

## TRI CAMP – SHOULD YOU PLAN YOUR WINTER VACATION NOW

Winter for triathletes can be tougher than the last miles of the marathon. Winter means counting laps, lengths, intervals, and watts if you are lucky. You work on deficiencies, real or imagined to help get you motivated for yet another indoor workout. It is dark when you get up, dark when you go home. The chance for fresh air is strictly weekends if the weather cooperates. By February, you can't bear to go down in the basement anymore and face that salty bike or the same training videos.

You need a vacation, but not from your workout. You need to take your workout on vacation and start counting outdoor miles instead of indoor minutes. Until you've experienced a triathlon camp, the idea sounds counter-intuitive. "I'm burned out on training and you want me to go to camp for a week to train?"

Yes, because making the decision to go is actually just as important as going, according to triathletes who were fortunate enough to attend a winter camp this year, one of the snowier and longer winters in recent memory.

"Knowing I was going to training camp motivated me to fit my workouts in, even when I didn't feel like it," said Dave Strassburg, a Buffalo-area triathlete who did his first triathlete camp with Plan2Peak Coach Peter Cummings this year in Las Vegas. "When you start training in December for summer events, it just seems so darn far off you question yourself. Having camp to look forward to made it easier mentally."



Additional motivation and focus is one of the hidden benefits of booking yourself into a training camp. "The prospect of camp helps keep me focused during the miserable hours training indoors. Knowing that soon I'll be heading out west for the camp and all the work done over the winter will be worth it," said Jon Bottoms, another Buffalo-area triathlete and US National triathlon team member.

Face it, every other vacation you've been on is about keeping the other people in your life happy. Once that is accomplished you try to sneak in a work out or a swim or something,

anything, because the alternative is madness or domestic turmoil. The logistics of where, when and what do you feel like eating, are what add stress to a vacation.



At a high quality camp like Plan2Peak Las Vegas, your life is simplified to the point that you only have to make the decisions you want to make. This absence of all the usual vacation compromise was not lost on another triathlon camper Melissa (Missy) Subjeck, who really enjoyed the idea of training and vacationing with a bunch of like-minded people. "Camp was great, but it was certainly a combination of things that made it a better experience than

expected," she explained. "It was a break from the monotony of indoor training of course, but it was also a retreat that incorporates coaching, training and social gatherings with friends who appreciate your need to continue training even while on vacation."

#### THE DAYS – EATING, COACHING, TRAINING, TESTING, EATING

The camp days themselves are a relaxing combination of learning, training and leisure. Yes, leisure too. Because when you are not on the bike or in the pool, you can read, catch up on email, chat with the coaches, and prepare mentally for the next work out. The relaxing comes a day or two later when you realize that this vacation is about you and your training. And that can be very relaxing, indeed.

Besides learning the technique of preparing plantains for second breakfast, you soak up nuggets of useful information every day, without even trying. The background isn't music, it's coaching conversations on pacing, race strategy, on-bike nutrition and the importance of certain target training zones. The collegial atmosphere encourages focus and discipline on your work out, but it also allows you to pick up, absorb, and apply all the information you can over the course of the week.

Because camp is not about how fast you are, but how hard you work or how much you learn, there is room for all levels of fitness and training goals. During the 5 weeks that Cummings runs his camps in Nevada, he typically sees the entire spectrum. "Some come to camp serious as a heart attack and some people's goals are local charity events," Cummings explained. "But I want everyone to have a professional experience. So, I actually over teach or coach. In this atmosphere I teach to a high level and I am shocked that even my "charity riders" grab bits and pieces and apply them to their routine. As for on the road coaching, I use various techniques to get each athlete all the miles they want while still keeping the group dynamic in place."

Each day of camp is different and not just because of the ride destination, and there are some spectacular destinations, but because of the details. Experience has taught the Coach much.

While at camp I saw triathletes take the opportunity to visit Greg Choat, long-time friend of Cummings and one of the best bike fit experts in the country. Choat is a high level cyclist, personal trainer and coach to many athletes including a few professionals who use Las Vegas as their off-season home. Choat uses the Retul system as a base for determining optimal fit on a TT bike which is crucial for triathletes, who don't get to move around and stand out of the saddle or sprint like road racers would. Then he takes it a few steps further and after consultation with Cummings, also incorporates hands-on physical assessments of a riders' functional mobility, flexibility and core strength to better determine fit and position. Besides improved comfort and performance, the session improves an athlete's knowledge of their own body to help prevent injury. Getting this done early in the week allows more time to get accustomed to any changes, and also consult on any tweaks necessary after a few rides.



Even though the schedule is full, Cummings explained, there is plenty of time for both individual and group instruction. In fact both happen constantly, sometimes simultaneously. "Most triathletes are training, learning, getting instruction 15 hours a day in some form or another while there including osmosis" he jokes. "And since they are living with me, they have ample opportunity to question me in a group format which usually triggers some great conversation. I also take time with each athlete while they are training to make comments and corrections," he said.

Mornings also afford the opportunity to do VO2 max and metabolism testing. For Cummings, having this equipment available at camp and doing the tests himself, is an important step for him to learn the intricacies of how each athlete's body functions and this allows him to better tailor their workouts and analyze the Powertap data. It also helps shape the discussion about diet and nutrition that many triathletes need, since they often feel they can eat anything at any time.

## SPECIALTY COACHES

Cummings is the Head Coach at Camp but he is a student of the game and never stops trying to learn. He admits that he brings in specialist not only for his athletes to learn from but to learn more himself. The early part of camp featured a visit to the pool with the underwater camera and swim Coach Traci Cummings. This also offers the Cummings a chance to see each athlete swim up close, and to take video (above and underwater) for review with each triathlete. Cummings then gives them things to work on during the pool session later in the week. These sessions can be done individually or en masse. Typical of triathletes is their hunger for more information, so usually these sessions are attended by everyone. No need letting free coaching go to waste.



Another highlight of last year's camps was a special "marathon" coaching session on the run portion of the triathlon that went from the morning well into the evening. Cummings was able to get U.S. National Triathlon coach Bobby McGee to come in for an entire day and night to talk about everything from training day warm up to strength and conditioning exercises for triathletes. McGee spent hours on run-specific form drills and video review of each athlete's stride and foot-strike pattern. And then, he concluded with an evening session on mental skills and sharpening focus and concentration during an event. Overwhelming? Nearly so, but "in a good way," every athlete concurred.

Even for an elite level triathlete like Bottoms, the multi-disciplinary coaching had a lot to offer. "I'm not great at any single discipline of triathlon, so I must work hard on all three. There's always something I pick up when working with the coaches, especially this year with McGee and Traci. I haven't worked with either of them very much, just once before, and they were able to identify some areas I can improve. Since the camp, I have been focusing on those technique improvements and I've been noticing a difference."



“Trying to take notes while swimming was the hardest part”, joked Buffalo triathlete Amy Goerss. “I appreciated the exposure to experts like Greg Choat and Bobby McGee. I have absolutely taken Bobby's training home with me, and I continue to try to work on some of the pointers he provided. With triathlon, there is so much to learn. I think the hardest part of obtaining all the information we got at camp is determining which pieces of advice we can realistically incorporate into our day to day training,” she said.



Plan2Peak is anticipating an encore appearance from both coaches next year. Always enthusiastic, Cummings is already looking forward to next year and a few improvements and upgrades he'd like to make. “This was my first pure tri week at camp and I think I learned as much as they did. Joe Friel once told me that if you want to understand intervals talk to swimmers and if you want to understand recovery it is the cyclist you want to talk with. Living with triathletes and watching them I picked up on quite a few things they could do better. Having specialty coaches was great for both the athlete and me. I had fun and learned just watching them and had a great time talking coaching with Bobby. In fact, much of my reading and research since camp has been inspired by the conversations I had with Bobby at camp and watching my wife work with the swimmers.”

#### A TYPICAL DAY...AND SECOND BREAKFAST

A typical day might start with a short morning run or swim depending on pool availability and the schedule of the swim coach. The specialty coaches will not be there all week and the ride plan is designed to accommodate this and also to pick the best routes depending on weather, time and how much climbing you did the day before.

Homer Simpson once tried to invent a meal between breakfast and brunch, but Cummings already has that covered. Because of the calories burned each day, most athletes discover they need a little more protein before setting out on the bike, hence, the second breakfast. And since you came to Nevada in February to get outside, everyday will usually have a strong ride component. Before departure, Cummings will review the route, elevations, weather forecast, wind direction, re-grouping points so everyone knows what to expect and how to dress or pack. This isn't one of those D.I.Y. camps where you drive as far south as you can and just ride around. Every route had been ridden and tested. And because of the sponsors Plan2Peak attracts like PowerTap, Hammer, Clif, Vertebrata Chiropractic and Nuun you don't have to worry about packing any suspicious looking powders for unfriendly TSA agents.

Vegas, yes, it certainly helps to have a great location. The city offers a large variety of flights at fairly low cost and the weather is fantastic as February averages less than an inch of rain a month. And you don't need to rent a car because Cummings will pick you up at the airport.

Much of the training rides take place in smooth state and national park roads with very low, cyclist-friendly traffic. And then there is the relentless scenery. I never imagined Las Vegas was surrounded by so many mountains. Every turn offers new desert or mountain vistas that look so foreign to east coast residents. If it happens to be too cold or rainy in Las Vegas, there's always Plan B -- Death Valley, epic rides, for high mileage or the opportunity to test yourself at the Beatty cut-off, a seven-mile climb, followed by a nine-mile ripping downhill with little rollers that keep you pedaling. You just don't have anything like this east of the Mississippi.



For Plan2Peak, the present Henderson, Nevada location on the east side of Las Vegas offers the opportunity to ride from the house out to spectacular locations: Lake Mead, Calville Bay, Red Rocks, the Valley of Fire and even the Hoover Dam. On these days, Cummings will often ride along and provide even more on bike coaching and advice.

Triathletes don't always come from cycling backgrounds so many welcome the additional pointers and techniques for on-bike handling and riding style that Cummings can offer. Even at tri camp there may be a strong cyclist or two in the mix and triathletes are always welcome at the cycle-specific camp weeks. And this can have its advantages, said Strassburg. "For example I found I need to get stronger on the hills. Even though I regularly ride Computrainer courses with hills I didn't know how weak I was. I liked getting the cyclists perspective on approaching and attacking climbs as opposed to just all triathlon," he said. Amy Goerss agreed. "I also enjoyed riding with people who are more exclusively cyclists, because it seemed to add a layer of depth of knowledge to that aspect of triathlon. We have so much to think about as triathletes, that it's hard to devote enough time to each discipline. And because we spend such a big proportion of time on the bike, it was great getting tips from people who focus on it. There's far more cycling technique to be learned than meets the novice triathlete's eye at least mine," she said.

Back in the late afternoon, some rides are followed by another run or swim, depending on the day's mileage or if the route passes any of Cummings' favorite shit-kicker eateries. Not exactly that category, the In-N-Out burger is a new one in Las Vegas and a real treat for those from the

east coast who have only seen the t-shirts. But this is really just a post-ride snack as these are triathletes and they will not be denied another meal later.

The post-ride quickie workouts also serve to help your bodies remember the small technique adjustments that the swim coach or running coach has made and to reinforce the new muscle memory. Jon Bottoms uses this information in a couple different ways. "I keep a mental list of technique pointers. When swimming or running long distances and fatigue is the only thing I can think of, I'll go through my list. I'll go over it to make sure my form doesn't break down and to keep me from feeling pain or tired," Bottoms said. Tweaks to running form are easier to adapt on the fly than those in the water. "There's so much muscle memory ingrained in swim technique, plus not being able to visually correct in the water makes technique modifications very difficult to maintain. I'll do them for a few laps while the coach is watching but then unconsciously revert to old habits. I find that focusing on just 1 thing at a time, for say 3 or 4 workouts before attempting another is the only way to handle it." Again, since the house is full of triathletes, there's no explaining, or sneaking away to get this practice in and no guilt for leaving your family; it's understood.

Some days there are meals "en famille" and other days the group would go out to area restaurants. Since triathletes seem to eat constantly, Cummings also had an assistant do grocery runs for specific requests along with some meal preparation. Another typical headache with the family and the kids – "Where are we gonna eat?" The coach has handled this decision as well. Aren't you feeling more relaxed already?

Evening's mean after dinner, and since it is Las Vegas, some triathletes will want to assert their stamina in other ways. And the night club options are as broad as the drinks menu. The money you saved eating back at the house will quickly be re-captured here. And since many of the mornings at camp are quite leisurely, the incentive to go home early just doesn't cut it.

"I love Vegas. I think it's a perfect training camp location," said Jon Bottoms. "The roads we ride are in great condition, low traffic and a good variety of terrain. It has even been recognized by others, this is now a World Championship location. The weather is usually decently warm, but not too hot, great for some hard training. Plus that city has so much to offer for 'recovery,' how can you go wrong?" he said, with a wicked grin.

## OVER-COACHING

What clearly separates the Cummings camp from others is the quality and sheer quantity of the coaching across the spectrum. He is uncommonly generous with information and repeatedly covers not just cycling, but race selection, nutrition, transition, training calendars, tapering and the science behind them. The 2-hour drive to Death Valley is like a non-stop coaching clinic that feels like a first class upgrade. The questions and conversation keep coming from the back of the van and Cummings doesn't stop. The passengers just soak it all in.

“Over-coaching is better because the athletes in camp and during the year will pick and choose what they want to apply,” Cummings explained. “I find it also helps them to realize there are still ways to improve. And it may not be until a month later maybe, when they will suddenly remember something I said or taught at camp and realize, ‘wow, I haven’t been doing that.’ All athletes, but especially triathletes, want to learn, they want to improve. I have found an athlete that starts to feel too accomplished or comfortable is at risk of becoming unmotivated. I have seen this with highly successful athletes, my national champs, state champs, world championship qualifiers. They thrive on challenges. I like to have them feel there is always something more we can do.”

Conversation with Cummings is always interesting because you have to pay attention. Just when you think you know what he is going to say next, because you read it somewhere else too, he veers off. In a field where so many coaches rip-off or parrot the same thing from the same bunch of thought-leaders, Cummings has a knack for looking skeptically at conventional wisdom or popular training techniques. Sure, they are useful, but not applied broadly. So he takes some of what his experience tells him and looks at the rest a little more critically, and he asks, “What do my athletes tell me? What are they feeling, and does their data back it up?” Notice he said, “Their data.” He means it, everything is personalized. And if you didn’t catch it in conversation, follow-up with a look at his web site and the papers he has authored or commented on and see a refreshingly independent streak.

By the middle of your week, you have settled into a comfortable routine of eating, training, coaching, eating and riding, running and eating again. By the end you are looking at bargain-basement Las Vegas real estate and have become so jacked-up about tri-training that you can’t wait for the first spring tri just to test out some of the things you’ve learned.

This was the first triathlon camp for Dave Strassburg, a novice triathlete with a lot of potential. After his initial fears of being overwhelmed subsided, he made sure he got the most out of his training time and found it turned out to be one of the best vacations ever. “It was a totally turnkey experience,” Strassburg said. “Peter really made things easy. He had all the logistics worked out in advance so we really got the most for our time and money. I’m already thinking about two weeks next year.”



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