

Three Wisemen—consider the local triathlon coaches

Many of us have a limited time to train seriously for a triathlon. You have significant commitments in your non-tri life, and would like to minimize the disruption on your family and work colleagues. Yet you do not just want to dog-it-in and seriously commit yourself improving in three sports. So why not investigate buying into a coach's advice, experience and support? The advice does not have to come out of California, be online by a big name coach or gleaned from a high gloss multi-sport magazine. I'd like to start a new saying, "There are heroes in your own homeland."

In the Fox Cities we have some very fine coaches who are caring, solid in knowledge and are outstanding athletes themselves. So I asked a few of them if they would share their coaching wisdom as we enter the NewYear. I like to call them the 'three wisemen.'

My first source was Jim Boldra from Neenah. Jim has been doing triathlons since 1984. As of this year he has completed 31 Ironmans.

I asked Jim was what are mistakes made and solutions to improve your swim? He was quick to answer, "Most people think 'Practice Makes Perfect', but the reality is 'Practice Makes Permanent'. I've seen many swimmers continue with the same flawed swim stroke for years and wonder why they don't improve. They think just swimming more will improve their efficiency, but a flawed swim stroke creates a muscle memory that can be very difficult to break.

To establish a quantitative way to see how efficiently you are swimming is called "Swimming Golf". Swimming Golf consists of swimming a series of 50 meter/yard swims, Count how many strokes it takes to swim a 50 and how many seconds it take to complete the 50. Then take the number of strokes and add it to the number of seconds to get a number called your swimming golf score. Like golf the object is to have the lowest score. I have students swim 5 x 50 with counting the strokes and seconds for each 50. Then we average the 5 scores to arrive at a baseline swimming golf score. Most swimmers will find that they can reduce the number of seconds by swimming harder, but then the number of strokes will increase. Or, they will try to really stretch out the glide to reduce the number of strokes but then the seconds will increase.

Coach Mike Pierson, physician who has numerous IM finishes, pointed out that when it comes to biking the common mistakes is working out without a plan and no idea what intensity a person is doing working out in. Mike explained, "My expertise is finding right individual training zones. To have the ability to ride fast either at longer distances you need to establish a proper base. You need to ride 4-5 hours minimum to improve, follow a training plan and know what intensity to exercise at."

Eddie Holzem, who at one time won many 10k's and went to the Olympic Trials, often prepares people getting ready for the Fox Cities Marathon. His observation is many runners run everything at or close to their goal race pace.

Eddie emphasized, “There needs to be different paces for different days. To gain strength you might run an 18-miler, but run this too fast and you breakdown physically and sometimes more important, mentally because of not having a good run.”

Eddie also added to a common mistake is many runners over-stride. They think reaching out farther in front of them to increase their stride length will make them faster. This type of longer stride will actually have the opposite effect resulting in a heavier heel strike. The pronounced heel strike causes decrease in momentum forward; it’s like putting on the brakes in your car. For longer distances it’s about raising your aerobic threshold. This is the body’s capacity to use its systems while using oxygen as fuel. Do workouts that raise your body’s ability to run fast without crossing the line into the anaerobic zone. One workout would be doing 20 minutes in length with recovery of 1 minute per mile covered. Keep these workouts limited to about 8%-12% of your total weekly mileage.

For Eddie, he believes the most overlooked aspect that runners often miss is improving their running form. “Think about it, every other major sports works on their form! Swimmers learn more efficient strokes; baseball players try to perfect their swing, as do golfers; the list goes on and on. Through this body awareness runners can increase efficiency and perhaps less injuries.

I found these guys very approachable and place their passion before their pocket book. They will sit down with anyone having specific questions, often do free clinics and spend much of their time being a rousing cheerleader for their students at many events. WE are fortunate to have these three wisemen, not afar, but right here in the valley.

So you have signed up for a race. You are excited and a little scared. You "know" that you have what it takes to finish, but want to get the. You need some advice to get you through your triathlon journey, and are thinking that a coach could be the way to go.

I have been on both sides of the athlete/coach relationship, and wanted to share some ideas on how to get the most out of your coach. Here are some key things to remember when considering a potential coaching relationship:

Trust

You will be trusting your entire season to another person. You should check the coach's credentials, experience and background. Ask for references and speak to current clients. Review sample workout plans, and discuss the coach's approach to building the season.

Goals

Communicate your goals for the year - help your coach place triathlon within the framework of your overall life situation. I have found the best results are achieved by having a limited number of quantitative as well as qualitative goals. Set the goals early in the season, and tailor the year towards achieving them.

Personality and Style

There are a lot of coaches out there, and many training philosophies. Different strategies work for different folks, and you should make sure that your coach's training style matches your needs. Particular things to watch for are the approach to intensity, volume and recovery. This is where the variation can be greatest, and will have the most significant impact on your performance (both positively and negatively).

The Plan

Many coaches offer different levels of service and price points. Make sure that you choose the plan that best fits your needs. If you are looking for frequent interaction, make sure that your coach will be happy with the level of assistance that you require. Agree expectations in advance - document what you need from your coach as well as what the coach needs from you.

Share of Mind

If you are paying for individual coaching, make sure you will get an adequate share of mind. Find out how many athletes are currently being coached. Discuss your coach's other commitments. Be sure that you are confident that your plan will get the focus it deserves. Once again, make your expectations clear in advance.

Over Communication

You are buying your coach's advice, experience and support. Ask a lot of questions. Understand what lies behind the yearly, monthly and weekly planning. You will become a better athlete if you understand the reasons behind each session. It is also your job to make sure that your coach understands how you are doing. Take advantage of every opportunity to update on your progress. You need to be totally honest. If you were so tired you couldn't get out of bed, make sure that message gets across. Be totally open and clear with what is happening. I think this is even more important in an on-line relationship because of the lack of visual feedback (tough to hide overtraining at the track, easy on the keyboard). Don't BS your coach! This is essential when you are tired, injured or not coping.

Belief

Once you have committed, paid your cash, built the season up... do the program. This sounds easy, but in fact, many people second guess their coach and adjust the plan. There should be a reason behind every workout. If you have doubts, ask questions until you are satisfied. You are paying for expert advice, so use it.

One Plan

Coaches should enhance the belief of an athlete in their ability to achieve their goals. The power of belief is one of

the most powerful forces in life. The best coaches, friends and training partners all share a unified belief in the ability of the athlete. People that do not serve this power of belief are best avoided. In my opinion, creating and enhancing the power of belief is the central role of the coach. It is also the most important attribute for success in life.

Structure

Due to their experience, coaches should have the ability to provide the athlete with a structured environment that will enable them to move safely and consistently towards their goals. Structure gives the athlete a feeling of control and confidence - thereby strengthening the power of belief as well as increasing the probability of success.

Knowledge

Coaches should be constantly seeking new training techniques and expanding their knowledge about all aspects of training, nutrition and recovery. The goal of every coach should be to become a mind-body master. Likewise, athletes that want to perform at the highest levels should make it a priority to understand the purpose of each session and to become mind/body masters in their own right. Gaining a clear understanding of a coach's philosophy will strengthen an athlete's power of belief.

Open

Coaches should be open to (and with) their athletes. Athletes should know that they will not be judged by their coaches. This builds trust between coach and athlete, increasing the effectiveness of the relationship.

Responsibility

Coaches must take full responsibility for the programs that they create. Likewise, athletes must take full responsibility for executing the coach's program to the best of their ability. When doubts arise, coach and athlete should review