



Power Training. Powerful Results! **PEAKS COACHING GROUP**

Name of Article: Using Pain To Your Advantage

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If bike racing is all about who can suffer the most then certainly asking your body to work beyond the point of comfort in order to stay with a lead group becomes a requirement. Like inanimate pistons of a car motor your legs must continue moving up and down pushing the pedals while your mind ignores the cry of your muscles to stop. Despite your heart pounding and moving up into your throat, your mind has to ignore its pleas and continue sending signals to keep working at that same level of effort. The mind is the key component to this and critical to any success you'll achieve. You can follow a training plan perfectly and prepare your body well, but if your mind hasn't been trained to manage the pain, failure is too much a possibility. This is simply about mental toughness. If you too easily give in to the pain and stop or want some strategies to use when you need to refuse to quit, read on.

As cyclists we all know the feelings that occur inside our bodies as the pace goes from moderate to more intense. When the workload becomes painful and the body wants to stop, we start searching within ourselves for the moment when we will give in. Some days we can stick it out a little longer than others, but eventually we reach the point where we make the decision to pull off and slow down. It feels good physically, but inside we know we need to be stronger and somehow should be able to hold on longer before easing up.

What I want you to consider is that instead of your mind being either on or off, or in other words instead of mindlessly following the group or maintaining an effort level to the point where our body looks to the mind for permission to stop, involve the brain much earlier. Do this by using the discomfort or pain as a trigger for several strategies.

In the book, "Sport Psychology for Cyclists" the authors suggest several strategies that I believe work well if you'll try them. Below I've paired them down into my own words, but do suggest you pick up a copy of the book and read it through. You might only find one or two that work well for you, but I strongly encourage you to experiment with them right now. Tempo work is a grueling grind of a workout. It tests not only your dedication to becoming stronger, but your desire and ability to suffer (though there is more intensity to follow). The following suggestions are ideal for testing and implementing during Tempo work. Do so and I'm sure you'll find them useful out on the road and helpful when it's time to hammer.

Strategy One: Breathing

In the book the authors have extensive descriptions and exercises for getting in touch with the flow of your breathing. While I will encourage you to read the book, here I'll keep it very simple; control your breathing to stay relaxed.

When we start dealing with discomfort and pain, we tense up. If you have tense muscles and posture then valuable energy is going to waste. It takes energy (precious ATP) to contract your muscles in every instance. If they are tight and tense then you are using it, but not in your legs. The ability to stay relaxed when it gets difficult is paramount.

Imagine yourself riding up a gentle grade at a moderate pace. Gradually the hill's grade increases from 2% to maybe 4%. You, being dedicated to your training, work to maintain the same pace. So if you were going 16 mph up the 2% grade, you're working to go 16 mph up the 4% section. Naturally your heart rate is moving up and your legs are loading up. You know you'll have to slow down eventually, but you want to see how long you can maintain this pace. The moment you start thinking about the discomfort is when you should start employing tactics to stay relaxed.

Focus on your breathing and upper body. Your arms and shoulders need to be loose and relaxed so you're not wasting energy being tense. Then work on controlling your breathing with full and paced breaths. Suck the air deep into your lower lungs and out again. The speed of your breaths will continue to rise, but you'll immediately find that some of the pain dissipates, either because you're no longer paying attention to your legs crying out or because you're suddenly getting more oxygen to them. Eventually you'll cross the ventilatory threshold, the point that your body can't exchange the carbon dioxide built up, and your nervous system will involuntarily cause you to pant. Up until that point you'll be able to control the air flow.

A phenomenon that occurs during difficult moments is that some individuals leave their body, so to speak. When the pain grows and the suffering begins, their mind tries to close itself off to the stimulus of suffering and simply send out the signals to the body to continue working. People who can do this might start focusing on something other than cycling or focusing on something up the road as a target. If you can learn to do this, it is another way to deal with the suffering. Focusing heavily on breathing will help you get started doing this.

Strategy Two: Power Words

Pain as a mental trigger to begin focusing on your breathing is great, but sometimes you need more. You might consider finding some power words to use. For instance, when the ride starts hammering and you realize you'll need some strength to stay up, to pull harder, to climb hard, etc., your mind can start focusing on a word that means something to you. "Smooth." "Power." "Attack." Are favorites of mine.

These words are tied to imagery of myself riding strong. When I am in the saddle and trying to maintain an effort level for a duration (particularly a Tempo interval), and I feel myself starting to falter, get tense, or pedal inefficiently, I'll start thinking: "Smooth Power." For me this triggers a reminder to focus on smooth even controlled breathing (that I've practiced), and for my legs to pedal in circles. I have a mental image of myself riding on a warm summer day down a flat road, in the saddle, and pushing the pedals hard, round and round. It is one of those moments on the bike when your heart rate is high and you should be suffering, but you're not. You're just moving fast, smoothly and powerfully. This image is something I try to mimic and force out of my body at that moment. It is triggered by the onset of some discomfort and thinking of the words, "Smooth Power." Search for your own trigger words and imagery.

Strategy Three: Visualization

I included some imagery in the last strategy that in my mind are inseparable. Having an image of yourself riding strongly gives your mind and body a picture to focus on when your body wants instead to give into fatigue. There is another image that I occasionally use when riding alone that is particularly helpful during a time trial.

Ignoring the argument as to whether or not we all have auras, let's pretend you do while on the bike. Imagining that you have an energy force around you, better yet one you can manipulate can be useful. During a time trial or other moment when you are alone pushing the wind and having to go hard imagine yourself reconfiguring your aura into a sharp knife piercing the air in front of you as you slip through it. I actually use a vision of the Princess Amidala's royal starship from *The Phantom Menace*. The highly

polished surface cheats it way through the air and its long pointed nose knifes through the wind with little effort.

Silly? Close your eyes and picture yourself riding out on an open road into a head wind. First imagine yourself configuring an energy aura around you into a large flat faced semi-truck plowing its way into the wind. The large frontal surface area is blasted by the oncoming air and has to fight and struggle its way through, taking up valuable energy.

Now picture an energy force around you moving into a shape similar to the starship's front and helping you slide through the wind. You move into an aero position while the starship pierces the air in front of you, clearing the oncoming wind to let you move through it with little effort.

Two possible ways you can visualize and use an energy source that surrounds you on the bike. If you're skeptical, try both and see what it feels like. I'm willing to bet you'll see a difference in how you feel. The real benefit is that having visualization as a tool can take your mind off the cries to stop from your body and allow you to continue working over and above what you normally might be able to do.

Conclusion

Spend some time thinking about these strategies before your next workout. What power words would energize you and what imagery would they trigger? In what way can you configure the energy around you to pierce the wind and let you slip through? Practice focusing on your breathing when the pace gets difficult and work on staying relaxed yet strong.

Experiment with these three strategies as you begin to struggle with longer intervals of Tempo or other types of efforts. Like anything, these take some practice and polishing to use effectively. The more you implement them, the quicker you'll know how to trigger and benefit from the help they will provide you when you need it most. If you want to do well in races or in life, you have to build some mental toughness. You have to learn to overcome the suffering that both bike riding and life will dish out.

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