Solving the Run Riddle

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"I had a solid swim, I tore it up on the bike, and then I fell apart on the run! What happened? How can I avoid this and have a strong run?" As triathlon coaches, we are approached with this question often. Athletes typically respond to this problem by running more or running harder, yet this rarely solves their problem. Better is to work smarter, not harder to solve your triathlon run riddle. Here are four ways to do just that: improve your swimming and cycling skills, improve your power, improve your running skills, and improve your overall health.

Improve Your Swimming And Cycling Skills

Poor swimming and cycling skills are often the cause of poor running performance in a triathlon. This can be difficult to grasp for those who still feel that triathlon is three different sports. In reality, we encounter a triathlon as one event, with three different locomotion patterns linked together. In any endurance event, how much energy we expend (physical and mental) during the first half of the race greatly affects our performance in the second half of the race. Consider running a marathon. If you were forced to run the first half with your hands tied behind your back and then the second half of the race with your hands free, this would affect your performance not only in the first half of the race. Yes, you would run more slowly over the first half of the course as a result of your impaired movement abilities, but even with your hands free, you would run with great difficulty over the second half of the course, because you would have just run over the first half of the course in a terribly inefficient manner, using up the majority of your stored energy. This is what happens to us when we complete the swim and bike portions of the race with great effort (and sometimes great speed), but with poor economy of motion from our underdeveloped swimming and cycling skills and therefore poor economy of movement.

If this could be the source of your running setbacks, each of the following could help you:

1. Make it a priority to patiently and systematically develop your ability to swim faster with less effort by learning to swim with good skill. The books, videos, and clinics of Terry Laughlin (www.totalimmersion.net for more information) are among the best sources of help in this area.

2. Make sure your bike fit allows to you pedal your bike with a high level of efficiency. Consider an expert bike fit by someone with experience fitting triathletes. For more information on what is involved in a comprehensive triathlon bike fitting, visit the website of a professional bike fitter. A great place to start is www.fitwerx.com, which is run by *Triathlete* Tech Support columnist Ian Buchanan.
3. Make it a priority to learn to pedal with greater efficiency. This means learning to apply force evenly throughout the entire pedal stroke. Drills such as various forms of isolated leg training and high cadence pedaling, as well as methods such as periodically riding a fixed gear bike can all help with pedaling efficiency.

Improve Your Power

All endurance forms of locomotion are the cyclic production of powerful movements. Running is no different. It is often a triathlete's lack of power that limits him/her on the run of a triathlon. For many triathletes, years of an overemphasis on distance training slowly deteriorate the neuromuscular system, diminishing their capacity to perform power-based motions. For many who run out of steam on the run, this is the case.

To improve your power, you should incorporate power-based exercises into your training scheme. Many athletes resistance train, but do so with slow motion, machine stabilized exercises. You will be much better served to perform exercises that meet the following criteria:

1. Are done free standing and unsupported by a machine or bench as we are when we are running;
2. Have a high balance component especially exercises performed with only one leg of support (as experienced in running) such as single-leg squats, step-up variations, lunge variations, and single-leg jumping, hopping, and bounding exercises; and
3. Involve motion that is as fast and explosive and utilizes the elastic and reactive properties of our muscles as we do when we run. Examples include all forms of skipping, hopping, and bounding activities as well as medicine ball throwing activities.

You can learn more about optimal power training and how to train for power by reviewing our June 2001 *Triathlete* article entitled "Power Gain".

Improve Your Run Skills

Running is not solely a metabolic activity as many are lead to believe. Like swimming and cycling, running has a larger mechanical aspect. A lot of people have problems in the run of a triathlon, not because they have not developed the

fitness to cover the distance, but because there running skills are poor and they waste tremendous amounts of energy as they run. If you have not worked to create optimal running skills, this could very well be your downfall.

Learning to run well is a fun process of reconnecting with how our bodies are designed to interact with the earth and with gravity. Doing so allows us to run in a way that takes advantage of instead of fighting, the natural forces of gravity, inertia, momentum, and the stored elastic energy in our muscles. For a thorough discussion of improving running technique and materials to help you, an excellent resource is the website of Dr. Nicholas Romonov (www.posetech.com).

Improve Your Overall Health

Many people crumble during the run not because they are a poor runner but because they are racing in a state of subpar overall health. Stated another way, they are usually chronically overstressed. A triathlon places a huge demand on the body to perform a very difficult task. To do so successfully requires us to draw upon every ounce of our physical and mental reserves. If you get to the start line of your big race, and your physical and mental reserve tanks area already half empty, it is going to be very hard for you to sustain a high level effort for the duration of the event. Usually, through strong willpower, a person in this state can "hold it together" (not a peak performance state) for much of the race, but at some point in the run, just kind of crumbles. This can be seen in DNF's as well as dramatically slowed paces on the run compared to the rest of the race. The problem here is not poor running fitness; it is poor overall health. The problem simply shows up on the run because it is the last segment of the demanding race.

If you think this is the cause of your poor running performances, you should make it a priority to work to improve your overall health and better manage the cumulative stressors in your life. Here are some areas to work on:

1. Rest. Successful training is based around the concept of systematically applying a training stress with alternating periods of rest. A major cause of poor health in triathletes is constant application of training stress without adequate rest. Make sure that your training plan is set up in a way that allows for the necessary rest.
2. Sleep. Oftentimes, more sleep, not more training will greatly improve someone's performance, by creating better health. Make it a priority to create great chronic sleep patterns.
3. Nutrition. Inadequate nutrition can quickly lead to diminished health which will often rear its head in poor triathlon runs. Make sure your daily diet is full of fruits, veggies, meat/fish/eggs, nuts/seeds, and true whole grains.

4. Stress Management. Making the effort to simplify your life can greatly reduce your overall stress load. In addition, deep relaxation activities can assist in managing stress.

These are some of the most common reasons why athletes fail to complete their triathlons with a strong run. As you can see, there are several other factors besides running more or running harder, that go into solving your triathlon run riddle. It's almost always about training better, not harder. So take a look through this list and identify which of these factors may be holding you back. Then use the help of an experienced coach or the resources listed within the article to help you train better and race better!

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