WHY THE WEIGHT GAIN?

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There are countless reasons people push themselves to their personal limits: to run marathons, compete in triathlons, to ride in multiple-day cycling tours. It requires much dedication, sweat and (sometimes) tears to log the necessary hours of grueling training. So what's their inspiration?

For many, it's the satisfaction of knowing that they can complete such an event. For others, it's the camaraderie or breaking their own personal records. Still others may be motivated by a particular cause, such as the MS Tour for the Cure, or the Team Diabetes Marathon Training Team.

Few people subject themselves to these hours of training for the sole purpose of weight loss. It's a nice side benefit, but not the primary goal.

You can imagine a person's shock if the number on the scale gets higher and higher during their training. "How is this even possible?" "Why is this happening to me, with all the training I'm doing?!" Fortunately, there are several logical explanations for this (often horrifying) phenomenon.

more lean mass?

Increased mileage on the road, on the bike, and in the pool can translate to an increase in strength and muscle mass. This added muscle mass will be reflected in a higher overall weight, yet a lower percentage of body fat. How can you tell if it's muscle or fat? You can go by how your clothes fit: if your pants are tight in the waist, it's likely that you've gained extra body fat. But if your clothes are only tight in the thighs or upper body area, it's likely that you've put on some muscle mass. You can also track your body fat percentage, which helps you distinguish the muscle from the flab.

more glycogen stored?

As you step up your training, an increase in weight may be due to an increase in glycogen, the stored form of carbohydrates. Carbohydrates are bound to water when stored as glycogen in our muscles. In fact, there are approximately three parts of water for every one part of carbohydrate stored in the muscles. Highly trained individuals become very adept at storing glycogen, and may gain as much as three or more pounds as they taper down their training to prepare for an event.

more calories?

Unfortunately, the extra weight may be due to an increased appetite -- and a corresponding increase in calories consumed. Sure, the average 150-pound individual can burn a minimum of 500 calories per hour of intense training. But this calorie deficit can easily be offset by their intake during training (energy bars, gels, sports drinks, and other carbohydrate sources). A general rule of thumb is to consume half of your body weight in grams of carbohydrates during each hour of training. So a 150-pound person should aim for approximately 75 grams of carbs hourly, translating to 300 or more calories each hour -- quite a significant portion of the total calories burned.

more liquid calories?

Drinking your calories from sports drinks and diluted fruit juices may be necessary to replenish carbohydrates and electrolytes during training and immediately afterward. However, most people don't need these drinks at other times throughout the week. Calories from beverages can add up rapidly, and simply don't satisfy hunger in the same way that eating real food can.

more rest?

Relaxing more than usual in your down-time? In your life before training, you were constantly in motion, playing a round of golf, hitting tennis balls, playing with the kids. Now are you so pooped post-training, you prefer to chill on the sofa, snack through the afternoon, and just take it easy, recovering from the morning's long training session? It's highly possible that you're burning fewer calories overall, in spite of burning more calories during the hours of your workouts.

less anxiety....

Finally, stop obsessing. Don't let the number on the scale dictate how you feel about yourself and your training. Instead, go by how your clothes fit, your energy levels, and particularly your training performance. If you need a number to provide an objective measure, consider having your body fat tested. This will let you know whether any potential increase in weight is fat, muscle, or a blend of both.