From a coach's point of view, I see athlete performance profiling as the process of ensuring both athlete and coach are on exactly the same page with regard to:
·What you are trying to achieve together, and;
·What areas need to be addressed in order to reach those goals
This is a vital first stage in the planning process, and without it, it's easy to find you weren't quite aiming at the right target, and it may be too late to change course…

In this article, I am just going to briefly overview the principles of the performance profiling process we use with our athletes at NTPCW – it's not intended to be a specific 'how to guide', but hopefully will trigger some thoughts and ideas. I'll be following up with a webinar and a Q&A over the course of the next month, so if you have any questions off the back of it then please give me a shout on one of those. And equally, I am always up for hearing other people's ideas and processes to challenge my own thinking.

Phase 1 – Defining the Goal
This section is mainly relevant when working with athletes with a specific target e.g. qualify for an Age-Group team, break 12-hrs for an Ironman etc. As a coach, if the athlete you are working with is mainly focused on 'general improvements' then it's probably ok to skip to Phase 2. When defining the goal, it is important to be crystal clear on what it is – I've seen a lot of times where people can be a bit too vague with this part, which often means a lack of clarity of what to work on, or can result in frustration even if you do achieve the performance goals when it doesn't line up to the desired outcome. It can be quite 'scary' for an athlete to put something out there that is ambitious and challenging (for fear of 'failing' if they then don't reach it), so part of the coaching skill is to get them comfortable with declaring their goal and then focusing on the process of getting there without being too obsessed by the outcome only. I'm going to make up an example from my frame of reference for the purposes of following through this piece, and use an U23 male athlete trying to earn a British Elite Series Race podium finish over sprint-distance, to achieve international qualification

Phase 2 – Creating the Performance Targets – 'Where you need to get to'

Once you have a clearly defined 'Outcome Goal' e.g. a race target time, a qualification or finish position etc, the next stage is to break this down into the subsequent 'Performance Goals' – i.e. what performance do you expect it to take to deliver this outcome? This is where it gets more difficult, because for most outcome goals (even time-based ones), you and the athlete aren't in control of a number of things that can affect this – e.g. what the standard of field is or what other competitors deliver or what the weather conditions are. The key to this phase is therefore gathering good information to help you make the 'best guess'. This is one of the areas that I spend quite a lot of time focusing on, as I feel it really helps give athletes realistic expectations of where they are at and what level they need to be to deliver certain race results. You can gather this information from a range of sources – previous results from the same/similar courses, other known competitor's data, team/squad mates who have raced at the same event/level before, single discipline/TT data, weather forecasts, elevation profiles etc etc.
I tend to break the performance requirements down across each discipline (plus transitions) into the following components (I will have more detail on the specifics within each component on the webinar):
·Physiological
·Psychological
·Technical/Skills

With the physiological requirements, we are mainly looking at the basic swim/bike/run demands, but also need to consider factors such as nutrition and climate. In this section I will always look at the race specific demands, but also at the underpinning faster paces (speed component), and slower paces (endurance component) as this will help understand which way our athlete is 'skewed' and guide the type of training we might give them to improve. For our example of the U23 male in the swim this might look like:

- Race-specific component = 800m TT - <09:15
- Speed Component' = 200/400m TT (we also look as short as 50m for draft-legal racing as getting into position is critical due to the 'pack' nature of racing)
- Endurance Component' = 1500m TT or Threshold Ramp Test

In terms of psychological demands, we tend to look at both race specific and more general holistic skills – e.g. race craft and decision-making within a race, but also organisation and planning, delivery under pressure if the goal is an outcome/qualification type. And technically we would assess the demands of the race e.g. type of swim (beach/lake/river), bike course, transitions etc.

Phase 3 – Understanding the Athlete's Current Profile – 'Where you are'

Once you and the athlete are clear on the demands of the competition, the next task is to assess the athlete's ability against each of the criteria you have identified. For some sections e.g. the physiology and/or TT data it can be fairly objective, whereas others, e.g. cycling technical ability, psychological skills etc it would be much more subjective. These subjective elements are a great chance to get into a good coaching discussion with the athlete, because you are fully relating it to their goals and the competition demands. I find this really helps an athlete get 'under the skin' of their own performance and for the coach and athlete to explore any differences of opinion in a collaborative way.

Summary

So to summarise, once you've been through the above process you would end up with something along the lines of (using our previous example):

OUTCOME GOAL:
·Podium finish at British Elite Series race
PERFORMANCE GOALS:
·Swim - <09:15 800m swim TT plus excellent open water skills & decision-making
·Bike – >325W at LT2 with ability to deal with spiky/technical riding in large group
·Run – 15:30 for 5km off the bike (~14:45/14:50 fresh 5km) delivered under pressure & fatigue
CURRENT ATHLETE STATUS:
·Swim - ~9:22 800m swim TT with decent open water skills
·Bike – ~315W at LT2 but exceptional technical/group skills
·Run – 16:10 for 5km off the bike (~15:30 fresh 5km) – room for improvement with run technique to support faster running

As previously discussed, this piece was aimed at outlining the principles and approach I currently use. I will go more into the details of the specific factors and how to use them in the webinar.

Putting it together – creating the Performance Plan…

Once you have all of this information, the next step is to integrate the 'where you are' and 'where you need to get to' into the Performance Planning process (i.e. the 'how will you get there'), including prioritising and periodising the objectives. This is especially in an example like the one above, where all three disciplines need some work. The coaching skill then is in deciding what order to focus on them, and how to structure the weeks and months in the lead up to the race in order to give the best chance of achieving all of the performance goals simultaneously by the given date.
However, that's a whole new topic and I've already gone on long enough, so I'm sure we can cover this in a future edition of the newsletter/webinar series...!

Luke Watson
Welsh Triathlon
Performance Coach

WELSH TRIATHLON CYMRU