



Recovery for the Academic Athlete

by MARIE WALL

What is an academic athlete? An athlete is a person who commits their life to a pursuit of excellence. The arena of academic athletics is teaching. An athlete requires proficiency in several areas: endurance, strength, flexibility, balance and recovery. Imagine a gymnast; their physical well-being would be their primary focus, but the emotional, mental and spiritual components would be essential for their overall excellence. It would appear for the academic athlete that mental energy would be the driving force of competence, but being healthy physically, emotionally and spiritually would enhance your ability to be fully engaged at school and at home. Crucial to being a healthy athlete who is able to perform at high levels and have a balanced life, is recovery. The focus of this article is the necessary recovery for the academic athlete – you.

The Role of Recovery

Recovery is the downtime between high energy outputs; it is necessary for the renewal of mental and physical energy. Consider energy out as stress and energy in as recovery. During the year you have been in a cycle of high energy output over a long period of time. There may have been a few recovery breaks in there, but now that the off season is around the corner it is essential to make this a recovery period for your energy stores.

A recovery period is a time to be relieved of the workplace demands. To have a vacation from the necessities of the workplace schedules, paperwork and all activities of the school year. This recovery is time to do other things and focus on family and self in a completely different manner. It gives you an opportunity to mellow out and put your attention into pursuit of other interests. It is a vacation; a time to recover from the high energetic output and restore your energy.

Much of our culture values constant output and has little or no value on renewal of energy. This is why the athletic analogy is useful. In athletics, recov-

ery is a vital part of the training cycle. If an athlete does not have sufficient periods of recovery they are at risk of overtraining and underperforming, while excessive recovery can have the same effect of underperforming due to under training. There needs to be a proportional balance of output with recovery to optimize performance; both short intervals of recovery and more intense periods of renewal, such as summer, are required for optimal performance.

The Off Season

For the academic athlete, teaching is a demanding endeavour which requires that you pay attention to your energy output – stress, and energy input – recovery. The summer is the off season for academic athletes. How you use your time to restore and renew your energy is a critical period in your performance cycle. It is common knowledge that professional athletes use their off season to let go of past performance and prepare for the upcoming season. Do you think they stop playing sports? This is doubtful, but the sports may be of a different nature and the training would be focused on renewal, not performance. This can be true for the academic athlete as well. Your off season renewal may take any number of directions. The essential aspect is to get rest from the demands of work, recharge your energy and renew your focus in the areas of your life that are most important – relationships, health, happiness and friendships.

Whatever the expectations and outcomes this school year presented, it is coming to a close. The summer is an opportunity for adjustments and changes. We have all heard, “You are what you eat.” An even truer statement is, “You are how well you take care of yourself.” To take care of yourself well requires daily and yearly renewal. While it may be difficult to maintain healthy practices during the year, the off season presents an opportunity to put into practice the lifestyle changes you would like to integrate into your personal routine, whether they are physical, emotional, mental or spiritual in nature.

The off season can also be a time to work on the areas that need tweaking. Let's consider what new routines may be of benefit to you: an eating plan, exercise plan, yoga, organizational skills, reconnecting to your relationships, paying attention to creating a positive attitude, or any number of pursuits which can help you move towards the goal of health, happiness and balance.

Cross-Training During the Off Season

Again, to consider the sport analogy, the off season is used to develop non-dominant areas and heal injuries possibly through cross-training. Try to pick up an activity or learn a skill that may be a stretch for you. This is a way to extend your interests and give you relief from the norms of the yearly routine. You may find an interest that you had not realized you would enjoy.

When conducting workshops I have often spoken about "me time". This year I have reframed this to "recovery time". The reason is simple. Many people related "me time" to selfishness and alone activities. "Recovery time" provides a much broader concept that can include any activities that are restorative, whether alone or with others. Recovery in our emotional arena is essential to sustaining the key components of our lives – family and friends. An activity that is enjoyable, fulfilling and affirming serves as a source of emotional renewal and recovery.

As academic athletes, mental performance is in high demand. The recovery time of summer provides relief from the mental demands you have been fulfilling; a vacation from all the schedules and calendars that school life imposes. Your need for high focus deserves a break and it permits room for more creativity. To maximize your mental capacity, this recovery is essential.

Spiritual renewal is a balancing act between the commitments to the purposes beyond yourself with adequate self-care. You are of no assistance to others if your energy stores are depleted. Even if it is hard to believe your self-care is a selfless act, remember that you use your energy for the greater purposes in your life and refilling the tank is a part of that.

As an academic athlete you have playing seasons and off seasons. Use this summer to recover from the demands of teaching and preparing yourself for the year is the gift you can give yourself and consequently, your family and your work. The challenge is to become fully engaged, invested in yourself, your family and your school when you are working. I wish you a joyous and safe summer of recovery.

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