

Should You Buy a Power Meter?

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Should you buy a power meter? If I was your coach you'd have to. I require every triathlete and cyclist I work with to own one. Why do I do that? Because I know they will accomplish more by training with power than without. I've seen it happen with every athlete I've coached since power meters hit the market about seven years ago.

Don't get me wrong, heart rate monitors are great training devices, also. They too are a requirement of mine. But they aren't as important as power meters. The interesting thing is, however, that heart rate monitors are more beneficial now that there are power meters than they were before. Now there is something to compare heart rate to besides how you feel which makes the information much more valuable.

But let's get back to why you should get a power meter.

They are more valuable to the serious athlete than a lighter frame or faster wheels. Given the choice I'd recommend a power meter every time. Why?

Let's start with a basic reason—getting the intensity right for workouts. Power meters remove most of the guesswork that goes into training and racing. For example, I've known cyclists who when doing intervals with a heart rate monitor don't call the work interval "started" until their heart rates reach the targeted level. With a power meter you soon learn that the interval starts as soon as the power hits the zone—which means right away. You're not trying to train the heart solely

when doing intervals or any workout, for that matter. In fact, for most workouts, peripheral systems (in the muscles) are really the key to your success.

Also, how do you get the intensity right in the first minute or so of the first few intervals in a workout? Heart rate certainly doesn't tell you anything as it is still trying to catch up. Are you going too hard or too easy? A power meter tells you precisely.

For the triathlete, using a power meter in a long race such as an Ironman is almost like cheating. When everyone else is fighting the wind, or flying down wind or guessing how hard to go when climbing, the triathlete with a powermeter is just rolling along at the prescribed power. He or she will produce the fastest possible race given the conditions.

For the road cyclist using power in a race tells you afterwards how many "matches" you have to burn in a race and how big these matches are. In a one-hour criterium are you burning 18, 600-700-watt matches or 12, 800-900-watt matches? In a road race what power do you need to maintain on a long climb to make the selection? Do you get dropped after eight minutes of a twelve-minute climb at 250 watts or 350 watts? This is great information for making decisions about what to do in training to prepare for the hardest races. Again, without this you are only guessing.

Power meters also provide highly accurate details about how your fitness is progressing throughout the season. I test the athletes I coach regularly using a combination of heart rate and power. Without this information I really wouldn't know for sure if they are making progress. I'd just be guessing.

Combining the power meter with Cycling Peaks/WKO+ software (available at www.TrainingPeaks.com) produces unbelievably helpful information. This software creates several charts to track your data. The Performance Manager Chart by itself is worth the price of the software. Using it you can chart the progress of your fitness, understand your fatigue and even predict when you will come into race form. Amazing stuff for the serious rider.

I could go on describing the benefits of training with power. There are many. But perhaps the best indicator of their value for performance is the elite athletes who use them. It is unusual to find a top pro in cycling or triathlon who *doesn't* use one. They were early adopters and for obvious reasons. They have a mortgage to pay and a power meter will help them do that.

Fortunately for my clients, few athletes now have power meters. That means my folks can progress quickly and soon dominate their race categories. They make me look like a great coach. So, actually, maybe you *shouldn't* get one.

Joe Friel is the author of the Training Bible book series and the founder and President of Training Bible Coaching.