

# NDC Thunder Bay Athlete Interest Article: “Peaking” By: Scott Hill



Many people have probably heard the term peaking for a race but don't know exactly what it means or what it involves. Essentially it is organizing your training in such a way leading up to an important race or an important set of races to be at your very best fitness. Peaking is important in all endurance sports because it is hard to be in your absolute best fitness all the way through the racing season. For cross country skiers we race from the beginning of December to the end of March which is a long time to be racing to your full potential. As I write this, myself and the rest of NDC Thunder Bay are entering an important part of the racing season when reaching peak fitness will be essential in achieving our goals this winter.

Peaking is a science that is difficult to master because it can be very different for each individual athlete. Some athletes require lots of rest leading up to a peak and others, although it sounds strange, need to train a lot leading up to big races to reach their best fitness. Finding the best way to peak comes with lots of experience and trial and error and sometimes even the best skiers in the world can't get it right when they need to. This was evident with the Canadian cross country ski team at the Sochi Olympics where for whatever reason the fitness of the Canadian athletes was not where it usually is compared to the other skiers. You can't control the uncontrollable and sometimes people get sick or injured while reaching their peak right before a big race, and that is just part of sport.

I have had many coaches tell me that 50% of peaking is mental which is something I totally agree with. Half the battle of reaching your best fitness during the race season is truly believing that you are in your best shape. If you are standing on the start line of your most important race of the year with the mentality that you are not as fast as you could be, the race is over before it starts. Having confidence in your ability is key whether you are at your best fitness or not, and having confidence can bring you success in ways fitness sometimes can't.

Another aspect of peaking is dealing with being nervous. You could be in the best shape of your life exactly when you planned to be but if you can't positively channel nervous energy it can be tough to race your best. This happens a lot with Olympic races or Olympic trials races where you have been working towards skiing fast in one race for so long, years perhaps, and all that pressure can be too much for a person to handle. It can be an incredible or demoralizing feeling to work so hard for so long for one day in your sporting career and have a great performance or not have it go the way you hoped. But in the end some people succeed and some people don't and that's just the way it goes some time.



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Peaking for an athlete can take place over a largely variable amount time depending on a goal race. Many people have probably heard the term Olympic cycle, which is a four year period ending with an athlete targeting peaking for the Olympics. There are athletes out there that will organize their training four years in advance of an Olympic games to reach their peak fitness for that Olympics. A four year training plan seems a little drastic, but even peaking once a year means sacrificing racing fast in other smaller races for much of the year to reach your max fitness for around 1-2 weeks. It's a high risk high reward situation and it takes a mentally strong athlete to deal with racing slowly early on and still remain confident that they will reach their best fitness when it matters most.



On the opposite end of the spectrum athletes also may be required to try and achieve multiple mini peaks through the course of one racing season. With these smaller peaks there might only be a two or three week lead up to a bunch of goal races throughout the season to try and reach a good fitness level. With these smaller peaks it is more of a low risk, low reward situation where it is possible to remain at a moderate fitness level throughout the whole season with a smaller increase in overall fitness come race time.

In the end peaking is a lot easier said than done, but when it works and you are able to go faster than you ever thought possible, it is an unbelievable feeling. It is something that every athlete strives for and pictures in their head during those hard training sessions during the year, having the best race of your life when it matters most.

