

Tapering to Peak Competition

By Susan Ellis

Tapering to important competitions is critical to performance. Rest is often more important during the taper than training. The time frame for the taper and the amount of work done in the taper will depend on the athletes' age, fitness level, and training history. Certain athletes respond differently to different kinds of taper. Some need to maintain a fairly high level of training to perform well, while others do better with more rest. Over time, you will get to know what works best for you. Some athletes do well with a longer taper (@ 21 days), while other athletes perform better with a shorter taper (@ 7-10 days).

One of the biggest mistakes young or inexperienced athletes make is to put on the big 'training push' in the last weeks leading up to the big competition. This works OK if you only have 1-2 ice sessions per week and want to add a third, and aren't doing any other off ice training. But parents will often make the mistake of dragging their kids off to the rink at ungodly hours more times than is necessary to get that little 'extra', when in reality the poor kids are just getting more and more tired.

Training at a high level causes muscle fatigue and muscle damage. The goal of the taper is to allow the muscles time to heal and fully repair themselves.

It is important during a taper to reduce the lactate work to a minimum maintenance level rather than a building level, and during the last week of taper to keep lactate work very low. Depending on the workout, it takes anywhere from 48-72 hours to clear lactates from the body, so doing your last tempo workout 3-4 days before the competition will give you time to recover. But remember to keep the volume very low to avoid high lactate accumulation. Athletes need to go into peak competitions feeling fresh and fast. Therefore, easy laps, refreshing technical cues, combined with short fast laps, and one low volume lactate workout will work for most athletes.

A typical peak prep week may look like this:

Monday: Easy relays or longer laps at sub lactate levels. E.g.: 5 x 10-12' relays or 5 x 10 – 15L easy.

Tuesday: Sprint laps with lots of rest between each rep, again sub lactate levels. 2 x 3 x 2L r 4 to 5' R 10'.

Wednesday: Tempo work, lactate work, but lots of rest between intervals to allow some recovery. E.g.: 5 x 4 – 5L r 8-10', or 2 x 3 x 3L r 3-4' R 8-10'. Follow up with good off-ice warm down – easy jog or spin on bike, stretching, massage. (Note: for some athletes switching the Tues / Wed workout may work better).

Thursday: Easy recovery laps focusing on technical cues. E.g.: easy relays – 4 x 8' or easy laps – 4 x 10L.

Friday: A few short sprint laps, no lactate accumulation, followed by very easy recovery laps, bike, or jog.

Better trained athletes will recover faster than lesser trained athletes, so you need to be very careful with the amount of lactate accumulation to allow each athlete to fully recover within 48 hours. Follow up any lactate program with a good recovery program of easy bike or jog, massage, hot/cold contrast bath, etc. to speed lactate removal.

Tapering to a peak competition is a bit different than tapering to other competitions that may be important but not critical for results. Strength training should therefore be carried through the competitive phase until 7-10 days before a peak competition. While skating is a form of strength training in itself (strength endurance), max strength can only be maintained off ice. Many athletes who stop strength training during the competitive phase often find a regression in strength, which may show itself in technical changes, loss of power, and even endurance, as a certain amount of max strength is required for strength endurance.

Proper nutrition and rest are an important part of the tapering process. Eating healthy, that is a proper balance of carbohydrates, proteins, and fat will help muscles to heal as well as help prevent illness. For many years sports nutritionists pushed the high carb thing. While carbs are important to replenish glycogen stores, protein found in lean meat, nuts, and low fat dairy products are important to help heal muscles. While I am not a big fan of supplementation, if you think you might be lacking protein then you may consider a protein supplement. A certain amount of fat is also needed in our diet, but find healthy ways to reduce fat intake such as eating only lean cuts of meat, eliminating high fat dairy products in favour of skim milk, low fat yogurt, reducing the amount of breads and other starchy carbohydrates in favour of fruit and veggies.

And most importantly, have fun and relax. Your work is done, you know you will go into the competition and do the very best you can do with what you've got, and if you give it your best you can be proud of yourself. One of the neatest things I saw was the Japanese team playing an on ice game the day before a world competition. They were laughing and having a ball. That's the joy of skating – fun and laughter, and oh ya, the speed!