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## What to do in the off season

Many people consider the fall of the year to be the end of the cycling season. They may look at the last weeks of September as the time to forget their bicycle and retire indoors, or to another activity. Others may look at September as a time to change from their road bike to their cyclo-cross or mountain bike and keep riding. The nice part about cycling is there are a lot of options available.

If you are a cyclist, you may be wondering how you want to spend your fall and winter. Well this is the perfect time to figure out what you want to do. The best way to spend your time in fall or winter is first figuring out what you plan to do. That will usually be a direct product of what you did this past year. If you are a recreational cyclist, this might be re-riding some of the long tours or group rides you did this year. If you are a competitive cyclist, this might be re-riding or changing the schedule of races you did this year. Maybe you want to try a stage race, or if you are a triathlete, you are ready for your first Ironman. To help you start looking in the right direction, here are some questions to ask yourself about this year and next year.

If you are fortunate enough to be part of a club or team, you may want to begin there. **What has been the best and worst parts of being on your club or team this year?** That may sound like an odd place to start, but while there are some very definite benefits to being part of a group, there can also be drawbacks. Let's say you joined a local bike club in order to have people to ride and train with. They all seem like a fun group to ride with, but as time goes by you feel like this group isn't really a good fit. Maybe they ride too hard or not hard enough. Maybe they don't plan things well. Clubs or teams are a lot like other social groups; not everyone gets along perfectly with all the members. Cycling is supposed to be fun and if the group you are with doesn't make it fun, you may need to start by looking for another group.

If you don't have any issues to deal with concerning your group or team, you may need to look a bit at yourself. **What do you think you accomplished this year? What do you hope to accomplish next year?** These are perhaps obvious questions, but we all have a tendency to criticize ourselves. If you are an adult, you probably have a lot of responsibilities. Family obligations, work, health, social commitments and a host of other things are all part of life for most adults. We have learned how to push ourselves, but we often don't know how to relax or give ourselves credit for what we do right. When you answer this two part question about accomplishment, try to be fair. If you have never completed a century before and you did one this year, take credit for that. If you feel bad because it took you seven hours, then tell yourself next year you will shoot to do it in six hours. Cycling is supposed to be fun, but the fact that you have to use your body to operate the bicycle adds a bit of challenge. Make your own fun challenges that fit your abilities. Don't underestimate yourself!

So let's say you have the perfect group or team already. **What cycling events did you enjoy the most and the least this year?** It may seem like an unnecessary question, but what your group does is the biggest part of the enjoyment. There are many cycling events and activities that cyclist enjoy doing as a group. Doing a camp or tour together can always be a lot of fun and in many cases, a challenge. If your team went to a race in Ohio and had such a good experience that they can't wait to do it again, then that should be part of your own plans for the upcoming season. When you are trying to decide on what to do in the off season, it has to be a preparation for what you plan to do next year. Competitive cyclists (Road racers, track racers, cyclo-cross racers, mountain bike racers, triathletes, etc.) usually have an important event that is the height of their season. When that event is over, they take a break and then start to get ready for the next year. You need a break between seasons. For one thing, your mind needs a break and a time boundary that separates one season from another. Otherwise all the racing and training turns into one continuous and unending ordeal. There many years when it can feel unending. So to figure out what you are going to do this off season, start figuring out what you want to do next year.

Once you have decided on your events for next year, you need to address your abilities. **What 3 goals have you set for yourself for next year?** This isn't supposed to be a critique, but more of an assessment of what you have to do to be better next year. For example, whether you live in the Chicago metropolitan area and have nothing that can be considered a real hill or you live in Colorado, cyclists can always improve their climbing ability. So in an effort to improve your climbing abilities, you set yourself a goal. Going to a camp for climbing can not only be a fun change of pace, but a very educational experience as well. I had an athlete I trained with Carmichael Training Systems. He had been to the CTS Climbing Camp twice and loved it. He was quite a bit older than many of the other participants, but had gotten so good at climbing that he out performed many younger riders. His goal for next season was to do another CTS Climbing Camp and beat his past results. Whatever you set for yourself as the 3 goals, make them a challenge, but make them realistic. A goal has to be something you must reach for, but it has to be reachable.

When you go about the process of setting goals, you should also be thinking long term. If you are 48 years old and have your own business, a wife and four children, your goals will be quite a bit different from an 18 year old triathlete. **What 3 things have you set for yourself as a goal in the sport of cycling?** Again, this should be an idea that relates directly to you and what you can accomplish with some good planning. We all think about what we want to do someday. How and where we would like to retire, or the place we hope to live someday. Long term planning means doing things now to enable what we want to eventually happen.

This leads to the last question to think about. If you are a serious cyclist and that doesn't automatically mean competitive cyclist. I know many people who ride a bicycle for nothing more than fitness, but they ride 250 miles per week. So if you are a serious cyclist and you want to achieve the most benefit from the sport, you should consider getting an education. That means getting a coach to help you reach your goals. If you are already on to the many benefits of having a coach, then you need to include that aspect in your questions. **What things did your coach do right or wrong this year?** Hiring a qualified coach may often seem like an unnecessary expense. A cyclist looks at themselves and thinks, "Why do I need a coach? I am not racing in the Tour de France." Well, you may not plan on being an auto mechanic, so does that mean you should know nothing about checking the oil, water or air pressure on your car?

Having a cycling coach, even if only for a year or two, can provide you with so much valuable knowledge that it can change your whole outlook on bicycles. Let me share an example;

I met a cyclist at my shop who had some health issues and needed to lose weight. He also worked for a company that took employee health seriously. This cyclist was planning to do a company bike ride around Lake Geneva, Switzerland. So he needed to be healthy, lose weight and gain the endurance needed to complete the company ride.

After talking to him over a period of weeks, he joined CTS and began following a training plan I had designed for him. That for most people is the biggest benefit. The structure of a personalized training plan turns hours or miles on a bicycle into something that not only provides fun, but very real improvement in your abilities on a bicycle.

Think about your own cycling for a moment. If you ride a lot, do you really enjoy it? Do you struggle to finish a ride or show no improvement over time? Do you get dropped or quit doing certain rides because they seem too difficult? All of these are reasons for getting a coach. A coach gives you the cycling education you need for what you do on a bicycle. If you are an adult who rides for health reasons, you need a coach just as much as any Ironman triathlete or Tour de France cyclist. Not knowing how to ride or train properly can waste valuable exercise time, because you aren't getting the desired benefits of a plan.

The cyclist in this particular case stayed with me and CTS for a little over one year. Job and family commitments forced him to change his routine. However, inside of that time he lost 37 pounds and went from riding a maximum of thirty five miles, to finishing a century. His ride in Switzerland was memorable. He met his personal goals and then some.

While I will always advocate for getting a coach, I am an even stronger advocate of being personally accountable for performance. No amount of help will bring improvement if you don't do what you know you should. Taking time to assess your behavior on and off the bike will be more helpful than a fantastic training plan you didn't follow. This year, use the off season to review where you have been and plan where you are going.

Good Luck!