



Tapering – the keys to getting it right in those final days

For those with little experience in competition sports, the notion of tapering is a bit foreign, although intuitively it does seem to make some sense. For others, what would seem at first to be the simplest part of the preparation, often causes the biggest confusion. The truth is, that getting the Taper wrong can really cost an athlete, in fact it can completely sabotage a performance even when the greater bulk of the training has been completed to spec.

So, what to do?

I always advise athletes / cyclists to err on the side of conservatism here and the reasons for such sage (not) advice are fairly straight forward:

- The only really catastrophic error an endurance cyclist can make (or pretty much any cyclist for that matter) is to do too much training in the taper period.
- Taper periods are not long enough for a de-training effect to take place. This means that you are NOT going to lose fitness if you back off your training loads for 1-2 weeks. In fact, even if you do NOTHING in the taper period, you would be unlikely to experience any significant loss of fitness (provided some appropriate work had been done prior to the taper).
- There is an old saying in endurance sports; "the athlete is better off 10% underdone than even 1% overdone". This is based on the notion that freshness will ALWAYS trump fatigue and another reason to back off leading into the big goal.

Another common error I see is riders (and triathletes) who seem to think that the taper period is a good time to experiment with new techniques or (worse still) an untested nutritional strategy. I have coached athletes who have squandered the form of their lives in the forlorn hope that their endurance will be boosted by a one-off foray into "carb loading". Bottom line is of course; "this is NOT the time for trying something new". Stick to what you know, have tested in training and has worked previously.



If done well, tapering will have you feeling unbreakable on the big day

Some General Rules for the Taper Period

- Any periods of intensity ABOVE threshold should be limited to less than 5 minutes continuously and less than 25% of any one ride.
- Two days before the event, you should have a VERY light day, preferably a day off
- The day before an event should include some light activity and if you need to feel a little zip, complete some high cadence "wind ups" of between 20-30sec, with at least 2min easy in between. These are very high cadence (115-150rpm) in a low to moderate gear and are designed as a bit of a "neural facilitator" in other words; they get the legs in the groove.
- Get some good sleep during the week because it is a widely reported phenomenon, that athletes tend to have poor sleep quality the night before an event, so put some in the bank.
- Drink plenty of fluid in the lead up but be sure to include electrolytes. Don't go overboard (2l per day should be plenty for most), especially if you are not a big drinker during other times.

How long should a taper be?

This depends a little on how good the preparation has been and the rule is that; generally, the longer and more robust, the training has been, the longer the taper. As a rule:

- If training has been continuous (and consistent) for less than six months, the taper will be one week.
- If the training has been notably longer, the taper will be 10-14 days.

An example week

Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun
50% of standard endurance ride distance. Keep intensity to Z2	50% of standard endurance ride distance. Keep intensity to Z2	OFF	Easy spin at 25% of endurance distance. Include 4-6 x 30sec high cadence wind ups (120-150rpm)	Very easy OR Day Off. spin, 25% of standard endurance ride distance. ALL Z2	Very easy spin at 25% of endurance distance. Include 4-6 x 30sec high cadence wind ups (120-150rpm)	Event Day

Some things to look out for

- It is normal to feel flat and "heavy" during your taper. DON'T panic and rush out to do some more training, be patient, the feeling of malaise will dissipate
- The feeling that you are somehow "losing" the fitness you have worked so hard for, is also very normal. Trust the process and remind yourself of the work that has been done. You are ultimately in control of that process and suppressing the urge to squeeze in a few more sessions, will pay dividends on the big day.

Relax during your taper, that is in fact the point and remember that the only real mistake you can make is to do too much.