



Future Dreams

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By Haydn Woolley

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WHAT IS A TAPER?

A taper is that mysterious period just prior to a competition, which often frustrates and confuses athletes. Questions, such as "How much?", "How long?" and "At what intensity?", become valid questions, the answers to which will most definitely have an effect when you step forward to test yourself on race-day.

To dispel the mystique, quite simply, a taper is a reduction in training volume, combined with an increased intensity and with recovery periods. But the combination of these factors will work differently for every individual and this is where interpretation arises. Tapering is definitely an art. The best approach is to experiment with tapering before events which are not important to you, and to learn that way how to plan your pre-race sessions to give you the best results.

THE AIM OF TAPERING

The aim of any taper is to maximise the appropriate combination of speed and endurance for your event. This involves choosing training sets that will refine your fitness and technique to give you that edge, both physically and mentally to achieve your goals. The taper is also the final stage in any periodisation plan that is geared to a certain race.

HOW TO TAPER EFFECTIVELY

The basic rule in tapering is: the longer or more important the event, the more you should cut down on the volume of training, over a longer duration immediately prior to race day. As you gradually bring those high miles down, your intensity and rest periods should simultaneously increase, to bring about refinements in speed and maximum recovery. (Your body's endurance retention will last well for up to four weeks.) All distance covered in the taper period should also be swum with a strong focus on holding the most efficient technique possible. You should therefore put an emphasis on stretching before and after sessions, because increasing your flexibility will enhance your ability to perform all swimming movements.

The degree of tapering depends on the following three factors. The priority of the race you are tapering for. The bigger the race, the lower you should bring the relative volume of training, whilst your intensity should creep relatively higher. The length of the race. The longer the race and the higher the number of miles trained, the longer your taper should be. Personal factors and experience. Get to know what works for you. Know your own body and



swim@futuredreams.co.nz

www.futuredreams.co.nz

[021-2888715](tel:021-2888715)

learn to trust it. PERIODISATION UP TO THE TAPER

One important consideration is that the concept of tapering implies that you have already gone through an intelligent and adequate periodisation plan leading up to the event, in order to make a taper valid. A taper will bring about much better results if you build your training up to a high volume. This high mileage also needs to be approached sensibly, so that your body can adapt easily over the time period allotted. This implies that you need to look at a time frame long enough (eight weeks, for example) for your body to have ample response time for growth without injury, and to maximise other adaptations to the increased training stimulus.

Note: if you increase your training mileage too quickly over the base or strength phases, then your body may struggle and you can fall prey to injury and lost training time.

ATHLETES TAPERING ON HIGH VOLUME

If you decide that you want to build your volume to a high level (12-15,000m in your longest week, for example), then you should have a plan designed to gradually reach that goal over a number of weeks (eight, for example). Given that the weekly increases are gradual enough for you to effectively adapt to the mileage, then your subsequent taper should be very effective (combined with the recommendations below).

Taking an Ironman competitor as an example, that athlete will swim train 4-5 hours (up to 13,000m) in their longest week. They should begin to put a dent in the miles at least two, probably three, weeks before their race. The third week out should slice 10-15% off their weekly volume, whilst starting to introduce some high intensity sets, like those below, into the training plans.

THREE WEEKS TO GO

- » Mileage - 85% of 100% week
- » Test Set - 12 x 200s Fartlek (1 x TIMED, 1 x V. EASY) with 90-120 secs rest (six reps with wetsuit on - race-specific)
- » Plus - 50m sprint work eg: 12 x 50s (four sets of three) 30 & 90 rest
- » Also - while keeping one easy over-distance session in the program (>4000m)

TWO WEEKS TO GO

- » Mileage - 75%
- » Test Set - 20 x 100 Fartlek (1 x SPRINT, 1 x V. EASY) with 45 rest.
- » Plus - 25m sprint work eg: 16 x 25s (four sets of four) 20 & 60 rest
- » Also - while keeping one easy long session in the program (>3000m)

ONE WEEK TO GO

- » Mileage - 40-50%
- » No more than three swims of 5000m over 3 hours
- » Maximal Effort Test Set - 8 x 100s with 3 mins rest (half with wetsuit on)
- » Short Speed Refining Sets - 32 x 12.5s (four sets of eight) 10 & 90 secs rest



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» Very easy perfect technique sets - 10 x 100s gliding effortlessly, 45 rest

On the other hand, if you are attempting to taper after only reaching 6000m (ie, if your training volume is always low), then a taper becomes less valid, because you have only a little distance to taper off from.

ATHLETES TAPERING ON LOW VOLUME

(eg: 6000m / wk) When you do not have the time to build your training volume to a high level then your taper period will generally be much shorter - anywhere from 5-10 days. You are probably more likely to be training more intensely all year around anyway, given this situation, so to some degree you should find it easy to implement speed. The major difference in the taper for such an athlete is that they cannot expect the same percentage improvement in that last week as the high mileage trainer. If you do find yourself in this situation, I would recommend you swim your last major fatigue workout 7-10 days from race day, and also double your rest periods from then on during any intense sets. Additional to this, I would implement the recommendation for the final week above, but only lower your total distance to roughly 70% and spend longer doing it for more recovery time.

SUMMARY

Tapering is the final and probably most crucial element in any training program. A good taper will put the icing on excellent preparation and almost guarantee success on race day, whilst a bad one can leave you feeling tired and lifeless. Tapering is an art and needs to be approached as such - with an open mind with respect to the individual. My recommendation is that you get together with your coach and plan the season surrounding your least important races, to test different tapering strategies and discover what will work best for that season finale. Get to know your body better, be honest with yourself and get out there and have the race of your life.

All the best,
Haydn



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