



## FEELIN' SPORTY

By Owen Rothstein

Here in the northeastern US, spring weather starts to get many in the mood for outdoor sports. It is mid-April, and last weekend my two primary chores were finishing my taxes and tuning up my bicycles. It doesn't matter whether cycling is your thing (like me), or baseball, softball, running, whatever...if you are going to be competitive, you have to train. Training your skills, training your muscles, training your mind – these are all part of the regimen if you want to be a successful, competitive athlete. A common (and thoroughly debunked) theory amongst youth athletic coaches was that one needed a cumulative 10,000 hours of sustained, deliberate training to become a professional, elite athlete. But how many of those hours are spent training your gut?

I have a few colleagues that compete in Iron Man level triathlons. For those of you that don't know, an Iron Man consists of a 2.4-mile (3.86 km) swim, a 112-mile (180.25 km) bicycle ride and a marathon 26.2-mile (42.2 km) run, raced in that order and without a break. An Iron Man usually has a 17 hour time limit. Most sane people consider these competitions one of the most difficult one-day sporting events in the world. One colleague who competes is a 44yo male and he has completed several. Another colleague has just completed her first one at age 50. In discussing with them their impression of the single greatest difference between training for a junior or standard level triathlon and training for an Iron Man, they both said nutrition.

I mentioned above that most Iron Man competitions have a maximum completion time of 17 hours. If you get an average of 7 hours sleep each night, it means that you are awake for 17 hours. Imagine spending every waking moment of your day swimming, cycling and running – intense, right? The FDA recommends that the average American should consume about 2500 calories a day. If 2500 calories covers a typical day of commute/work/workout/go home, how many calories would you need to consume to spend every minute exercising? If they are the right kind of calories in the right order and with the right timing, maybe less than you think. This is where training your gut comes in.

As an athlete, you (and anyone else for that matter) can train your gut to optimally absorb and deliver the fuel you need to perform at your best. Many people (although not everyone) know about post-workout Recovery and the importance of refueling your body with carbs and protein immediately after exercise. What many don't know is that research has shown that you can train your gut to increase its ability to absorb carbohydrates, the primary fuel for your body. Waiting until race/game day to try a new carbohydrate fueling strategy catches your body off-guard

and it won't have the capacity to efficiently absorb all the carbs it needs. You may also experience gastrointestinal problems...a situation that is particularly unpleasant at mile 95 of an Iron Man bike ride with a marathon run looming.

If, as an athlete, you are mindful about eating the right foods and beverages daily to fuel your body, then you are already on the path to training your gut. To really dial in your body's response to the nutrition you are providing:

- Study the recommendations of nutritionists and previous competitors about the type of competition you are entering.
- Make sure that you are avoiding processed foods at all costs. Training your body to absorb nutrients from natural, whole-foods is its natural state.
- Move from a meal strategy to a grazing strategy. If your body gets used to replenishing exhausted glycogen (stored sugar) frequently, it will make fueling during your competition easier.
- Don't miss a phase. Your daily diet is your foundation, but a competition has a before, during and after phase. Make sure to prepare before, execute during and recover after.
- Start doing mini versions of your game day competition strategy well in advance. This can help you taper and trim your plan, as well as get your body used to the routine.

Even weekend sportsters can benefit from adopting these strategies. I know very few people that play that leisurely game of tennis on the weekend with a plan to lose. If better nutrition helps you get to that return a little bit faster, play a little bit longer, or just feel a little bit better after the match, then it is probably worth it. Either way, your body will thank you for the positive attention.

