

C H A P T E R

1 Introduction to Prime Triathlon

We would like to introduce you to several key concepts that will act as the foundation for *The Triathlete's Guide to Mental Training*. One of the most popular phrases used in sports is peak performance. It has become a common part of our vocabulary, used by athletes, coaches, and sport psychologists, as well as businesspeople and other high-level performers. Peak performance is typically defined as the highest level of performance a person can achieve and is considered to be the goal toward which all athletes should strive. When Jim came out of graduate school, peak performance was what he wanted the athletes with whom he worked to achieve.

But as Jim became more experienced as a psychologist and a writer, he began to appreciate the power of words and how vital it is that the words we use are specific to what we want to communicate. He saw several difficulties with the essence of peak performance. Triathletes can only maintain a peak for a very short time. Would you be satisfied if you performed well in one race and then did poorly in subsequent events? Also, once that peak is reached, there is only one way to go, and that is down.

So Jim searched for several years to find a phrase that accurately described what he wanted athletes to achieve. One day, while walking through the meat section of a grocery store, he saw a piece of beef with

a sticker that read “Prime Cut.” He knew he was on to something. He looked up “prime” in the dictionary and found it defined as “of the highest quality or value.” Thus “Prime Performance” was born—a phrase highly descriptive of what he wanted athletes to achieve.

Prime Performance or, in this case, Prime Triathlon, is defined as “performing at a consistently high level under the most challenging conditions.” There are two essential words in this definition. The first key word

When you're on, really recognize everything that feels like you're on. Be acutely aware emotionally, psychologically, physically how you feel. Then make it finite—what do your quads feel like right now? I'm running 5:30 pace and I'm really fluid, how do my calves feel, quads—so when I get in a race I would go back to that. You see yourself being fluid in your mind, and I'd see myself on the bike floating, like my foot is just floating through each motion. “It feels effortless now.” Remember that.

—Dave Scott,
six-time Ironman world champion

is “consistently.” We want you to be able to perform at a high level day in and day out, week in and week out, month in and month out. Prime Performance is not about being “on” 100 percent of the time—that is impossible—but rather performing at a high level with only minimal ups and downs instead of the large swings in training and competitive performance that are so common among triathletes. The second key word is “challenging.” It can be easy to have a good race under ideal conditions against an easy field in an unimportant race. What makes the great triathletes successful is their ability to perform their best under the worst possible conditions against a formidable field in the most important race of

their lives. If you attain this level of performance, Prime Triathlon, you will not only be successful, but you will gain immense enjoyment and satisfaction from your efforts. Now that is a goal worth achieving!

Where does Prime Triathlon come from? Though we'll be focusing on its mental contributors, the mind is only one piece of the puzzle. You also need to be at a high level of physical health, including being well conditioned, well rested, free from injury and illness, and eating a balanced diet. Your technical skills must be well learned and your tactics ingrained. If you're physically, technically, tactically, and mentally prepared, then you will have the ability to achieve Prime Triathlon.

Have you ever experienced Prime Triathlon? Do you know what it feels like to perform at that level? Let's describe some of the common experiences of Prime Triathlon. First, it is effortless—comfortable, easy, natural, and automatic. There's little thought; the body does what it knows how to do and there's no mental interference. You also experience sharpened senses; you see, hear, and feel everything more acutely. We've heard pros say that when they're experiencing Prime Triathlon, the distances seem shorter and the climbs feel less steep. You're totally absorbed in the experience and are focused entirely on the process. You have no distractions or unnecessary thoughts that interfere with your performance. You have boundless energy. Your endurance seems never-ending and fatigue is simply not an issue. Finally, you experience what we call Prime Integration. Everything is working together. The physical, technical, tactical, and mental aspects of the sport are integrated into one directed effort at achieving your goals and loving the triathlon experience.

PHILOSOPHY OF PRIME TRIATHLON

Before you can begin the process of developing Prime Triathlon, you want to create a foundation of beliefs about triathlon on which you can build your mental skills. This foundation involves your attitude in three areas: (1) your perspective on competition—what you think of it, how you feel about it, and how you approach it; (2) your view of yourself as a competitor—how you perform in training and races; and (3) your attitude toward success and failure—how you define success and failure and whether you know the essential roles that both success and failure play in becoming the best triathlete you can be. Clarifying your views in these three areas will make it easier to win the mental race and to achieve Prime Triathlon.

PERSPECTIVE ON TRIATHLON

Triathlon is important to you. You put a great deal of time and effort into your triathlon training and races. You give your best effort in every swim, bike, and run session. A difficult day of training or a poor race leaves you feeling disappointed. These feelings are natural because you care about triathlon. They motivate you to do better in the future.

There can be, however, a point at which you can lose perspective, and your feelings toward triathlon can hurt your training and race performances.

One of the most harmful words in triathlon is a simple three-letter word: T-O-O, too. You want to care about your triathlon participation, but you don't want to care *too* much. You want triathlon to be important to you, but you don't want it to be *too* important. You want to try to perform your best, but you don't want to try *too* hard.

In the "too zone," triathlon is no longer a positive aspect of your life—it is your life! Triathlon is no longer about having fun and achieving your goals. You invest your ego—how you feel about yourself as a person—in your training and competitive efforts. If training and races don't go well, you may dwell on these failings, feel bad about yourself, and become depressed and despondent. If you feel this way, it's important to step back

and regain perspective. Reevaluate what triathlon means to you, the role it plays in your life, and how it affects your well-being and happiness. You may find that it plays too big of a role in your life. If triathlon defines how you feel about yourself, it will likely interfere with your achieving your triathlon goals and detract from the satisfaction you derive from the sport.

To perform your best and have fun, keep triathlon in perspective.

I'm not psycho about winning or anything; I just try to do my best and enjoy the day, so every year I go to simply have a great time. I'm too old to go really deep, but I do enjoy competition and the goal of doing my best no matter what my age.

—Missy LeStrange, ten-time Ironman age-group champion

Remember why you participate; it's fun, you enjoy the exercise, it's a great way to socialize, it's fulfilling to master a sport, and you enjoy the competition and achievements. The Prime Triathlon view of competition means that triathlon is a healthy and balanced part of your life that enhances you physically, mentally, socially, and spiritually. Have fun, give your best effort, enjoy the process of the sport, and you will perform better and attain your goals.

UPS AND DOWNS OF TRIATHLON

Another aspect of the Prime Triathlon perspective on competition is recognizing and accepting the ups and downs of the sport. In the history of triathlon, very few triathletes have had perfect or near-perfect seasons. Even the best triathletes have ebbs and flows within their seasons. The focus is not on whether you have ups and downs, but rather on the heights