

# Planning Winter Training

October 2023

For those that ride most of their goal events and races in the Summer, we are now at the “end of season”.

It is the time to take a step back, have a short rest from cycling events, and do some exercise away from the bike, known as cross-training. This gives the body and mind a chance to recover from a season of mental focus and stress on the body.

This time of year is the appropriate time to contemplate the season just gone and consider goals and plans for next season. You should carefully consider what went well, and what were the cycling abilities that limited your performance (your “limiters”.) It is also a good idea to consider any technical issues that need to be addressed.

It is important to keep training through the winter if you don’t want to be starting back at “square one” at the start of the season every year and not be any better in your events in the next season than you were the in the previous season.

With the winter climate the way it is in the UK, it can be difficult to find the motivation to go outside and ride, so a turbo trainer or smart trainer and a great software package such as Zwift is a real benefit. I create my own training session files and execute them inside the Zwift virtual world (see [trainerday.com](http://trainerday.com)), which makes hard training so much more tolerable. Zwift does have its own selection of training sessions for you to choose from, but you must choose carefully and do the right kind of work at the right time.

There are many ways to train, but optimal performance on the bike doesn’t happen by accident. It comes from regular riding and from consistently training the relevant abilities and areas of weakness, aka your “limiters” for your goal events.

If you are in your first season or two of cycling, any kind of consistent, regular riding will likely see improvements in your ability. However, for more experienced riders, in-order-to keep improving, you need to consciously consider what kinds of training will be of benefit to you. That means having a plan.

In this article, I will show you how to plan your training over the winter into the coming season, so that you can give yourself the best chance of achieving your goals next year.

## How to Plan

To formulate a training plan, you need to determine your goals for the following year, such as important races or, perhaps a particularly challenging sportive or Gran Fondo – these will be your priority “A” events. These should be marked on the calendar, and you should plan towards these.

The next step is to work back from the priority events and break-down the time between the present day and the first priority-A event into phases of training. It is recommended that the earlier phases of training focus on more general cycling abilities, and as you approach your goal event, the latter phases should focus on training that are very specific to your event. Your body responds to training in a very specific way, so it is important to train in the way you expect to ride or race, especially in the weeks preceding your priority-A events. Not riding the bike and spending the winter honing your bench press will not improve your ability to ride 100 miles in the slightest!

It is important to allow for periods of rest within the phases, and within the weekly training periods themselves, so as not to accumulate fatigue that will affect the quality of your training, and the event itself. I recommend planning for a week or two to “taper” before your important events. Only the “A” priority events (2-3 of these per year) as if you are tapering constantly, you will lose fitness.

## Putting a Plan Together

### Set Goals

Planning starts with setting goals. The goals must be realistic and achievable, also, something to strive for, so not too easy to reach. When setting your goals, it really helps if you can quantify what you are looking to achieve. This could be to be the ability to ride at 20mph for 30 minutes or hold 300 watts for an hour or perhaps get up North Hill in 4 minutes. Ideally, your goal should be something that is measurable, that you can check progress against.

I’ll use my own personal plan to illustrate how I am planning to be ready for the 2024 season, where my goals are as below. Note that I don’t have specific races earmarked, but the start of the TT season is my first priority-“A” date.

- Ride a short 23-minute 10-mile TT on the E21/10 course. For this I need to average around 245 watts for the duration of the race to average about 27mph. I know this because I have achieved this in the past and averaged around that kind of power to achieve it.
- Ride under 1-hour 25-mile TT on the E21/25 course. For this I need to average around 230-235 watts for the duration of the race to maintain an average of 25mph. I have come close, riding at 220w average for 1:00:57. The ability to sustain that power output will be key.
- Secondary Goal: Finish in the main bunch at a TLI Crit race (not easy to measure) – avg speed between 23-25 mph for 60 minutes with lots of accelerations to recover from. For this personally, I need a solid aerobic base, a good CP 60 (FTP) of at least 230-240 watts and an ability to recover from multiple repeat accelerations and extended periods of time cycling at Vo2 Max. At this stage my peak sprinting power is not important as I am not expecting to be battling it out for the win at these events. Therefore, Sprint training will be a very small portion of my training plan. It won’t be neglected entirely though.

## Block out the main Phases of Training

When developing my own plan, I usually start with a key date and calculate how many weeks there are between the present week and the week of the event. This is then divided into phases of development.

Your training should progress from working on more general aerobic abilities and progress to more specific training, looking very much like the kind of event you are planning to ride, the nearer you get to the event.

To that end, I divide up the weeks available into Phases of training, as follows, working backwards from the event date;

- **Phase 3. Peak/Race Prep (6-8 weeks.)** This is where the final preparations are made. This training will be very specific to the goal event and will “look like” the event as much as possible, isolating the key elements to success in the event and working on those in particular. You may want to include a 1-2 week taper at this stage immediately before your event to recover from the fatigue built up during this intense phase of training.
- **Phase 2. Build (8-12 weeks.)** Here we are working on the key abilities for our goal event. The goal here is to develop the speed and endurance required to complete the target event. You shouldn’t really move out of this phase to phase 3 if you cannot meet this basic requirement.
- **Phase 1. Aerobic Base Building (8-12 weeks.)** Almost all cycling events are largely aerobic in nature. We need to build a strong aerobic base on which to build our performance. All elements of cycling and racing lead back to the need for a large aerobic base, so you should not neglect this phase. For long-lasting results, this is mainly achieved with riding for long periods in HR zone 2. However, it is important to work on keeping the threshold and VO2-max from falling too far in this phase also.

This is what my planned phases look like (I use an excel spreadsheet). I am planning towards the start of the club TT season in mid-April;

Note that I have not scheduled any off the bike “cross training” for myself. This is because I’ve had a lot of time off the bike this year due to illness, so I don’t need the recovery time. Instead, I need to focus on re-building my aerobic base as a priority.

	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	
	<b>Phase 1</b>					<b>Phase 2a</b>			<b>Phase 2b</b>			<b>Phase 3a</b>			<b>Phase 3b</b>		<b>In-season</b>
	<b>Aerobic Base Build</b>					<b>Build CP/FTP</b>			<b>Build Muscular Endurance</b>			<b>Build Anaerobic Ability</b>		<b>Peak/Race Prep</b>			
<b>wk</b>	1-2	3-4	5-6	7-8	1-2	3-4	5-6	7-8	9-10	11-12	1-2	3-4	5-6	7-8		Summer-season	
<b>w/c:</b>	02/10/2023	16/10/2023	30/10/2023	13/11/2023	27/11/2023	11/12/2023	25/12/2023	08/01/2024	22/01/2024	05/02/2024	19/02/2024	04/03/2024	18/03/2024	01/04/2024	15/04/2024		

## Decide What to Train in the Phases in Broad Strokes

Your strengths, “limiters” and the time remaining before your goal event determine how long you should spend in each phase. For me personally, I have had a lot of time off the bike this year due to illness, so my aerobic ability and FTP have fallen quite significantly. Therefore, I need to focus on the basics. This will entail developing my aerobic base and then a large focus on increasing my aerobic power at threshold. After that I plan to develop my ability to sustain that power for up to 1 hour, my target long TT time and Crit race duration. This is the development of muscular endurance. If that goes well, I will develop my ability to work at Vo2 max and finally my ability to repeat those very hard efforts (mainly required for Crits.)

It could be argued that I should spend an extra 2-4 weeks on my aerobic base, but I am not intending to do much, if any 50-mile road racing, so I only need 1 hour endurance for the Crits and the 25-mile TTs, so I don't really need the extended endurance. For somebody planning on some long rides, 100-miles+ I would recommend extending this phase and work on developing aerobic endurance.

Remember a plan is not cast in stone, it can and most likely, will need to change as the reality of life impacts your ability to train. Expect to adapt your plan as you progress through it.

I would suggest that if you cannot complete your goal distance close to the speed required for that event, you should continue with phase 2 and shorten or eliminate phase 3 altogether until you are up to target distance and speed.

## Identify Key Areas to Train

For each phase you'll want to have a general plan of the kind of training you'll be wanting to undertake. This is not about identifying specific workouts, but about the kinds of stresses you need to incur to make the required improvements in a particular phase.

Identify “limiters” for your chosen events and what training is required to improve them.

Employ the fundamental training concept of “Progressive Overload”. This means that each week you need to make your workouts slightly more intense (high-intensity work) or longer (endurance) than the previous week. However, every fourth week for example, have a week of much reduced amount of work to give your body a chance to digest the training and be recovered for the next block of training.

It is strongly recommended that you do not schedule any more than 2 high intensity (those above HR zone 2) workouts per week.

## Testing

Every 6-8 weeks it is a good idea to test yourself to measure progress. This could be an FTP test to see how your FTP is coming along, or a ramp test to test your Vo2 max.

Testing could also be a matter of timing yourself on your favourite hill or circuit, to see if you are faster. This of course is highly variable depending on the weather but can be fun and encouraging to do.

## Test Plan Illustration

To give you an idea of how to create a training plan, this is my own personal plan, as it currently stands.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q		
1		<b>Phase 1</b>					<b>Phase 2a</b>				<b>Phase 2b</b>				<b>Phase 3a</b>		<b>Phase 3b</b>		<b>In-season</b>
2		<b>Aerobic Base Build</b>					<b>Build CP/FTP</b>				<b>Build Muscular Endurance</b>			<b>Build Anaerobic Ability</b>		<b>Peak/Race Prep</b>			
3		1-2	3-4	5-6	7-8		1-2	3-4	5-6	7-8	9-10	11-12	1-2	3-4	5-6	7-8	Summer-season		
4		wk: 02/10/2023	16/10/2023	30/10/2023	13/11/2023		27/11/2023	11/12/2023	25/12/2023	08/01/2024	22/01/2024	05/02/2024	19/02/2024	04/03/2024	18/03/2024	01/04/2024	15/04/2024		
5		Zone 2 Endurance Zone 3/Tempo SST Intervals  Keep some Vo2 Max/Anaerobic Sprint training on recovery weeks					Shorter THR Intervals 10-15 mins Over/Under Microburst: 30/30, 40/20  Keep some Vo2 Max/Anaerobic Sprint on recovery week				Long THR Intervals 15-20 mins Shorter duration Vo2 max  Sprints on recovery week			Build Vo2 max + Anaerobic Maintain THR 10-15 mins Anaerobic work Sprints		Ramped efforts THR through Vo2 (Simulated break/chase efforts Sprints) Anaerobic Sprints			
6	Weight Loss	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y											
7	Strength Training	Lifting high weight, high reps to high weight, low reps				Introduce plyometrics and Hing at speed			maintain with core work 2-3 p/w										
8	Endurance HR Zone 2	w/e 3-4 hrs	w/e 3-4 hrs	w/e 3-4 hrs	w/e 3-4 hrs	w/e 2-3 hrs	w/e 2-3 hrs	w/e 2-3 hrs	w/e 2-3 hrs	w/e 2-3 hrs	w/e 2-3 hrs	w/e 2-3 hrs	w/e 1-4 hrs	w/e 3-4 hrs	w/e 3-4 hrs	w/e 3-4 hrs	w/e 2-3 hrs		
9	Zone 3/Tempo	20-30 mins	30-40 mins	Zone 3/Tempo if cannot get out for endurance ride															
10	Sweet-spot/SST	20-30 mins				30-40 mins	30-45 mins	Zone 3/Tempo if cannot get out for endurance ride											
11	Threshold work/THR	small amount at end of endurance rides				20-30 mins	20-30 mins	20-30 mins	30-40 mins	40-60 mins	40-60 mins	40-60 mins	20-30mins	20-30mins	30-40 mins	30-40 mins	Develop limiters		
12	Vo2 max work	small amount at end of endurance ride (2 mins)				2 mins	2 mins	2 mins	3 mins	3 mins	3 mins	4 mins	4 mins	4 mins w/repeat 4 mins w/repeat Develop limiters					
13	Anaerobic	small amount at end of endurance ride (30s)										1m intervals	1m intervals	1m intervals	1m intervals	Develop limiters			
14	Sprint work	small amount (at end of endurance ride)				8-10s	8-10s	8-10s	10-15s intervals	10-15s intervals	10-15s intervals	15-20s intervals	15-20s intervals	15-20s repeat short recoveries	Develop limiters				

It outlines the major phases I have identified that I need in-order to improve towards my goals.

Each phase has a general description of the kind of work that I have identified that I need to undertake.

Note how the earlier phases are generally focused on lower-intensity training, and the intensity builds through the phases where in phase 3 it looks very much like the key abilities required for the goal events.

The last phase usually ends up being extremely fatiguing because the volume of riding you are doing is at maximum at this point, and the intensity will also be at its highest. This is why it is important to have a taper before your goal event. Remember the equation  $\text{Form} = \text{Fitness} - \text{Fatigue}$ . A taper will reduce fatigue drastically whilst keeping the fall in fitness to a minimum, thus increasing "Form", which represents your ability on the bike.

It is not necessary at this stage, certainly not for the entire plan, but I have broken my plan down further, into the kinds of work required in the training intensity zones, to illustrate the areas of training and progression that I believe I am going to need to obtain my goals. The durations are the length of the intervals at the given intensity. I will use this each week to schedule the actual training session I will do. This will be highly variable and very likely to change as time progresses. I will adjust and adapt the work intensity and duration, depending on the progress I am making. Some weeks will be better than others.

You'll notice that the one constant item on the plan throughout all phases, is the Endurance Zone 2 riding. Cycling is fundamentally and primarily an aerobic sport, so this needs the most attention in your overall training programme. Zone 2 riding is the surest, least fatigue-inducing way to make lasting improvements all round. It is a very slow and gradual process however, so it is important to keep riding week-in week-out.

## In Summary

For the non-novice cyclist, the low-hanging fitness fruit has been picked already. In-order-to improve, some thought, and consideration need to be given to how to improve, to reach the cyclist's goals.

The best way to do this is to formulate a plan. Hopefully this article has given you some pointers on how to do that. To summarise;

- Assess the season just gone vs goals
- Identify realistic goals for next season
- Identify what areas need to be developed to achieve goals (limiters)
- Work back from key dates and create phases of training to develop the identified cycling abilities.
- Decide the training to undertake in each phase in broad terms
- Execute and adjust plan (with regular testing and adjustment of the plan)

## Final Thoughts

Improvements come a small amount at a time, so it is important to train regularly and consistently if you are to see meaningful improvements to your ability on the bike. This takes time, dedication and discipline. Tangible progress against a well-thought-out plan is a great way to motivate yourself to get through the winter training period and come into the new season in the best condition possible.

Hopefully I have given you some insight into the kind of planning I undertake for myself and for my private coaching clients.

If you have any questions or thoughts, please feel free to drop me a line at [coaching@madcc.org.uk](mailto:coaching@madcc.org.uk)

Thanks for reading!

Mark McGee

Club Coach



Level 3 Cycling Coach



velo121.com  
coach@velo121.com