

Credit Crunch

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It's mile 5 in your big ½ Ironman. You had a real good swim and your best bike split ever by 15 minutes! You're working real hard, but you think you can keep the pace up. Then you head up a steep hill, around a corner, and bam—your pace slows to 8:00 per mile...8:35...9:15, you're cramping up bad, your stomach feels lousy, you're walking now—it's not a pretty finish. You missed your PR by five minutes, when it seemed earlier that you had it in the bag. What happened? *You took out a loan you couldn't pay back and there was no bailout for you!*

You have a certain amount of energy you can expend in a race. The sound approach is to parcel out this energy evenly from start to finish, *paying your bills with cash (energy) you have on hand, one mile at a time as they come*. Do so, and you'll have a good day. Disobey this *contract with your body* and you'll eventually pay the penalty—you'll slow down considerably, and it won't feel good!

There's three ways you can approach pacing a race: even splits, positive splits, and negative splits. To illustrate these approaches, let's consider a five-mile run and a runner trained to run 8:00 per mile.

	Even Splits	Positive Splits	Negative Splits
Mile 1	8:00	7:35	8:15
Mile 2	8:00	7:35	8:05
Mile 3	8:00	8:15	7:55
Mile 4	8:00	8:45	7:50
Mile 5	8:00	9:55	7:40
Total	40:00	42:05	39:45

Even Splits

Even splits are a solid approach. You race consistently at a pace that you know you can maintain for the distance. This gets you real close to your best possible time for the race.

Positive Splits

Positive splits—starting faster than you can maintain and slowing down as the race goes on—never works! Going out too fast *always* leads to slower splits later on and your slowest overall time. When you going out too fast you are *borrowing* energy that you don't have. Your body knows what pace it can sustain for the distance and how much energy is needed to do so. Your body prevents you from

going too fast as a way of self-preservation. The first line of defense your body takes is to make things harder. Going a few percent faster than you can maintain for a little while will simply feel more difficult. Your muscles will feel heavier; your chest will burn a bit more. Think of this as a *late-payment notice*. If you correct things by slowing down to an energy-use level that you can *afford*, you'll be able to continue along at a decent pace, although you will have to slow down a bit. You see, for the energy you borrow, your body *collects interest*. Hard as you may try, since you borrowed energy you did not have, you have to pay back *more than what you borrowed*. That's why in our example (See Table 1), after starting out by borrowing 50 seconds over the first two miles, our runner paid back the 50 seconds and an additional minute and 15 seconds. The *sooner* your respond to your *late-payment notices* by slowing down, *the less interest you pay*. Continue to ignore your *late-payment notices* and you're headed for full-blown *foreclosure*—an all-out breakdown and the end of any chance of a good race.

Negative Splits

Negative splits are the way to go. Start out a notch below the pace you know you can sustain, then gradually build your pace over the course of the race, racing your fastest at the end. By preserving your energy early on, *putting some away in savings, you earn some interest (extra energy)* that you can use at the end of the race. This allows you to maintain a strong pace as you fatigue, finish really strong, and post your best possible time. Negative splits *always* yield your best overall time.

Let's consider how this concept applies to a ½ Ironman. (The idea here applies to all triathlons.)

	“Win the Swim”	“Bike PR”	“Great Race!”
Swim	0:23:00	0:28:00	0:28:00
T1	0:02:00	0:01:00	0:01:00
Bike	2:50:00	2:30:00	2:45:00
T2	0:02:00	0:06:00	0:01:00
Run	1:45:00	2:00:00	1:30:00
Total	5:02:00	5:05:00	4:45:00

Many triathletes get caught up in thinking that a triathlon is three races within a race. Unfortunately, your body sees it differently—your body sees it as one race and it wants you to use your energy relatively evenly from start to finish.

Two Common Pacing Mistakes

Because it's first, it's easy to be overly mentally aroused for the swim and this can make you go too fast. You may have been training for many months for your big race and now it's here. You may be tempted to pour all of this energy into the

swim to nail a huge swim PR or race others to T1. But the key to your best race is to harness your energy and swim the swim like it's the first quarter or eighth of the race because time-wise that's about what it is. How would you approach the first eighth of a marathon or ½ marathon? You'd be cautious to keep your pace conservative, building it gradually as you get into the middle and later miles. If you knew you were not the fastest runner there, you'd never race to be the first runner to get to the three-mile mark of a marathon or ½ marathon because you know that this is almost asking for certain disaster later on. The same thing holds true in triathlon! Visions of cheering crowds may dance through your mind as you are the first to exit the swim, but remember, the real glory (and personal satisfaction) goes to the athlete that executes a great start-to-finish race to get the overall win (or personal record). In our example (see Table 2), you can see what happens when you expend too much energy in the swim. The athlete had slower transitions, a slightly slower ride, a much slower run, and thus a slower overall race, all as the direct result of burning up too much energy early on. As with our runner, our triathlete paid back the *borrowed energy with interest* later on in the race.

Many triathletes who consider themselves strong cyclists and weak runners, go crazy on the bike. Going hard is good. Going fast is good. But racing so fast that it's as if you are riding in a stand-alone cycling time trial is a big mistake! It's easy to get carried away going for a bike PR and/or racing other triathletes to T2. Again, racing hard is good, but only when it's done with a balanced pacing approach that's going to get you your fastest overall time. In our example, you can see what happens when you race too hard on the bike. Our triathlete *paid back the borrowed time* at a *steep interest rate* in the form of a miserable-feeling T2, his/her slowest-ever run split, and a subpar overall performance.

To get your best time in a triathlon, pace yourself by parceling out your energy evenly from start to finish as in our "great-race!" example. No land-speed records were broken along the way, and some pride had to be swallowed as our triathlete let others pass him early in the race, but his sensible approach yielded his best possible time. Avoid *debt collection by racing on energy you have in the bank* and you too will be setting a PR, *an overall PR*, at your next race!

To learn more about Jason, Will, and Tri-Hard Endurance Sports Coaching:
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