

Ta Da! - A SUPER off season workout

The off season presents quite a few challenges for triathletes trying to get in work outs and increase their fitness. Weather and lack of daylight hours in our area is the biggest culprit, lack of time is always a problem too. It is tough to get your workouts in just to maintain your fitness, let alone try to increase your fitness. The sport that suffers the most is cycling.

Many triathletes keep their swimming up year round and even increase their focus in the off season. The same is true for running, with many triathletes targeting big races in the winter or early spring. But the same is definitely not true for cycling.

Personally, I am not a big fan of riding my bike on a trainer. I do all my rides on a Computrainer, which helps enormously, but I still really struggle to put in time and effort on the bike in the offseason. I know this is true for most triathletes. In fact, I don't think much causes more burnout or boredom or lack of enthusiasm than long slow bike rides on a trainer. Yuck.

So, how do we keep our fitness on the bike (or better yet improve it) while not spending hours sitting on the trainer? This is where Dr. Tabata comes in.

Dr. Tabata recruited highly trained subjects (elite level speed skaters) and had them perform the Tabata protocol (I will explain the protocol below) five times a week for six weeks. At the beginning and again at the end of the study period, Dr. Tabata measured the subjects' VO_2 max and their anaerobic capacity. To provide a basis for comparison, Dr. Tabata conducted a second experiment in which subjects (again highly trained) pedaled stationary bikes for one hour at a moderate intensity (70 percent of VO_2 max, basically what we tend to call "Zone 2") five days a week for six weeks. Their VO_2 max and anaerobic capacity were also measured before and after the intervention.

The results? The subjects which performed the Tabata protocol improved their VO_2 by 14% (compared to 9.5% in the control group, an almost 50% difference) and their anaerobic capacity by 28% (versus no change by the control group). But even better, the subjects performing the protocol improved their fitness in 83% less time (50 minutes versus 5 hours)!

Less time, more fitness. What is the catch? Four minutes of pure hell. The protocol itself is pretty simple. Warm up with easy spinning and a few pickups then hammer almost all out for 20 seconds, rest for 10 seconds then repeat up to 8 times. Cool down a few minutes with easy spinning then get off your bike. You are done. Voila, a 15-30 minute workout.

I think the best way to use the Tabata protocol is to use it as a substitute work out or a time saver. If you have something longer planned and just don't feel like it or if you just don't have the time to do a longer workout, crank out the Tabatas. Of course, you can incorporate them into your regular workout plan if you like, and then start cutting them back at the end of March or so when you can get outside and do some more race pace training.