Deload to Reload

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Every day athletes young and old push themselves to be better than they are right now. They spend countless hours training their bodies and their minds in pursuit of higher levels of performance. One part of training that is often left out in this quest for excellence is a period of time, whether it is a day or a week, where the athlete turns down the intensity of their workouts. This period of time is called a "deload period" and it is one of the most overlooked and underutilized tools for consistent and continual progression.

Deload periods are absolutely vital to ensuring that athletes can not only perform at their best when it matters most, but they can also get better each day up until that point so that when it's time for battle they are in top shape and ready to go. The frequency and duration of deload periods will vary from athlete to athlete based on their current conditioning level and the intensity of their workouts, but a general rule of thumb would be to incorporate a deload period once every four to six weeks during a strength training regimen and once every two to three weeks during a movement training regimen.

The reason the movement deload periods are more frequent than strength deload periods is that most movement training sessions are more demanding on the nervous system than a strength training session, which is more demanding on the muscular system. Because the nervous system takes longer to fully recover from stressors, i.e., training sessions, than the muscular system it should be allowed to refresh more often. Of course, as I mentioned earlier, the exact frequency of deload periods will be dependent on the individual athlete as well as the intensity of the training sessions.

The duration of the deload period is something that needs to be individualized as well. However, in general, one week of strength training sessions should suffice as well as one to two individual movement training sessions. The strength training deload period will usually be a little longer than the movement training deload period because, depending on the split of the program, it will take a full week for the athlete to deload all of muscles being worked in training. If the athlete is on a daily total-body program or works the same body parts multiple times in the same week, then the duration of the deload period may need to be adjusted. The greater frequency of the movement training deload periods combined with the fact that most movement training sessions work the same muscles results in a shorter duration of the actual period itself. Of course, the performance coach will need to be able to read his or her athletes and adjust the training plan as needed. The best combination of frequency and duration for each athlete will only be found through some trial and error of the performance coach.

There are many things that a deload period can consist of. Training techniques such as foam rolling and other forms of SMR, yoga and/or flexibility training, as well as massage therapy are all great options to incorporate into a warm-up, cool-down, or off day from training as these will improve tissue quality

and help to prevent injury during more intense training sessions. For movement training sessions, the number of sets or the duration of movement drills can be decreased. Another option is to make the entire workout an extended dynamic warm-up, really focusing on moving the joints through the full range of motion and re-teaching and working basic movement patterns. Once again, the intensity of these sessions will depend on the athlete's physical state due to previous workouts as well as what their immediate future looks like (upcoming competition vs. off-season training). Pool workouts consisting of aqua jogging and moving the hips, knees, ankles, and shoulders through their full range of motion are another option to substitute for the traditional movement training sessions, as these sessions will be much lower-impact on the joints of the athlete.

A simple deload plan for the strength training sessions of the athlete is to perform the same program they did the week prior, but use 70% of the weight on all the exercises that they did the week before. This weight will feel very light, and it should, but that's okay because while it is not physically taxing the athlete, it will allow their muscles to recover without having to take an entire week off from the weights. It will also allow the athlete to ingrain proper lifting technique for those exercises into their muscle memory as well as enable them to move throughout the full and desired range of motion with ease. With exercises that the athlete may only be using their body weight such as pullups, chinups, dips, and inverted rows, the athlete can use resistance bands or assistance machines to perform these exercises. However, it may be easier to instead cut the desired reps to 70% of what they were and perform the exercises with 100% of the athlete's body weight. An alternative to dropping the weights to 70% for exercises with external resistance is to implement the initial stages of an off-season training program into that week of strength training, focusing on body weight movements and building, or rebuilding, a strong athletic foundation for the athlete to continue to develop.

Some ways to tell that an athlete is definitely in need of a deload period are if they are lacking usual motivation for their training, their reaction times are slower than normal, they are dragging in between their drills or seem lethargic during their sessions, their movements are not as clean or explosive as usual, or their resting heart rate (RHR) is elevated. The last one is a clear sign that the athlete's nervous system is failing to fully recover between training sessions. If this is the case, then it may be wise to take a day to apply some recovery techniques (see *Recovery 101: Training Techniques* for specific ideas) or a parasympathetic session (see *The Parasympathetic Secret* for more information). Hopefully after spending a day or two applying these methods the athlete's RHR will be back down to what it normally is and the athlete can resume their normal training program. However, don't be surprised if it takes the athlete a week or more to fully recover if they are coming off of a long stretch (months) of intense training without deloading.

As a performance coach, the number-one objective of our art is to make sure that our athletes are able to perform to the best of their abilities when called upon to do so. To make sure that this is a possibility, it would be recommended and wise to implement deload periods into their regular training programs.

Get big or die tryin'.

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