

Racers must ride quality miles and avoid junk miles to succeed in competition, but how can one distinguish junk from quality on a given ride? Many racers do junk training thinking they are doing quality, and then avoid riding that really could be quality for fear that it will be junk. The misunderstanding stems from the ideas that low speed riding is wasted, and conversely, that any ride with a high average speed or power is a good ride. Such thinking is potentially detrimental. Defining quality to mean high-speed encourages riders to mistakenly push hard in training even when that pushing is counterproductive, and to avoid the aerobic training that is the basis of racing success.

Defining quality training as training that makes a rider more competitive, and junk as training that wastes opportunities for quality training is far more useful. How can one distinguish junk from quality during a ride? Simple: Training done at high speed or with a high average power for the effort is most beneficial. Training with a low output compared to the effort is wasted, whether the output is high or low. Training hard when already tired or struggling to make a speed or power that comes more easily on another day is junk training. Riders become proficient at what they practice. Why practice suffering to produce a speed that can be produced without suffering?

A quality workout must also be specific to the needs of the rider. A rider with a phenomenal sprint who rarely makes it to the end of a race with the group is doing junk training when he devotes an afternoon to sprinting—no matter how ‘good’ that workout is. A rider who always finishes with the leaders but never wins, should be focused on finishing tactics and possibly the physical activity of sprinting, but is wasting time doing more aerobic training than is needed for maintenance.

Is LSD Junk?

In the old days, many riders talked about doing “LSD” or “Long Slow Distance”, while others denigrated such training with phrases like “train slow to go slow”. It turns out that each group was partly right. All the best road and MTB riders do or have done large volumes of riding at speeds well below what they could do for shorter times. In that sense, LSD is essential. On the other hand, deliberately riding slower than one could ride all day, day after day is not an efficient use of time. I prefer to substitute the phrase “Long Steady Distance”. The optimal development of aerobic power requires riding long distances at a distinctly moderate pace, but as the training has its effect, the ideal speed for those rides increases. Steady miles become junk only if a rider deliberately fails to increase output to keep pace with fitness. Optimal training leaves a rider just a little tired at the end of available time, but definitely ready to train again with the same effort the next day. For base training, that might mean averaging 13 mph rising to 15 through the training season for a beginner on rolling courses, or 22 rising to 25 mph for an international pro on a mostly level course with few stop signs.

Being ready to train the next day depends on recovery as well as the difficulty of the day’s ride, so a ride that is just right for one rider might be too hard for another even if they have equal fitness.



not junk
miles

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Quality vs. Junk for Power Trainers

It is dangerous to make ever-higher average speeds or powers the measure of the quality of rides. These are good markers of the effects of the previous few weeks of training, but not of the quality of the ride just completed. If average speed with the same effort on the same course is increasing from month to month, the training is working. The danger comes from riding hard on a given day to get a new record to show that the training is working. Using average speed or power as the indicator of quality encourages ignoring perceived effort to get a number. This is an error because perceived effort is one thing no rider should ever ignore in racing or training.

For riders who like to mark their progress with numbers, I suggest a different variable: efficiency as measured by power versus heart rate on similar rides. If training is working, a plot of daily average Watts divided by average heart rate on similar types of rides should show a gradual upward trend. Any day the new point comes out below the trend line, there's a problem in need of correction. The rider is tired, dehydrated, underfed, injured, poorly fitted to the bike or doing something else wrong that needs correcting. Good training and recovery behaviors yield efficiency plots that rise steadily and performance that rises along with those plots. Any day that the point is above the trend line, one has done good quality training. Any day that one has done other than a recovery ride with efficiency below the trend line, one has done junk miles. (Remember that for the plot to be meaningful, it has to compare similar rides: spinning endurance rides with spinning endurance rides, and TT-interval rides with TT-interval rides for instance.)

Skip the Junk Miles

Riding with low speed or power for the effort or heart rate is comparatively ineffective. Such junk miles don't just waste that day's ride but compromise the next several days as well. Junk miles leave a rider tired, leading the ignorant rider to more junk rides. Successful professional riders pay attention to perceived exertion. They often talk about "training how they feel". They don't push unless they "have it" that day. In other words, they don't ride junk miles. If they feel good and are cruising with minimal effort compared to the speed, they go long. If they are slow, or have dead legs or heart rates that don't rise normally, they go shorter and easier. Going easy and short rather than riding junk miles allows them to recover and return to quality training sooner.

In contrast to the successful pros, many lower category riders and perennial also-rans insist on "sticking to the plan", finishing three week "build" cycles even when they are toasted with a week to go for instance. The riders mired in the fours are the ones most likely to tell me, "hey coach, I did everything on the plan" or "I got all the intervals", even though my plans for them specifically say to ride recovery pace if they are not feeling energetic and ready for a strong effort and despite the fact that I have reminded them of this repeatedly. The pros and Masters National Champion types are the most likely to tell me, "I wasn't feeling great so I took it easy today".

Several times I've seen riders who had plateaued long term suddenly start making progress again when they learned to pay attention to perceived exertion along with speed or power and to back off unless they felt good. After decreasing junk miles, they prospered.

Increasing Quality Volume

By now some astute readers are thinking, "Wait a minute: If I cut my ride short every time I don't feel great, I'll hardly be training at all". If this describes you, you need to make a change: First, start holding back and doing recovery rides any time you don't feel really good. A recovery ride is one to two hours with your heart rate below 70% of maximum and turning over the pedals at a comfortable cadence. Doing recovery rides any time you feel other than great is the number one, most valuable piece of advice I can give to riders who are already training realistic volumes for their category. If you've been riding tired and you start following this advice, you'll most likely get much stronger within a few weeks.

If you feel worn or slow on rides and taking a few recovery days doesn't have you feeling a lot better and riding a lot better within a week or two, you need to examine things beyond your training: You may need to improve sleep, nutrition, hydration, bike fit or how you deal with stress. Riders who sleep 8-9 hours per night generally recover better than those who sleep less, so they can handle more quality training and perform better. Riders who consume 200-350 calories of carbohydrate per riding hour stay stronger longer on their rides, leading to more quality and fewer junk miles. Losing more than

a couple of pounds during a ride leads to junk miles pretty dependably since the only way to lose that much weight during a ride is to be dehydrated, which reduces performance dramatically. Riders whose bikes fit well can make optimal use of the fitness they have, riding faster with less effort. People with a lot of stress from work or family don't respond to training as well as those who are calmer generally. It is entirely possible that decreasing total riding hours to allow taking care of other responsibilities will lead to better performance for too-busy riders. Even riders with perfect nutrition, hydration, sleep, bike fit and stress levels will still have occasional bad days, and will do best if they take recovery time rather than pushing through on those days. Riders who have bad days more than once per week definitely need to improve some aspect of their training or self care.

Improving the ratio of quality training to junk, whether that is achieved by taking recovery days when tired or improving self-care to bring more rapid recovery and a tolerance for more quality training, will lead to improved training response and improved performance. *R*

SCOTT SAIFER, M.S. is accepting new clients now. He and the Coaches of Wenzel Coaching have been helping riders learn to listen to their bodies, recognize and correct fatigue, improve recovery behaviors and improve competitiveness since 1994. Our clients reported 23 top-3 race finishes in July of 2008. For more information about working with Scott or one of the other Wenzel Coaches, please visit WenzelCoaching.com or call (503) 233-4346.

