



What is your weakness?

Damien Howell MS, PT, OCS

www.DamienHowellPT.com

804-594-0403

Unless you are competing in the Southern Hemisphere the winter is considered off-season for Triathlons. Off-season is a good time to develop strategies to improve performance and prevent injury. Winter is a good time to review and analyze your training diary as a way to identify individual strengths and weaknesses. The opinion of many is it better to focus on improving our weakness rather than to focus on improving strengths. Recent psychological research found when answering the question "which do you think will help you improve the most knowing your strengths or knowing your weakness", only 24% believe the key to success lies in their strengths.

In the Greek myth of Achilles, the son of Thetis and Peleus, Achilles was the bravest hero of the Trojan War. When Achilles was born his mother, Thetis, tried to make him immortal by dipping him in the river Styx. As she immersed him, she held him by one heel so the heel did not get immersed in the magical water. Therefore the heel remained vulnerable and stayed mortal. The myth gets cloudy over the years, as Homer wrote in the *Iliad* pride was the weakness of Achilles and the heel served as a metaphor.

Whether you value striving to improve your weakness more or your strength more, you need to be able to distinguish your strengths from your weakness. Like the Eastern idea of the Yin and Yang for every strength there is likely an attached weakness. If you carry more body fat you are probably likely a better swimmer, but are less efficient running and biking. If you are lean with little body fat you are likely a better runner and biker and more likely a "sinker" than a swimmer.

We all have a figurative Achilles Heel. For the triathlete weakness can manifest itself in many ways. For some their weakness is swimming, for some it could be biking, or running. Weak areas can be parts of the body, which have suffered previous injury. Relative weakness can be related to physical stature, pre-existing physical abilities, or because of the parents we choose. Weakness can be very specific, such as lacking flexibility in

the ankles needed for a good streamline flutter kick, or lacking the anaerobic power to stay on course in an open water swim against a strong current/tide.

For some individuals having the self-awareness of weak areas is the easy part. For others it is wise to seek counsel or coaching to help identify subtle and specific weaknesses and strengths. In order to identify a weak part of the body a musculoskeletal screening examination by a qualified healthcare professional can be helpful.

The following list of questions can help initiate a self-analysis to determine possible specific weak areas.

- Have you broken any bones in the past, particularly during childhood or adolescence?
- Have you had traumatic sprains, strains, or dislocations in the past?
- Have you had surgery on your bones, joints, or muscles?
- As a child did you wear corrective shoes or braces?
- Are both your feet the same shoe size, and are both your legs the same lengths?
- Do you have any bone or joint problems such as arthritis or osteoporosis?
- Have you experienced recurring injuries in the past from regular exercise programs?

If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, you have an increased risk of developing an injury during triathlete season. Studies have demonstrated that an injury within the last year corresponds to a 50% greater risk of a new injury in subsequent season. A health care professional can measure your range of motion (flexibility), muscle strength, and coordination. This systematic examination provides hard evidence of residual weakness.

If you decide to seek a musculoskeletal screening examination, you must decide what type of health care professional and which individual health care professional to see. The health care professional should be knowledgeable about the musculoskeletal system and about injury prevention. Ideally the individual should also be knowledgeable about the specific demands of triathlons.

If deficiencies are identified specific interventions can be developed and applied to change the deficiencies. Again some individuals are skilled at developing their own remedial or rehabilitation program; whereas others should seek counsel or coach to develop a program to address

weaknesses.

Possible interventions include specific remedial strengthening exercises for specific muscles, which have been identified as weak. Specific stretching exercises can be avoided if specific muscles are identified as being too long or specific joints are identified as being too loose or lax. Perhaps equipment adaptations are needed to account for faulty alignment, such as, shoe inserts or adjustments to bike seats.

Often the weakness of a triathlete is skill and coordination to move the body at maximum efficiency in a forward direction when swimming, biking, or running. Correcting faulty form is a large topic which I will address in future articles.

In the mean time reflect on what are your strengths and weaknesses. Choose to focus on improving either your strengths or your weakness, or both your strengths and weaknesses. If you choose to work on your weakness concede it is not fun to work to improve weak areas, and get after it. Enjoy the satisfaction that comes when you recognize your race times and fitness levels are improving.