

Getting the most by planning the timing of your racing.

Why is it important to carefully plan a racing season rather than just racing when your buddies start getting excited about racing?

If your goal for the year is to do as many races as possible or to gain as much experience as possible, enter all races with no thought to the time of year, provided that you either a) don't plan to do much of the road season or b) don't mind being pack fodder for the rest of the season or c) are so strong that you can ride these races without going hard except in the final laps.

Why? Riding extensively above lactate threshold decreases VO₂-max and lactate threshold power. Riding below LT boosts them. Thus the metaphor of training as a bank account. Base riding is making deposits, hard riding is making withdrawals. Once you start racing or doing hard club rides, you are making withdrawals. If you make withdrawals year round, you live paycheck to paycheck; you never get to the level of aerobic power that could otherwise be yours and could propel you to the wins or upgrades that your parents gave you the genes for.

There is a reason why riders don't recognize this problem: While hard riding decreases VO₂-max gradually, it also increases tolerance for hard riding quickly. Thus three to six weeks after you begin racing weekly, you feel like superman. You peak, meaning that you recover quickly from hard efforts and can attack repeatedly. Thus the experience is, "I started racing, I got way stronger, more racing is better!!" Unfortunately, a few months later (usually 2-4 months, sometimes as much as six), the drop in VO₂-max and threshold power catches up with you. The power to stay with the pack goes from below your LT power to just above, and then you can't race effectively any more. The only exception again is riders who can finish the races without having to go hard. These metaphorically "rich" riders can race on the interest from their bank accounts. That's why, along with mortgages and family, the hero-pros can race locally early in the season and still go strong in July and may do 100 or more race days per year, but local guys, unless they are sandbaggers, are tired after a few months and a few dozen races. It's also why when hero-pros train in races that actually have other hero-pros riding, they won't be seen at the front as often if at all as in later races in the same season. They are saving their pennies.

What to do? Pick a several-month stretch of races to be your season and prepare for those. You'll get about two weeks to a month more racing than last year before you burn out. If you are racing for the first time this year, figure you'll get two-three months. Once you end your first peak it takes a minimum of ten weeks to develop a second peak of close to equal height, though a 10-week peak will be shorter than your first peak. Don't start racing hard until you want your peak to develop in the next month.

One note: You need weekly hard riding to bring on a peak. If you do a race or hard ride every two or three weeks, you will never get your best race legs, so you can't avoid this problem by simply racing less often. Periodized Base development and peaking are rooted in physiology.

(By Scott Saifer, M.S. of Wenzel Coaching)