

# Brain Farts— Mental Hang-Ups That Hold Triathletes Back

Jason Gootman, MS, CSCS & Will Kirousis, BS, CSCS  
Tri-Hard Endurance Sports Coaching  
USA Triathlon & USA Cycling Certified Coaches  
Certified Strength & Conditioning Coaches  
For More Information: [www.Tri-Hard.com](http://www.Tri-Hard.com)

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Almost every triathlete has a funny (in retrospect) story about a bonehead rookie mistake they made in their first triathlon. But as you become a veteran of the sport, are you still making mistakes that are holding you back? Let's look at common mental hang-ups that hold triathletes back and how to free yourself of them—increasing your success going forward.

## Fear of Resting

You have probably heard it a million times: It is not your workouts that make you better. Workouts only provide a specific stress to your body. While resting, your body adapts to this stress and grows stronger. It is the *combination* of workout stress and rest that results in improvement.

*Workout Stress + Rest = Improvement*

But yet, you still fear resting. You fear not doing enough in your workouts each day, you fear taking rest days, you fear taking rest weeks, you fear easing up as you approach your peak races—you fear resting at all! For most triathletes, since life is so busy with work and family responsibilities, resting simply means working out less for a day, week, or other period of time. Triathletes generally fear resting for two reasons. Most commonly, you are afraid that you will lose all of your hard-earned ability. The best way past this hang-up is to give rest a try. Most triathletes when they actually give rest a try (or when we “force” them to take it) experience a gradual learning curve. At first, they resist the change, saying that they really don't like it, but they'll keep trying it. With a bit more experience resting, they start to see themselves performing better in their workouts and races. They start to see the benefit. With even more experience resting, they begin to *ask* for rest at appropriate times—they have come full circle at this point. They understand that working out and resting are of equal value to them. If you are resisting resting for fear of losing all that you have worked for, give it a shot and you will find yourself performing *better* than you thought possible.

Some triathletes have more than a surface-level fear of resting. These athletes *can't* stop working out—they are addicted to the process of training or simply to

exercising, usually the latter. These athletes typically *refuse* to rest when a family member, friend, or coach suggests it. They also become very upset and agitated when something in their life forces them to miss a workout. If you think you may be addicted to exercise, you should seek professional therapy to help you get to the roots of your addiction and move past it. (Typically exercise addicts do not see their own addiction, so if you have a loved one who you think could use help, encourage them to seek it.) Exercise addiction is far too common in triathlon, and because of this, unfortunately is sometimes far to accepted as being normal. It is important that you do not shrug exercise addiction off as a “good addiction” just because it is an addiction to a generally life-enriching behavior—an addiction is an addiction and an addiction is destructive.

### **An Ego That Owns You**

Your ego is the part of you that judges your self-worth based on the sum of your achievements. When your ego is running your show, you *have to be the best all the time*. Because training for triathlon is a cyclical process, where you develop your ability incrementally over time so that you peak for your races of choice, your ego is a dangerous training partner. If your ego owns you, it can wreak havoc on your success in a number of ways. Here are a few examples:

1. You need to race all the time because you only feel satisfied when you are taking home hardware and seeing your name high in the results list on a race website. As a result, you are always in “kind-of-great racing shape”, but never in peak racing shape.
2. You go way to fast/hard in a weekend of what were supposed to be aerobic workouts because your former college roommate is in town working out with you and you need to show him who’s the man (or woman). Overdoing things in your workouts can lead to injuries, burnout, or the overtraining syndrome.

To free yourself from the grips of your ego, try to view your performances as something you do, not as who you are. Try to gain enjoyment from the process of self-growth as a triathlete instead of simply your most recent results. In the long run, you will race better because you will workout and race in ways that are more appropriate to you developing your ability over time.

### **The Swimmer/Cyclist/Runner Syndrome**

A triathlete is a swimmer, cyclist, and runner all in one athlete, right? No, a triathlete is a triathlete—*one* athlete who can handle *one* athlete’s workout load. Some triathletes fall into the trap of following a workout routine designed for swimmers or cyclists or runners. Worse yet, some triathletes try to do all three of these together! Trying to train for an Olympic-distance triathlon like a swimmer

would train for an open-water swim, like a cyclist would train for a 40-kilometer time trial, and like a runner would train for a 10-kilometer run is a recipe for the injury, burnout, overtraining-syndrome triad we mentioned already. Yes, successful training for triathlon typically involves a greater workout load than it does for a single-discipline sport, but  $1 + 1 + 1$  does not equal 3 when it comes to triathlon training. View yourself as a triathlete that is working to race well in a sport that has three disciplines and has only one body-mind with which to do all the workouts and recover from all the workouts.

## **Misuse of Group Workouts**

Group workouts can be a valuable component of any triathlete's training plan. In most settings, working out with others will help you push yourself a bit more than you would by yourself. But many group workouts turn into unstructured races. These can be great—when really pushing yourself is what is right for you in your training plan. There is, however, a downside. Here are a few common problems:

1. You find yourself in the middle of a group swim workout, doing everything you can to hold on and stay with the swimmers in your lane. If your technique needs work, this is not the best thing for you. Your body will use whatever technique it needs to in order to keep up. If your skills are not well-established, you'll simply be reinforcing poor technique. Use group workouts to push yourself, but not at the expense of maintaining/learning good technique.
2. You ride a weekly group ride with a bunch of cyclists. You are repeatedly psyched that you are holding a stellar-for-you 23 MPH on these rides. You plan your pacing for your upcoming  $\frac{1}{2}$  Ironman on your pace from your group rides. On race day, you crash and burn late in the ride because you were writing a check your body couldn't cash riding at that pace without 25 other cyclists to work together with. If group rides with cyclists fit well in your overall training plan, use them, but also make sure you do solo endurance rides solo to get a sense for how to pace yourself, how to fuel yourself, and how to mentally approach this kind of riding as you will experience it in your races.
3. You come to triathlon as a runner. For 10 years you've been running with a local running club, running 5-6 days a week with them. You love running with the group so much that you can't give it up, even though you really want to do well in your first year of triathlons. Because you are doing so many workouts with your running club, your swim and bike training is compromised and you are not swimming and riding well at all in your triathlons. If there is a single-discipline group that you like to workout with, keep working out with them, but do so in a way that allows you to balance your training well among the disciplines. To do well in triathlon, you should emphasize working on your weaker points.

## Impatience

We live in an “I want it yesterday” society that affects people in all aspects of their lives. With many type-A personalities among its ranks, impatience rears its ugly head for triathletes in a few ways. One way is to do way too much working out, too soon. Like fear or resting, or an ego that owns you, impatience leading to great of a workout load too soon leads to poor performance at best, health problems at worst. Rome was not built in a day—ultimately racing well requires a patient mindset of getting incrementally better over time. Impatience also causes triathletes to go up in race distances too fast. We get too many phone calls from individuals who read about triathlon on the weekend and signed up for an Ironman that next week. In what other sport would you take on the sport’s biggest challenge so soon? There are many famous and less famous examples of triathletes who raced very well in Olympic-distance triathlons for years before a successful jump to racing longer distances. Even if racing longer distances is your ultimate aspiration, give yourself time getting there. The more solid your racing foundation is at shorter distances, the more successful you will be as you make the leap to longer distances. Lastly, impatience keeps triathletes from giving their training plans a chance. Once you have a good training plan that you like, whether you designed it for yourself, got it from a book or magazine, or had it personally made by a coach, give it some time to work. Don’t do the first week and say, “Hey, this stinks—I’m not any faster. I need to try another approach.” Give it more time than that—stick with a given approach for 8-12 weeks before passing judgment on it. This is how long it takes for significant physiological changes in your body. If over time, you really feel your training plan is not working well for you and that you have given it a good chance, look to make adjustments or seek a different approach.

Embrace resting, let your ego go, think like a triathlete, use group workouts wisely, and be patient in your training, and you are on your way to increased success!

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