Racing Weight: How To Get Lean For Peak Performance: 5-Step Plan for Endurance Athletes

by Matt Fitzgerald

It has long been a given that if a race-car builder wanted his car to go faster, he looked for ways to reduce its weight—sometimes going so far as to acid-dip body panels to make them thinner. Most of the major car manufacturers will be looking for new ways to make their vehicles lighter over the next few years in order to meet or surpass the federal government's new fleet-average-mileage regulations; besides making a car faster, lighter weight also increases fuel mileage.

Anyone involved in endurance sports knows logically that the weight factor also applies to their bodies when it comes time to get out the door to train and race. The more weight you carry above and beyond that needed to perform to perfection for the body you possess, the more of your energy and strength is used lugging around the extra baggage.

At the far extreme, of course, is the possibility of dropping so much weight that you compromise strength and endurance due to muscle loss.

For each person performing in certain sports, there is an ideal weight at which results are maximized.

Matt Fitzgerald, an athlete and author who specializes in running, cycling, and triathloning, has taken on the daunting task of understanding just what kind of weight is needed for top performance in six endurance sports: cross-country skiing, cycling, rowing, running, swimming, and triathloning. He also analyzes the diets of 14 elite endurance athletes, including Ryan Hall and Scott Jurek.

And he works with triathlete and nutritionist Pip Taylor to create a brace of recipes that are designed to fuel the endurance athlete while helping control weight.

Matt spends a fair amount of time educating—or perhaps re-educating—the athlete on how foods work in the exercising body. Wisely, he doesn't come down like a ton of bricks on the ingestion of fat, a substance endurance athletes need in their diet more than the average walking-around person. He brings science to the intuition of some long-distance runners from the 1970s and early '80s. The

uninitiated used to be appalled that Bill Rodgers, 4-time winner of both the Boston and New York City marathons, used to eat cold leftover pizza—after smearing it with mayonnaise! It certainly didn't slow down "Boston Billy." He had one period in his career where he won more than 20 road races in a row, everything from the 10K to the marathon. He also used to travel with a small jar of peanut butter, which he'd dip his finger into when he got hungry on the road. Boston Billy and Matt Fitzgerald would likely get along just fine at the dinner table.

Matt also makes a good case *against* protein-heavy diets. As he mentions, the East Africans are on diets that contain only about 10 percent protein, and it doesn't seem to have a major negative effect on their performance.

The timing of when you eat what you should eat is also discussed and backed by scientific studies. His admonition to not eat immediately before exercising is certainly sound; you want nutrient- and oxygen-carrying blood to be available to the working muscles, not shunted away to the stomach and intestines to break down the food you've just eaten. Eating (mostly carbs) 2-4 hours before exercising seems to be ideal.

Matt's book is cleanly written and easy to follow and covers all the bases. When I first heard the title and learned that the book was 288 pages, I was skeptical that he could find 288 pages of good material on the subject, but he did—and they're lean, high-performance pages, eager to be put to good use in making you a lean, mean running machine.