

The painful road from 12:18 to 9:46!

Paul requested that I write a review of my day at Challenge Barcelona Maresme and the build-up during the year. I've expanded on this somewhat to provide an idea of how I've reduced my Ironman time from 12:18 to 9:46 over the course of 5 years. I realise that some people reading this might not be particularly impressed with that time, but I think many of the lessons I've learned along the way could help to speed up other peoples' performances, regardless of where they're at currently.

It's provided in rather tedious detail (partly for my own benefit, when I try to recall these events in 2010) and reveals perhaps too much of the turmoil of my mental state and my race day bodily functions(!) for which I apologise in advance.

I use an SRM power-meter and Polar run pace monitor. The gadgetry is pretty much a necessity for an effective relationship with your coach if you're remote from them, but it's also been fundamental in my progress to date. Knowing that the coach will look at my uploaded file is like having him sat on my shoulder during the run!

More information about the WKO+ software in the screenshots I've included is available at the Training Peaks website, www.trainingpeaks.com

About Me

First, a bit of background. I'm 43, living in South East London/Kent, in full-time office-based work, married, and father of a 10 and a 12 year old. So your typical 9-5 working age-grouper. I train most days (to fit in all of the sessions Paul puts in my plan one of my swims usually slips to my 'rest day'). I suppose I average 12 hours per week, rising to perhaps 15 in an Ironman build-up. I've been doing triathlon for about 8 seasons, but training/coached seriously for around 4 or 5, and with Paul since 2007. I had no prior cardio-vascular/sports background to speak of, so my 'athletic age' is relatively young and I find I'm still setting personal bests. 99% of my training is done solo, weekday evenings once the kids are in bed, and weekend mornings for the longer stuff. I hope you'll see that I'm not one of those naturally gifted individuals who just seem to rock up to make the podium (damn them), and that it's taken a fair bit of trial, error and graft to reach my modest achievements to date.

Losing my IM Virginity

I rushed into my first Ironman event in 2004, in Frankfurt, moving straight up from Olympic distance and, due to lack of base fitness, had a thoroughly miserable day, walking home in 12:18. **Tip #1 is; Ironman racing ain't going anywhere, so take your time to get there.** At least 3 years unless you're coming off a solid bike or run background.

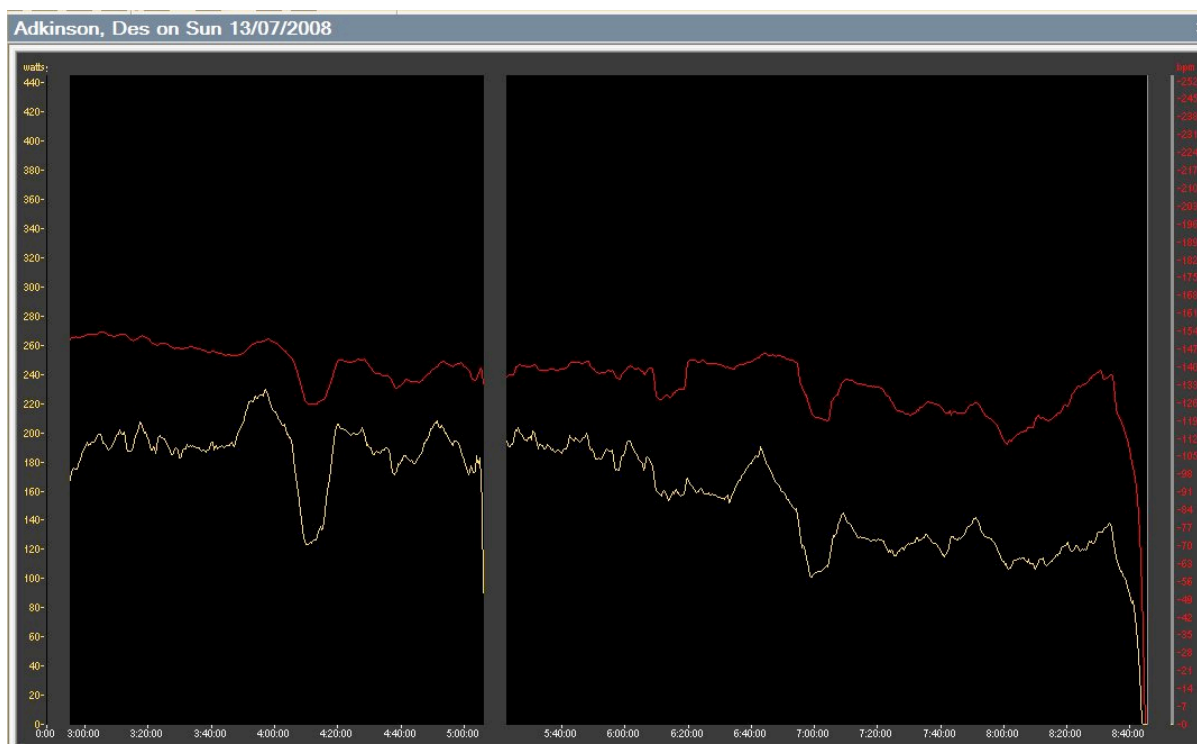
I then focussed on 70.3 races for the next few years which are more family-friendly in terms of training hours. My first one was a nightmare; paranoid about the need to fuel on the bike I over-ate solids and bonked anyway - with a stomach backed-up with undigested bars. **Tip #2 It's as easy to consume too much as it is to consume too little** – I recommend you read Paul's "Lessons from Lake Placid".

Subsequently I did quite well at this distance, setting a 4:19 PB, learning a lot about pacing and race day nutrition, and got to the inaugural Clearwater world champs. (Full race results over the years at www.tricondor.com).

Unfinished Business: Ironman Attempt #2

In 2008 I was ready to return to the 'unfinished business' of laying down a respectable Iron distance time. I chose Challenge Roth in Germany, known to be a fast course. Unfortunately it took me 14

minutes to fix a puncture on the bike, due to numb hands from the pouring rain. After this the Red Mist descended as I worked too hard to make back the time. The increased intensity and/or neglecting my intake meant I did not absorb enough fuel and I bonked during the bike leg, just like I had done in Frankfurt. Paul was able to pick this out from my power and heart rate in the SRM data, shown below:



Heart rate (red) versus power (yellow) at Roth 2008.

The break in data is the puncture. Note how the wheels come off (metaphorically) subsequently, due to nutrition/pacing errors. The peaks/troughs relate to climbs/descents, but the key point is that i) the two lines are starting to part company with each other and ii) it's a two lap course, so there's no other explanation for the dramatic power drop-off. I wish I could say there was a 3 hour descent on the course...but there wasn't!

Still, I managed a decent run of 3:38 once I got onto the Coke (can't beat that corn syrup), and I finished in 10:42 (a theoretical sub-10:30 if you ignore the puncture!). So, **Tip #3, it's obviously best avoided, but you can recover from the dreaded bonk - it doesn't mean 'race-over' - keep going!**

End of 2008 Review

I had suffered quite a few episodes of low energy, 'post-viral' feelings during 2008 and was a bit concerned about my immune system and whether IM distance racing was too much on top of work and family commitments. Ironically these episodes often coincided with lighter/taper periods when my training load was reduced. I had also been using Joe Friel's Paleal Diet For Athletes, with a reduced carbohydrate intake (except pre/post training/race) and wasn't sure if this was related.

I have a big painted arrow pointing to Kona on my garage wall, in the direction I pedal my turbo. But this was looking a rather lofty ambition at this stage in proceedings.

I took three weeks off and, in consultation with Paul, scheduled races for 2009 which were designed to fit our cunning plan for the coming year (on the Annual Training Plan or ATP on Training Peaks).

And so to 2009 ("at last" you cry!)

For the first time I competed in a series of 10K road races over the Winter, and these really gave me an off-season training focus and sharpened up my run (plus I won the Vets prize!). Paul and I scheduled two A races based around success he'd had with athletes training for the Busselton Ironman; I would build to a middle distance at end of June/early July, then have two light weeks before commencing a 12 week build up to Challenge Barcelona on 4th October. In August I had a two week family holiday booked in Lanzarote, which would provide an opportunity for quality warm-weather biking and running and daily swims, including sea swims. Paul would reduce my pre-race tapers, hoping to avoid my apparent 'withdrawal' symptoms. I had also relaxed the Paleal diet somewhat, and was eating carbs throughout the day again. **Tip #4: Eat healthily, but no fad diets!**

The middle-distance race, at Eastnor Castle, went better than I could have ever imagined. The field was quite small, but I was overall winner, clear by 4 minutes and with a great run split. Chatting to the second and third place competitors afterwards, one of them had missed a Kona slot by one place in Wisconsin, and the other had secured a slot with a 9:50 in South Africa, in the age group I would move into in 2010. My spirits/hopes were much lifted.

The Lanzarote break was fantastic - I returned feeling fitter and faster than ever before, and my WKO + PMC reflected this with a great big spike.

Immediately upon my return to the UK I had the final short-course race as a 'sharpener' - an Olympic distance on the Hyde Park ITU Worlds course (a test event for the London 2012 Olympic course). I had a great swim, exiting 8th in my wave of 160, and was flying on the bike, when another competitor crossed through the cones marking the central reservation and we had a high speed collision, head-on (I know from my SRM file that I was doing 39.5 kph). I lay in the road thinking "well, there goes Barcelona...and my carbon bike too". So, an hour in the medical tent, broken teeth, bruised (I thought broken) rib, facial cuts, big black eye and heavy bruising to neck and back. I felt crappy for the rest of the week and sat around feeling miserably, imagining all my Lanzarote training draining out of my body, and poking my rib which made weird clicking noises and which I was convinced was fractured. But, thankfully, my physiotherapist (after much painful prodding) concluded that nothing was broken. Also, the bike was OK, and a week later I was easing myself back into the training program, albeit with some very painful snatch-turns in the pool.

Challenge Barcelona Maresme

And so to Barcelona, where I was hoping to get as close as possible to 10 hours to give an indication that Kona might be a possibility as an M45-49 next year and, at the very least, to post a clear sub-10:30 with no mechanical dramas. The week started with another mini-drama when the kids, bless them, gave me the snuffles and I had another 3 days off. I was actually quite chilled about it, knowing I couldn't have changed my fitness much in either direction the week before the race.

A lovely 4* hotel and a Thursday arrival ensured we were extremely relaxed and unhurried in the lead-up, though we kept out of the sun. We racked our bikes and bags on Saturday, including an optional change of run gear to leave my options open on race day.

The **BIG** lesson of the week was that relaxing and carbo-loading makes me feel *ill*. Particularly after our large evening meals I would feel quite rough. I had felt the same in the days before Roth, but now I realised that this was a symptom of the combined resting and loading. I always woke up feeling fine the next day, and it only took a short swim or bike spin-out to alleviate the symptoms. I had spent the days before Roth fretting that I was going down with something, but now I could see that this was just another, expected part of the pre-race build-up and so no cause for stress.

Race day: up at 4:40 for breakfast. First mini-drama - I hadn't been able to find any of my usual pre-race food locally, and the hotel hadn't put out any of these either (eggs, banana, melon). But, since I

wouldn't be running for another 9 hours at least I figured my yoghurt, cornflakes, white toast/jam and a couple of small muffins would be long-since digested, so I tucked in and made sure I got around 150g of carbs down, without feeling bloated. Then I sipped 500ml of High5 EnergySource on the bus to transition, took a caffeinated High5 gel an hour before the start, and then took nothing more until the bike.

The next 'stress point' for me is always getting the tubs inflated. Once I know these are up to pressure and haven't exploded I'm a lot more relaxed.

Final portaloos stop (always take your own paper, just in case!). Fortunately Luke Dragsta, who was in front of me, left it in reasonable condition (I couldn't believe the Pros had to queue up with the Prols!). Then down to the beach. Seeded myself front and to one side to give myself the best chance of catching a decent draft without getting half-drowned. Effective drafting has taken me quite a while to get to grips with, but it really can buy you minutes off an open water swim time. Now, my next mini-drama; because we were in holding pens I didn't have an opportunity to defog/rinse my mask and I started to steam up. However, in the bun-fight of the running start/dive a little water leaked in and I was able to tip my head forwards and rinse my lenses, then quickly let this out at an opportune moment a bit later on, when pausing to sight.

As an aside: I had changed to a full swim mask for open water in 2008, after I'd completely missed the turn-buoy in the UK middle distance championships when my pool goggles fogged up; I got quite uncharacteristically disorientated/panicky in a tight group, whereas I'm usually really relaxed in open water. It was a lesson on how quickly emotions can run away when you're unexpectedly deprived of one of your primary senses, even for a fairly experienced triathlete.

Despite the swim being one big rectangle it was still surprisingly tricky to sight, being so large with no smaller buoys to indicate the line. Lots of people went off course and there were canoeists' whistles blowing all around me as they tried to corral swimmers back on-course. I managed to pick up a good draft on the outward leg, and remembered Paul's advice to sit-in and enjoy the ride. When we hit the back markers of the wave in front my parasitic relationship came to an abrupt end. I had clear water for a while (not what I wanted – it took noticeably more effort - but I seemed only to be coming across back-markers) but I focussed on swimming a good, straight line until finally I found another orange hat and latched on for the final leg back to shore. I staggered up the steep exit for an IM swim PB of 1:02:35.

Into T1 and grabbed my Bike Bag. To my surprise I found that some mungo had stuffed all his sandwiches into it. I threw them aside, put aero-helmet, shades and number-belt on, and ran shoes-in-hand to the bike (word of caution here – not all races allow you to put the bike shoes on once you get to the bike – they must be fixed to the bike or worn on the way to it).

The bike course starts with a narrow, winding road with speed bumps and drainage covers (fun with wet hands!) until it joins a (closed) dual carriageway where you complete two large loops followed by one final, smaller loop. It's mostly flat, with a few lumps at the start of the loop.

I had set myself a target wattage of 180W for the bike leg. I'd chosen 190W in Roth a year earlier, which had turned out to be overly-ambitious. Although I thought I was fitter now, I wanted to play it safe.

I average around 190W on my long (150km) training rides which is just into the bottom of Level 3a according to my best-recorded FTP test from early 2009. I've stuck to these levels all season; I haven't done much re-testing of my FTP during the year, except some turbo-based ones which, to be honest, I don't find very representative of the power I can put out on the road. I use my power meter primarily in two ways: Firstly, to make sure I maintain a target, minimum power when training/racing and don't start day-dreaming/slacking. And, secondly, as a 'limiter' when long-course racing, where I set a ceiling wattage for the flats, taken from my average power over a previous middle-distance race

after which I ran well (a tip from Gordo Byrn). The value you set as a maximum for hills can be a little higher, but both are there with the clear intention of conserving your precious glycogen stores for later in the day.

I agree with Paul's theory that using a power meter in these two ways conditions you to habitually pace your rides at a manageable level and this becomes ingrained after a while.

Early in the ride I mostly seemed to be seeing 160W-170W numbers when I looked down, but it 'felt about right' so I decided to sit at that level for a while, be conservative, and see how things panned out. Of course, this meant that a fair few disk wheels and pointy helmets were flying past me! There were also some small draft packs, and the course was crawling with motorbike marshals (there'd been 160 disqualifications in the May half-distance race on the same course) so I kept well out of these and let them go; I was racing the clock and the course, not those around me – Ironman needs a different psychology to 70.3 and short-course racing. I also checked over my shoulder before each overtaking manoeuvre and, if I had a motorbike close by, made sure I passed quickly so there was no risk of an 8 minute penalty wrecking my plans. But, when there was no motorbike, the roads were wide enough to cruise past people without the dreaded glycogen-munching power spikes. Also, if I sensed I was getting into a 'dual' with a rider of a similar speed I sat back at the legal distance and bided my time; most of these riders eventually faded.

Quite early on in the ride I started getting lower-back discomfort (sacro-iliac joint). This was a concern – there was a long way to go and I hadn't trained much in the aero-position. This is partly because my training rides are on such undulating roads but, strangely, I find that riding aero is uncomfortable in training and I'm lazy about doing so, but that I usually seem to be able to hold an aero-position throughout races, certainly at 70.3 distance. My TT bike does not have the now-popular steep, triathlon seat tube angle, but there's no budget for a new frame just now, so further experimentation with bike position will have to wait!

I took an occasional stretch, dipping forward out of the saddle and arching my back, and within 30 minutes or so the pain had subsided and I was rocking again. At one point I was feeling *too* good – I looked down to see a 300W reading as I swooped past three riders on a roundabout. I gave myself a good, colourful telling off out loud, and focussed back on the plan again.

I prefer a 100% gels/fluids strategy and was sticking to High5's recommendations for Ironman racing (having used their Half IM guide at Eastnor Castle). It's available on their website at http://www.highfive.co.uk/min_leaflets/guides.html.

Here's what I took in during the complete ride:

- 3 x High5 Energy Source x 650ml
- 1 x High5 Extreme x 500ml
- 2 (or 3?) x on-course isotonic drink x 500ml
- 6 x High 5 gels, all but one caffeinated

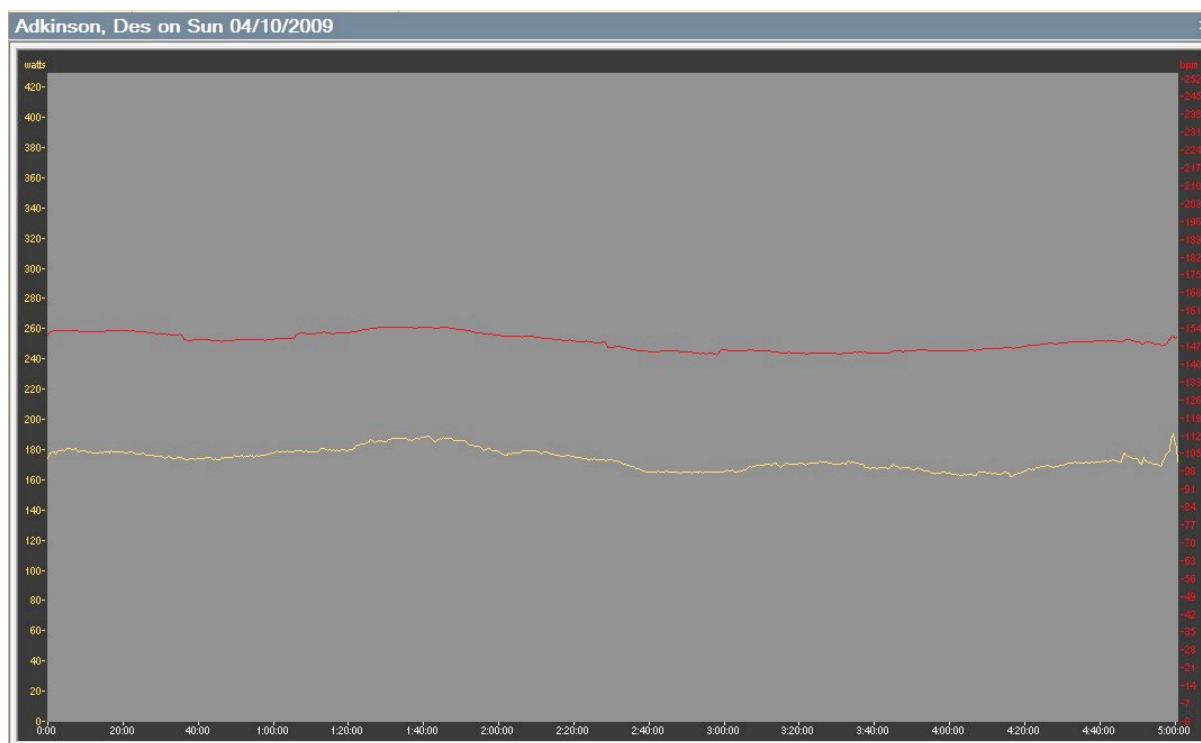
I drank my Energy Sources one per 45 mins. They had mixed up a bit weak, as had the on-course drinks, so I kept to a little over one gel per hour. It was a struggle getting the Extreme sachet into the on-course water while on the move (which I hadn't practiced, tsk tsk), but it provided a welcome boost in the latter stages. The on-course carb drinks were around 500ml, so I was drinking those in closer to 30mins each with a litre-per-hour target in mind due to the temperature. I didn't feel close to a bonk at any time, though I do remember one slightly 'peculiar' moment where I whacked a gel in to be sure.

I hesitate to include this, but decided it's important, so here goes: I don't stop on the bike, neither at aid stations nor for loo breaks – it's 'dead time' and it's unnecessary. It meant my right bike shoe had to live on the balcony for the rest of the trip(!) but I'd have been *kicking* myself if I'd done 10:01 with a loo stop. And here's the thing – there's some weird muscle-related thing that means, even five

hours into the bike, that you feel absolutely bloody great on the bike for 5 minutes afterwards! You heard it here first.

Enough of such talk. The ride finishes with a slightly perilous return to the winding streets, drain covers and speed bumps of Calella, which I took cautiously, and I was soon jogging into T2.

Here's what my ride analysis looked like at the end (compare and contrast to Roth!):



Heart rate (red) versus power (yellow) at Barcelona in 2009.

Note no divergence or convergence of the two lines. They're flat because the course is; the key point is that they track each other consistently. There's a 'decoupling' calculation, using values extracted from the WKO+ software, which provides the ratio by which these lines diverge/converge in the first and second half of the ride. I believe it's good to get this percentage score beneath 5%. This puppy shows a cool 1.1% !

It's all about the run

There's no such thing as a good bike followed by a bad run. Now we would find out whether I'd overcooked it.

The same mungo (I presume) had also stuffed a pile of sandwiches into my run bag! Again, my gear was luckily safely underneath these and I walked briskly out of T2 while I got my iPod plugged in. These are legal in Challenge races and I was to find it a massive boost to have a soundtrack during the run.

I had run continuously, and quite well, at Roth (3:38), allowing myself a short walk per aid station. Since then, Paul & I had been using the 9:1 run/walk strategy for all long run sessions. That's a separate article in itself, but the key point is, the walk is a brisk walk with arms still in your 'running position', and cadence is high. Also, you have to *train it* as you would with any other skill. It allows your heart rate to drop, time to *properly* take on nutrition and, in this race, the chance to sponge down well with cold water. It is also believed to reduce the risk of injury.

As the aid stations were 2.5km apart I opted for a one minute walk at each one. I believe this strategy was absolutely key in my ability to maintain a good pace to the finish. I didn't take any walks beyond the scheduled ones. I was again on the High5 plan, and stuck to 3 gels per hour, supplemented with drinks at the aid stations. I only skipped one of these gels when I felt a bit of a stitch coming on, but this quickly passed.

There were a couple of scares on the run when my knee started to tighten up – reminiscent of the ITB-related seize-up I'd suffered at Ironman Germany. But these went as quickly as they came.

Then, during the run, I experienced something a former coach (and former UK Ironman record holder) had described to me but I'd found hard to believe – big, elated 'highs' even when I was over 8 hours into the race. When the playlist from my recent wedding came up on random shuffle I was singing away like a complete loon, as high as a kite (perhaps it was caffeine overload). I'm not a hippy type *at all*, I promise you, but I remember consciously turning these moments into positive energy, and saying to myself: *"You want to be out here. It'll be a shame when it's over. This is what you spent the whole year training to do"*.

I knew a good time was 'on' but tried not to think too much about it in case something happened and, seeing my projections slip away, I would start to think negatively. But when I saw "1 km to go" I foolishly allowed myself to calculate a sub-9:45, not knowing that the Spanish idea of 1km is, in fact, closer to 2km! So I bounced over the line, still deliriously happy, with a 3:27 run split and a 9:46 total time.

Running Data & Levels

(I don't spend time playing with heart-straps and footpods in T2, so there's no pretty graph in this bit).

Coach might not approve of this bit but, hey, I ran well so he's probably in a good mood: As with the bike power levels, I don't recall repeating the test run set during the year and I stuck with the levels I'd established off the back of the Winter 10k races. However, having set the relevant pace range before a training run, I always tend to run just above that zone. In other words, rather than faff around trying to hover between the slow Polar beeps ("you're going too slow") and the fast beeps ("now you're going to fast!") I just try to run continually on a fast beep, knowing that, although I may be one level above what Paul intended, in all likelihood that level's now a bit out of date anyhow. Not very scientific I grant you. This approach also has a lot to do with it being difficult to discern the slow beep when running with an iPod on listening to IMTalk!

In the build-up to the race Paul had scheduled a brick session where I rode fairly hard (upper Level 2, Lower Level 3a) for 3 hours, followed by a 2 hour run. It was a hot day and I had used the 9:1 run/walk strategy. I figured that this would be the session which best indicated what I was capable of in the Ironman and, extrapolating the distance, it gave me a 3:23 estimate. This turned out to be only 4 minutes too ambitious – which ain't bad!

Other Lessons Learned

Here are the two key points I try to remember at all times. These aren't new or revolutionary, they're just *true*, although they might seem a bit contradictory at first glance:

1. Consistency is key

Use the WKO+ PMC graph to re-enforce this (explained later) - if your power meter or pace/heart rate monitor is away for servicing, then enter manual Training Stress Scores (TSS numbers), estimated from previous sessions. Then watch the graphical representation of your fitness climb as

the year progresses. And see the boost you get if you're lucky enough to have a training camp or other period of back-to-back quality sessions. My objective for 2010 is to enter my swim sets into WKO+ too to get an even more accurate chart. As Paul says, the PMC is only one indicator, but I find it can be a very effective motivator.

BUT! Never lose sight of objective 2...

2. Get there healthy and uninjured

This is your primary objective! The fitness gain from that session where you pushed through a niggling injury or early-stage illness will buy you no time at all if it means your Ilio Tibial Band goes twang half-way through the run on race day and you hobble the last 21km, or you're flattened with post-viral fatigue.

Learn the niggles you're susceptible to, get advice from a physio, and act accordingly. For example, I know that if my calves get tight then I start to get shin-splint/compartment syndrome because the muscles in the front of my leg have to work harder to lift my foot when running. Now I've had this diagnosed I can recognise the onset and self-treat with calf-stretches and a moisturiser-covered rolling pin up the shin!

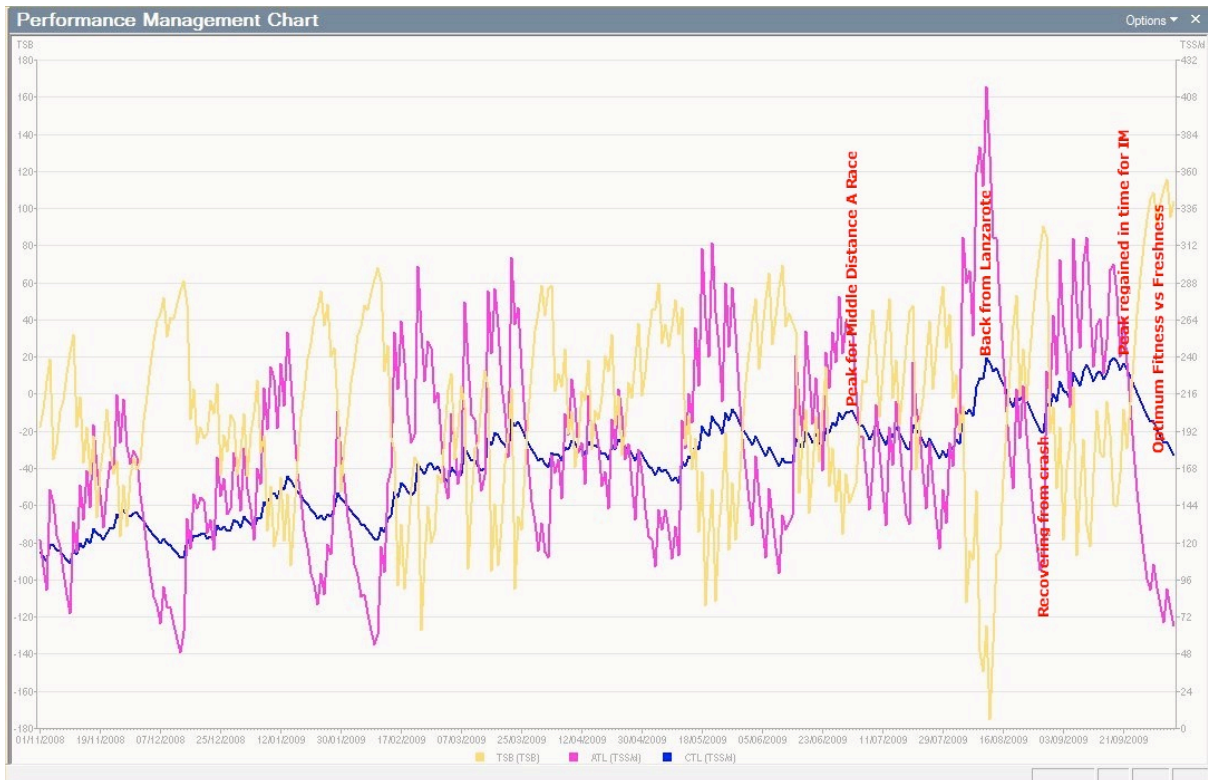
Learn to balance training with the other 3 key factors of diet, rest and your 'state of mind'.

I'm pretty obsessive about a healthy diet - I think of it as 50% of the equation - do the workouts, then fuel properly to rebuild my body and stay healthy. If I feel so tired that I know a session will do more harm than good, then I'll opt for a good meal and an early night instead. And if I need down-time due to work-related stress then I'll take it. This is easier said than done for us Type A personality types, I know - but it's key.

Performance Management Chart (PMC)

And here's the whole story of 2009 represented in a nice, pretty picture: The Training Peaks WKO+ Performance Management Chart (PMC).

The dark blue line is my Chronic Training Load (CTL) which indicates my 'fitness' and which rises based on the duration, intensity and proximity of my sessions. The pink line is the more short-term-reactive Acute Training Load (ATL) which is of less interest (to me at least!). The yellow line is my Training Stress Balance (TSB), a measure of my 'freshness'. So, after Lanzarote for example, I had pushed my blue CTL up to an impressive peak, whilst my yellow TSB shows I was completely knackered as a result! My training plans are designed to 'over-reach' without 'over-training', and clearly a tool like this is ideal for monitoring this balance. The idea before an 'A' race is to taper such that you go into the event with the optimum combination of fitness and freshness. As the taper starts the yellow line begins to soar. At the same time the fitness line starts falling. More information here: <http://home.trainingpeaks.com/articles/cycling/what-is-the-performance-management-chart.aspx>



My PMC for 2009 with key events

To be continued...

And so, my rambling brain dump ends - Part 2 to follow in 2010 when we'll find out if it was a fluke, or whether I can put my perfect race together again and secure one of those ever-more-elusive Kona slots!