



The Centre for Integrative Sports Nutrition

## COACHING AND CARE OF ATHLETES IN LOCKDOWN – BY PAUL EHREN



This is written as a companion blog article to Simone's excellent [article on maintaining muscle size and strength](#) during this period of social isolation, published a short time ago.

I really want to address a somewhat wider picture and look at some actions that we as coaches and athletes can take, not only to survive, but hopefully thrive during these crazy times.

Firstly, it is important to remember that individual circumstances will vary dramatically, and it is vital that we work closely with our clients to address these circumstances.

By way of explanation, let me quickly highlight a few examples that I have encountered. I was five weeks into my prep for a British Championship bodybuilding qualifier when the gyms were forced to close, therefore I was just approaching a peak in terms of exercise intensity and dietary adherence. A client/friend had just

won the British Lightweight Cage Warriors MMA title the weekend before shutdown, and was therefore looking at a period of restoration, repair and recovery (consider the amount of immunosuppression taking place after a 12-week training camp, dieting to make weight and the contest itself). A couple of my other combat athletes were actively prepping for the Tokyo Olympics. These Games, with all other major events, have been cancelled/postponed with no certainty as to their future.

We therefore, need to actively look at the exact circumstances of each client and deal with their needs as they are presented.

### **Be realistic**

Individual circumstances will dictate the limits of what we can achieve. The chances are that neither us, nor our clients, will have a fully equipped home gym, so we have to appreciate that a certain degree of detraining is inevitable if we can no longer squat or bench press our normal working poundages.

This picture represents the sum total of my personal lockdown equipment:



In a similar fashion, I've recently spoken to a competitive triathlete residing in Dubai. Due to the nature of the political system in the United Arab Emirates, they are in a state of total COVID-19 lockdown, requiring an official government permit to leave their residence. Since this obviously means that direct training for the main components of the sport – swimming, bike riding and running – are out of question, concentrating on strength and conditioning protocols becomes the only remaining option. Once again, a performance drop-off must be expected until normal service can be resumed.

However, I seriously think that this is a perfect period to reassess, think outside the box, work on areas that we may have ignored for months, or even years, and put ourselves in a position to come back even stronger once a degree of normality has been resumed.

This correlates to both my personal plan and what I have in mind when advising clients:

### **Mental health/well-being/positivity**

I have put this section first with good reason; without these being in place, the whole house of cards can collapse.

Particularly when dealing with high-performing individuals, there is quite often a direct relationship between ability and mental fragility – we need to be aware of this and advise accordingly. Even for the mentally strong, these are troubling times and every element of positivity should be exploited.

Again, using myself as an example, my day starts at about 5 a.m. when I naturally wake up. By 6 a.m., after a cup of coffee, I'm out for my daily outdoor exercise allowance. The first part of this is a pretty lively hill walk with a 20 kg rucksack load. The return journey is still 'stepped out', but the ground is mostly levelled or downhill (useful eccentric loading). More importantly, it goes through a country park, allowing me to concentrate and fully appreciate the breaking of a new dawn, the feel of the chill air on my face, my movement over the ground, my controlled breathing, and the sights and sounds of the outdoor space – to soak these in, to fully appreciate them, and to wonder in the true power of nature.



## **Exercise**

As mentioned, it is important to be realistic, but there are so many things we can concentrate on. The fact that you may be able to perform a 400 lb squat or a 300 lb bench press doesn't mean that you can pistol squat, knock out many handstand press-ups or nail a Turkish get-up. Control of our own body, improvement in power-to-weight ratio and translation to a degree of plyometric power is so important, and an awful lot more challenging than many would think. It is very possible to produce routines that will leave most strength- and power-based athletes on their knees with minimum equipment, whilst still leaving room for positive overload and training adaptations.

Many sports, including the power-based options, and components of triathlons are also extremely biased towards the sagittal plane (e.g. standard back squat or bicep curl), with hardly any concern given to frontal (e.g. lateral lunges or side steps) and rotational (e.g. medicine ball wood chops or Russian twists) plane movements. Over time, this will lead to weakness and imbalances. I would argue that by addressing these issues, we can return to our normal modes of exercise/competition that much stronger.

## **Correctives**

By dint of our chosen sport, I can almost guarantee that us and our clients will have various 'issues' that need attention. For example, my right rotator cuff is a mess, and this has given me a perfect opportunity to concentrate on corrective/stabilising moves and mobility.

Remembering the triathlete, just their extended position on a bike leads to foreshortening of the psoas complex, internal rotation of the shoulders and weakening/dysfunction of the thoracic spine. These are all aspects that triathletes can now address without spending 100's of miles on the bike each week. The Thomas stretch is a good way to lengthen the psoas complex.

## **Recovery/overtraining**

Despite the current restrictions we face, because of the enforced additional recreational time we all have, we need to be aware of the possibility of overtraining and under-recovery. I do also foresee mental overtraining as a possibility in some individuals, with little else to occupy their thoughts apart from their sport.

## **Nutrition**

I will throw the net slightly wider than just the protein requirements so eloquently dealt with by Simone.

This is also a time for discipline in our nutritional protocols. One big problem that I'm coming across is the tendency to 'graze' throughout the day or evening when perhaps we haven't got as much to occupy ourselves as normal. The approach that I have taken here is to adopt a 14:10 IF protocol (with three or four meals), which allows my system more time than usual to regenerate and also keeps my mind off

snacking.

We must all work within our own personal budget restrictions, but I would also take this opportunity to eat as well as possible, not as much as possible! Organic, free range, grass fed, etc., with sugary, processed, pre-packed and take-away food being severely limited. Sourcing food from local suppliers or farm shops rather than the madness of mega stores is a great idea, and hopefully this will become the new normal once some of the current restrictions are finally lifted.

In a nutshell, we have to expect a degree of performance fall-off, but we can place ourselves in a physical and mental position to return much stronger.

To find out more about Paul Ehren, click [here](#).