hour of your race in a ratio of 3:1, carbs to protein. In the case of the 3 hour Olympic distance race, that means ingesting 56 grams of carbs and 19 grams of protein. There are some excellent sports recovery drinks that perform this function extremely well.

Practice, Practice, Practice

Like all other triathlon skills, do not wait until race day to practice them. You may be surprised to find that what tastes good to you on an easy bike ride, you can not choke down at race intensity. Or maybe it gives you a stomach ache. Or maybe you need more carbs or water than I suggest above. Don't wait until race day to find out. Practice the skill of nutrition and you will avoid the bonk.

Good Luck out there!

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