



BANISH THE OFF-DAY

Whether you're an Olympic elite or an accounting age-grouper, we all have races where it just goes wrong. But what causes this drop in performance? And can the off-day be stopped in the first place? **James Witts** reports...

Alistair Brownlee's 29:07min Olympic Games 10km run, Craig Alexander passing Andreas Raelert on the run at Ironman Hawaii in 2011, Mirinda Carfrae's record-breaking 8:52:14 at Kona 2013 – all iconic exploits from superhuman triathletes.

Although we might think the world's greatest are chiselled from marble, even they have days when they simply haven't 'been' at the races, because it's not just us

age-groupers who slip into our tri-suits and fail to meet our expectations. But are there genuine biological, psychological or (whisper it) spiritual reasons behind the off-day phenomenon? And how can you combat these on race day?

What the elites do well is identifying the causes of off-days so they'll never happen again. So, with input from the world's best triathletes and coaches, here we compile some proven advice to help you banish the off-day blues come race morning... →

FEATURE

RACE STRATEGY

Race-day experience and gathering relevant data will help you execute three-stage peak performance

One of the key causes of under-performance is pacing. This resonates across all endurance sports, but more so the multi-disciplinary nature of triathlon. You're expected to race consistently when horizontal in the water, bent double on a machine and upright on two legs. No wonder executing three-stage peak performance with efficiency and speed is fraught with issues.

"Poor pacing happens a lot with younger athletes," says Jamie Pringle, exercise physiologist at the English Institute of Sport who works with British elite triathletes. "The classic example is they'll go with the wrong break on the bike and blow up. Come the run, their legs have completely gone."

Triathlon's spat out many an athlete who's stormed the bike, only to stride straight into bricks and mortar come the run. Clearly, as Pringle alludes to, race experience plays a major role in pacing efficiently. Also, gathering as much relevant data as possible about your physical performance will give you benchmarks to work to.

"POOR PACING HAPPENS A LOT WITH YOUNGER ATHLETES"

Try penciling in pre-race time-trials across all three disciplines and a range of distances so that you're aware of your top-end capabilities. So for an Olympic-distance triathlete this could be 1, 3, 5 and 10km run races. Employing heart rate monitors and power meters is a further step to being more aware of your optimum pacing.



Throw single-discipline races into your schedule to gather vital race experience and pacing know-how



Jamie Pringle guides elite pros on pacing and tapering



Employing heart rate monitors will increase your awareness of your optimum pacing



Tapering and hydration issues meant Jodie Swallow's Kona debut in 2013 was one to forget

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TAPERING IDEAL

A good taper will let your mind and body absorb the benefits of training blocks

Of course, sometimes your pacing is consistent, not fluctuating one iota. Unfortunately, that pace is consistently dismal. That's where the dark art of tapering comes in. A good taper's designed to let your mind and body absorb the benefits of training blocks by easing off the gas. In principle, the longer the race distance, the longer the taper. Many coaches suggest you should also cut down on volume, with the occasional high-intensity effort thrown in. Sadly, like pacing, prescribing a one-size-fits-all taper is futile.

One of the biggest hurdles to overcome for tapering triathletes is the ego. Backing off after a stint of heavy training may be an appealing notion, but come that time, the idea that resting equals faster performance is anathema to – as noted psychotherapist Dr Steve Peters terms it – your 'Chimp'. Rest assured, however, that from a cardiovascular, respiratory and muscular perspective you'll be fine. Just remember the adage: it takes a lot less training to stay fit than to get fit.

Pringle observes there's currently much innovation in tapering to increase the chances of athletes peaking where it matters – at their big race. Mistiming tapers is endemic across all sports and abilities, but not all lead to the demoralising experience of Jodie Swallow at last year's Ironman Hawaii.

"When I was racing Olympic-distance, I performed well when racing from week to week," says Swallow. "In Ironman this isn't viable. My taper into last year's Hawaii didn't go well. I spent five weeks in Cozumel, Mexico to acclimatise, which is more humid but not as hot as Hawaii. In retrospect this was too long and left me drained at Kona. I also had too low an electrolyte intake. That and the fatigue led to my collapse and hyponatremia." →

FIVE FAMOUS BAD DAYS...

It may be rare, but elites can suffer the same ills as us age-groupers. Here are five tri examples...

ICONIC CRAWL

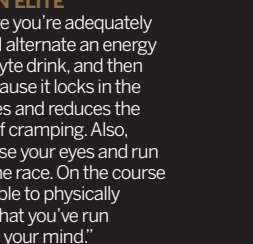
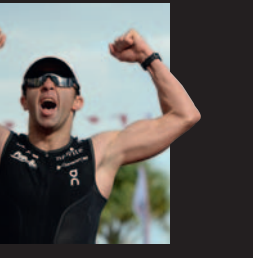
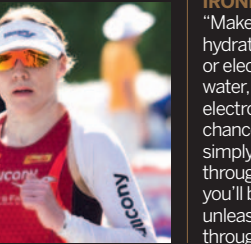
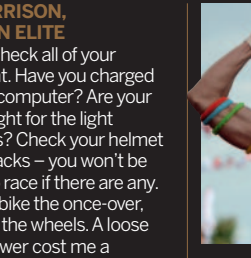
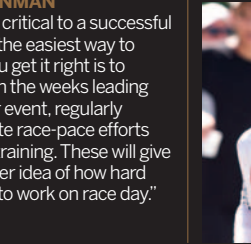
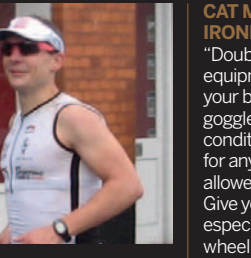
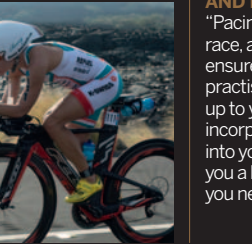
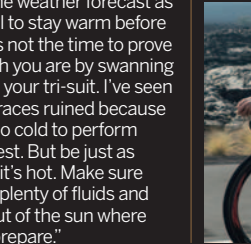
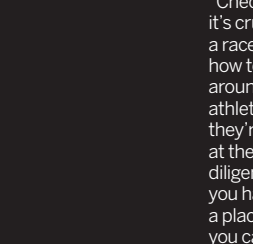
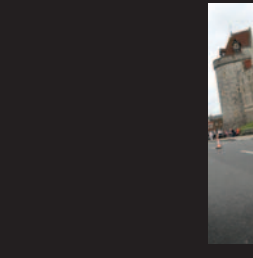
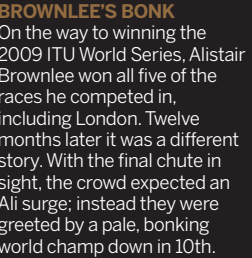
Julie Moss's dramatic crawl to the line is the most iconic image in triathlon. It was 1982 and the 23-year-old college student had entered Ironman Hawaii as part of her thesis. A mile from the line she was on course for an unlikely triumph, but her legs suddenly turned to jelly. Ten yards from the line she collapsed and was overtaken by Kathleen McCartney.



NEWBY-FRASER DRIES UP Paula Newby-Fraser arrived at Ironman Hawaii 1995 with seven Kona titles to her name. An eighth looked inevitable as she hit the run with a sizeable lead. But come mile-20 she received word that America's Karen Smyers was gaining 30secs per mile. Newby-Fraser panicked, abandoned her hydration plan and collapsed through overheating, finishing fourth.



FRODENO ECLIPSES GOMEZ Spain's Javier Gomez entered the 2008 Beijing Olympics with an incredible 54 top-10 finishes from 57 ITU events under his belt and his first ITU world championship win in the bag. Whether it was the weight of expectation or a reported stitch, his winning Olympic kick never came. He finished fourth behind eventual winner Jan Frodeno.

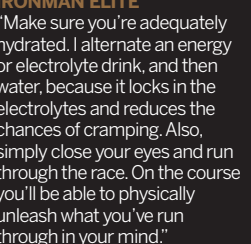
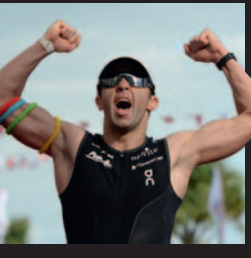
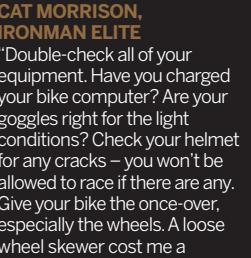
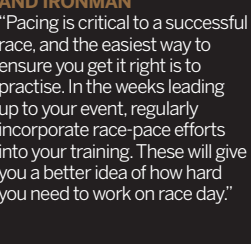
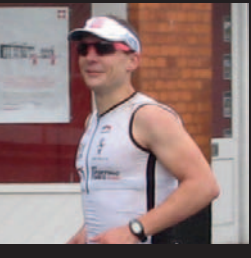


...AND FIVE PROVEN WAYS TO COMBAT THEM

They've raced hundreds of triathlons, so who better to help you avoid an off-day?



TOM BISHOP, GB ELITE "Check the weather forecast as it's crucial to stay warm before a race; it's not the time to prove how tough you are by swanning around in your tri-suit. I've seen athletes' races ruined because they're too cold to perform at their best. But be just as diligent if it's hot. Make sure you have plenty of fluids and a place out of the sun where you can prepare."





Being confronted by a sea of fit athletes on race day shouldn't distract you from your pre-race plan

MANAGING NERVES

Psychological factors can override any physical prowess come race day. Emotion regulation is key to maximising your performance...

As we're all aware, it's not just the physical that can impede performance. "Providing the athlete's physical training has been going well, it's more likely that psychological factors have an influence on the day," says Professor David James, Dean of Research at the University of Gloucestershire whose specialist areas include overtraining in sport. "This, when

coupled with nutrition issues, is a common cause of underperformance."

Race-day psychology is a growing field, and one of the mental factors focused upon by psychotherapist Dr Steve Peters is emotion regulation. In other words, how an athlete controls their emotions to unleash their finest performance. Emotions encompass three types of response: physiological, such as increased respiration and heart rates; cognitive, such as the changes in attention, perception and information-processing priorities; and behavioural, such as aggression towards an opponent.

Applying a negative emotional response to a common scenario should help you visualise this potentially destructive path. You turn up to the lake on race day and are confronted with a sea of fit-looking athletes. Pre-race plans of drafting off a nearby competitor are replaced by fears of drowning among flailing arms. Physiological response? Heart rate and respiratory levels rise, burning valuable glucose. Cognitive response? Your attention's been pre-occupied by nerves, and thoughts of mentally rehearsing the race – which buoy to aim at, what to look for on exiting the swim – have gone out of the window.

Behavioural response? Nerves have wrapped their tentacles around your shoulders, limiting your range of movement and making every stroke a chore. The result? A slow, energy-sapping swim.

BREATHE, RELAX AND ACCEPT

There are several ways to circumvent falling into this emotional quagmire, including visualisation. However, we return once more to Swallow for our final solution, this time on her way to 10th at the 70.3 Worlds in 2012.

"Onto the bike I was in the lead but it was 43°C and I was suffering," says Swallow.

"Leanda [Cave] caught me at 30km and I knew I was in for a rough day. I couldn't deal with the moment and pushed even harder. That, of course, led to more fatigue and frustration. What I should have done is breathe, relax and accept, and maybe the body would have turned itself around."

Pacing, tapering, nutrition, psychology, life stresses – pinpointing the causes of underperformance can be a lottery. All you can do is arm yourself with the knowledge, experience and data that'll morph your DNF into a PB. **220**

ALTERNATIVE TRAINING STRATEGIES

Following a different training programme to your current plan may reap benefits (or, then again, it might not!)



TRAIN BY GENES

Knowing if you're genetically more suited to power events or endurance, or recover quickly or slowly from a hard effort, you can devise a programme that'll maximise what Mother Nature gave you. A DNA swab sent to a company like DNA Fit can discern the best training plan for you based on your genetic attributes. Allegedly pro cycling teams have trod this path, adding to its credibility.



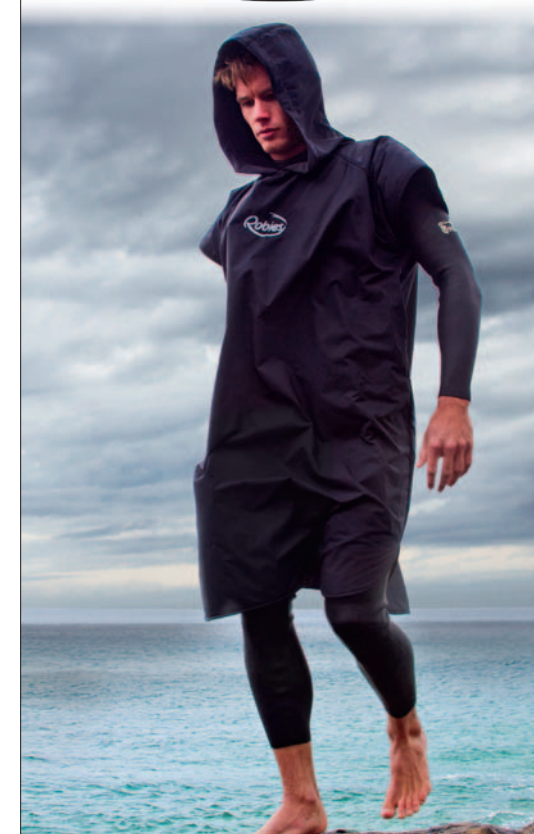
CIRCADIAN SESSIONS

Proponents of circadian rhythms (our body clocks) suggest training at times that suit your body to maximise every workout. A 2009 French study had 16 cyclists undertake high-intensity tests at 6am and 6pm. The result: 8% better performance at 6pm due to their higher afternoon body temperature. U.S. pro TJ Tollakson (left) is one such advocate and naps daily.



IT'S IN THE STARS

Finally, what about tweaking the contents of your workout by the stars? Gemini's apparently like variety in their lives so will be the perfect endurance athletes, with a love of fartleks and intervals. Pisces, of course, are attracted to water so will storm the swim. Not surprisingly, empirical evidence for the benefits of astrology on exercise is limited, if not non-existent.



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