

# Coaching: A Live Experiment

'Get a coach, get faster'? This rider tries it out

by Kari Redfield

I'm a 5:30 century rider — and can't seem to get faster. My genetics argue otherwise. With a Vo2 max\* of 69, I should be able to ride 100 miles blazing fast and under 5 hours.

For the first time ever, I'm about to get whipped into ultimate shape by a bicycling coach. Can three-plus months of focused training get me to that magic number by El Tour de Tucson? Time will tell.

The quest begins Aug. 10, when I start working with Darrin Permenter of Coyotes Athletic Centers in Phoenix. He's the coach of Ironman Andy Keller, and this past season, headed up one of the most successful cycling programs at the mountain biking National Championships, placing three athletes on the podium.

At the time of this writing, (in early October), I'm nine weeks into the program. I took two weeks off my typical training program to taper for two events. The rest of the time is three intervals a week, sprints on a simulated altitude trainer, a recovery session on a simulated altitude trainer, two recovery days and two rest days.

It's painful. So painful I contemplate quitting and going back to my old training ways, which provide a good mix of pain and pleasure.

I kid with friends. "The intervals hurt so bad they make me bleed from the eyes." I elaborate: "It's all I can do to get and keep my heart rate in the target zone. It takes all of my concentration — all of it. And even then, even then, I can't always do it."

"I thought you liked pain," they say.

And I do, except this is a whole new level of pain beyond the leg- and lung-searing pain I do incorporate into rides.

I've pretty much given up on riding with people, because if I need every ounce of focus to do my intervals right — and if I curb my effort even a little or get distracted I sell myself short. And if I ride with people on recovery days, I go too hard and can't do the next days' intervals.

Here's a taste of the early days, from my training journal:

*I can't tell you how discouraged I've been. I've been constantly tired — to the point that I'm actually been worried about my health. I can't tell if I'm getting faster. I'm always riding intervals and trying (and too often failing) to hit my HR zones. Or I'm on a recovery day, and I'm empty. I've spent parts of entire weekends sleeping away the afternoons. I'm riding for pain, and pain only.*

Or like this, for Aug. 27:  
*I couldn't get in the heart rate range today. I hit the green zone [lactic to anaerobic threshold]. I was supposed to go red [three beats or more above anaerobic threshold].*

Another entry, for Aug. 31:  
*I rode Mt. Lemmon today. My workout was supposed to be five minutes in the red zone. After yesterday's intervals, I can't even come.*

Of course, I hit my zones exactly sometimes.

Darrin, as always, offers encouragement and tells me to stick with it as closely as possible. Listen to your body, though, he says. Make adjustments as necessary.

"Remember," he says. "There's a difference between riding and training. And that's the difference between winning and losing."

## A Victory

On Sept. 5 comes a breakthrough. I ride one of my favorite rides, up South Mountain in Phoenix to the Towers. It's a bit more than 1,000 feet of climbing in seven miles, with grades at 4 and 6 percent and that reach 8 to 9 percent, but also has four ripping fast downhills, and places where the grades back off. Before, my fastest from the bathrooms parking lot to the top was 34 minutes and 30 seconds. Sept. 5 I do it in 33:17 from the bathrooms, 27:17 from the bottom of the hill where most people, including competitors in the South Mountain Time Trial, start timing. The next week, I do it even faster, in 32:50. This was my entry:

*My HR hit 190 in that last sprint to the top. I was at more than 181 for well over five minutes. It was 171 or above for 26 minutes. I didn't let up even when I was going downhill. I kept it in the big chainring for the entire middle section. How I wanted to get off my bike at the top after that last sprit and was ready to puke! How I wanted to fall over.*

*If today would have been the TT on South Mountain, I would have been the second place Cat 4 woman cyclist.*

Finally! Confirmation that I am indeed getting faster.

With all those hard intervals, one indeed hopes.

Darrin, too, is ecstatic over my progress. I go in to talk to him more about the training he's developed for me.

I want to know about the altitude training. I can't tell how much of it is because of the simulated 9,000 feet. Logic, of course, suggests it is significant. It forces my body to make more red blood cells and increase Vo2 max. Both of these are what EPO does in athletes, though doping does it to a much greater degree and in a way that has a really good chance of killing the athlete.

"It's hard to believe that working out the body at altitude for 30 minutes makes that much difference, but you're breathing the air and letting it filter through to each cell in your bloodstream," Darrin says. "Just breathing the air during certain sessions while exercising does affect you at a cellular level, increasing the ability of your mitochondria to produce energy."

I also wonder about the short intervals. I am hitting such a high intensity for such a short amount of time — is it really going to work? Most of the intervals I've been doing before Darrin are one after another for 35 or more minutes.


"If you can only put out 5 more watts than anyone else, you're way ahead. It's not the people that explode out of the gate," Darrin says. "It's those who put out more pedal stroke after stroke. So if we can get your watts up just a bit with super high intensity training, that will make all the difference."

## High Hopes

The next boost to my motivation comes when I ride the Skull Loop Challenge in Prescott. It's 90 miles with 6,000 feet of climbing. Last year I rode it with a friend in 6 hours and 15 minutes. Though the route is three miles shorter this year and slightly different — true, but that can't account for this year's time of 5:32 — and I ride all but eight miles by myself.

But, then comes a 70-mile race in Scottsdale. I finish in 3 hours and 17 minutes, a letdown. I get into good-sized groups, and I ride in groups for at least 60 miles of it, not pulling. To finish El Tour de Tucson in less than 5 hours, I have to increase my average pace by at least 1 mph above that. Doesn't really sound like a lot, but 1 mph for 5 hours is a challenge.

Can I do it with the help of this tortuous, all-consuming program? Time will tell.

Find out in the next issue. 

*\*Vo2 Max measures liters of oxygen that you can take in and pump to your muscles in one minute. Darrin says that he considers anything above 60 in the elite athlete range. "High 60s is in the top 5 percentile. Anything over 70 is freakish." It is largely set by genetics. Experts believe that, with proper training, it can be increased by about 20 percent from the lower limit.*

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The author, left, at the front of the pack.