Taper Strategies for the Racing Season
by Sergei Beliaev Ph.D., President, Super Sport Systems LLC

Summertime is all about racing. For competitive rowers, this is the most exciting and rewarding part of the year, but it also can be a bitterly frustrating or disappointing time as well. Performance during this period clearly depends on prior preparation (the foundation that was built during winter and spring training). There is no way to magically pull a rabbit out of a hat at this phase of the season, but there are a number of techniques and training strategies that may help get you through this intense period. In this article, we will discuss some of these training strategies and tips for the summer period that may help you enjoy racing more and enable you to receive maximum satisfaction from your performance.

Eventually, every season comes to the point where racing becomes the dominant thought. This leaves little, if any, time for actual training between races. For purposes of our discussion, we are going to assume that training was well thought out and planned accordingly long before the racing season started. If this is not the case, then strategies for this particular period of the season become much more complex, since we cannot rely on the solid foundation that should have been created specifically to support performance at this critical juncture.

With this in mind, we suggest treating the competitive season as part of the overall preparation plan and can then deal with issues related to pre-race preparation according to “standard procedure.” In this article, we will discuss the two most common scenarios: preparation for a single event and preparation for a series of events with the focus on a major one (usually the last one in any given cycle).

1. Single Event Taper-- Secrets of the “Perfect” Taper

There are a lot of myths and legends about taper. The effect of taper is associated with the phenomenon of increased speed along with a drop in general training volume at the end of the season, usually several weeks prior to the main event. By definition, this scenario suggests that you can achieve this effect only after substantial periods of training overload. If this is not the case, and your training loads were built up gradually and/or were not consistent prior to competition time, reduction of general training volume during this period will hardly make a difference. And in the worst case scenario, it may even impact your performance in a negative way. In situations like these, training is structured differently and should not follow “standard” taper strategies (if such a thing exists).
**Taper Duration**

In traditional thinking, taper normally lasts several weeks (at least two). During this time, training volume and the amount of high intensity workloads are generally lowered. The idea behind this strategy is to achieve stabilization of the athlete’s adaptive systems after a period of training overload. However, this approach appears to be valid only when the training process is NOT optimized, or more explicitly, when training loads are not progressive and NOT individualized to meet individual adaptive abilities on a consistent basis.

When a progressive training plan is followed, the taper period can be reduced significantly (to only 7-10 days). Plans like these “lead” an athlete to peak performance at a specific time. Therefore, the last week or so is used to “fine tune” all systems before the race.

**A Taper Planning Technique**

Preparation for taper requires “planning back” (actually counting training days backwards) from the date of the event. Every training session of taper should then be carefully weighted from the perspective of maintenance or cohesiveness and used to achieve a specific goal in one or the other. At the same time sufficient recovery time between training sessions also is necessary. This will allow you to compete on your race date fully rested, but still “perky” and sharp. In doing this, we are assuming that all necessary training goals have been achieved and that you are ready to perform to the best of your ability.

**Taper Strategies**

There is no such thing as “one taper fits all.” All athletes are different, and they have each had different training experiences during the season as well. When you approach the start of your taper period, you must evaluate your form to understand whether or not you are “exhausted” by your previous training regimen, or just eager and ready to race “no matter what”. It is important to understand that responses to taper strategies may be different in different types of athletes. Some respond well to rest and to a reduction of training volume prior to the start. Conversely, others may continue to improve through their usual workload. You will have to determine which approach works best for you.

In any event, you may still want to consider including all of the same types of exercises that you used during your preparatory period, since you need to support all of the functional abilities all the way up to the race date. We
suggest the following procedure and workloads during the last week of preparation prior to the main start:

- Continue to work on endurance in Zone Ia at or below anaerobic threshold (e.g. 5,000 m X 2/3 times and some cases up to 20 kilometers)
- Continue support of functional abilities. This is VERY important! (e.g. 3/5 X 1000 with a relatively short rest period of 20-45 seconds between repetitions)
- Include more exercises to develop anaerobic power (e.g. 4-8 X 250 / 500 meters @ ~95% of maximum speed with 2-4 minutes of rest, etc.). Depending on the taper strategy you choose, this type of work should end completely 3-5 days before the start to secure maximum recovery of anaerobic capacity. At higher levels of competition, we often use an alternative strategy that actually excludes this type of work one or more weeks prior to the start. Special training protocol should precede this strategy, which works best in highly controlled and carefully managed training environments (collegiate and national levels).
- Include drills and technical exercises. After all, taper is all about sharpening your senses and skills. (You do not want, however, to work on changing your regular stroke the last week before the start.)

NOTE: Two types of speed work require special attention

- Ability to achieve and keep maximum speed (e.g. at 250 meters)
- Ability to work at competition speed usually at longer distances (e.g. at 500 or 1,000 meters with 3-6 repetitions).

As a rule, be sure to include sets in zones Ia and possibly II (slow interval exercises), since this type of work will improve your ability to recover and also help with finding your proper tempo and stroke rate.

2. Multi-Event Taper with Focus on a Major Event

Preparing for a major event through a series of races is not an unusual strategy in competitive sports. In some cases, especially at the professional level, athletes in different sports may participate in as many as 100-130 starts a year, leaving little time for systematic training. But they still need to devote significant time (at least two months) in order to build a proper (aerobic) foundation before the start of their race season. A longer "foundation" phase will lead to a longer and more consistent race season.

Races in this case are used as preparatory steps, each solving a specific tactical or other task. Since races by definition are executed at work
intensity close to maximum levels, they may substitute for the needs of high intensity training. One important thing to remember here is that you are not aiming at winning every race you enter. Reaching “smaller” goals in preliminary races may be more important then just rowing full out, especially if you are still in the preparation phase of your season.

Goals you may target in each preparatory race can be divided into several categories.

• Technical: Here your goal is to be able to maintain a specific stroke count during the whole distance or a specific part of it. You should concentrate on specific skills and / or elements important for the improvement of your stroke or boat handling ability (regardless of the outcome of the race).
• Performance: Here your goal is to maintain a specific speed during particular parts of the race (e.g. keep maximum speed for the first 500, 1,000, etc.), or to be able to increase speed to a specific level / maximum (e.g. during the last 500 meters, etc.).
• Strategic: Rowers should be able to execute a specific strategy during the race.

You must realize of course that this is a rather simplistic view of the peaking process, but for purposes of this article, it will give you a basic understanding of some of the elements that need to be examined before you choose a taper or re-taper strategy.

For more information about this and other season planning topics, please visit http://www.RowingTraining4Life.com or http://www.3SUniversity.com, attend a 3S Clinic or call Dr. Beliaev at 804-519-1201.