

Putting the Time In: Training Talk with Rice, Mocke & Eray

Do surfski paddlers ever stop thinking about their training? Fitness and racing is such an integral part of the sport that many ski paddlers, never mind their rank, eagerly succumb to the lifestyle of “amateur athletes.” There is no free time anymore; the days revolve around jobs, family, school, and the time left to work on becoming a better paddler!

Of course, the camaraderie of fellow paddlers and the natural beauty of paddling venues all over the world are top reasons to love this sport as well. But at its core surfski is a competitive pursuit, giving us the opportunity to analyze, compare and grade the intricacies of available equipment, technique, race courses and results, etc.

Training is a particularly interesting topic. We’ve all heard the expression: “It’s not the boat, it’s the engine.” The implication being that the paddler who puts in the most time, and works the hardest in their training, will be best prepared come race day. Equipment choices are vital to each individual, but it’s the work we do on the water that produces the results.

Three of the hardest working athletes on the World Series circuit are Sean Rice, Dawid Mocke and Michele Eray. Busy with their own work, studies and family lives, they still have the discipline and commitment to train and race at the top level of surfski competition. All three paddlers were kind enough to take some time to share their insight on training, including which aspects are most important to them, and how it factors into their daily life and routine.

Training with the Pros

How much focus and time does training take up in your daily routine? Do you train multiple times per day? Is every day carefully planned and structured, or is there room to wing it from day to day?

Sean: It takes up any spare time I have! During the lead up to a race I will be doing 2-3 sessions a day. After a full day at University trying to fit in 3+ hrs of training a day really isn’t easy. Every days training is worked out well in advance. I basically get to the water or gym and just DO! No thinking needed - just DO it. Makes life much easier for me and doesn’t let that lazy voice in my head take over.

Dawid: A lot of time training! I generally train twice per day, anything from 2–5 hours per day, depending on where we are in the season and in relation to upcoming events.

Michele: Most of my training is planned and structured. I spend a lot of time planning the year, with regards to races, and plan the phases of my training around that schedule. I usually train 2 times per day. I used to do more when I was a full time athlete training for the Olympics, but now I don't have the time. Although most of the sessions are structured, the overall goal is really well planned, so there is a bit of room for change, depending on weather conditions and how I am feeling. Sometimes it is just about having fun out there!

Do you currently, or have you ever, worked with a fitness and/or paddling coach? If so, how big an impact has it had on your paddling career, and would you recommend it to other paddlers?

Sean: I have been coached by Peter Cole from ORKA TRAINING for the past 6 years. Having a coach or even just someone who you can rely on to train with everyday really is the secret to success. Unless you're super human training by yourself is just no fun! He has been a massive influence on my racing!

Dawid: Yes I currently do, and I think that a coach is very important to improvement and success. I would certainly recommend it to all levels of surfski paddlers.

Michele: For the Olympics I had a coach, but since then (Aug 2008), I have coached myself. Technique is very important and a good coach can help with that. Also, sometimes it's great to have another opinion!

What percentage of your training takes place on the water, in the ski or kayak? What types of cross-training activities and sports are you into?

Sean: Pretty much 70% on the water and 30% off the water. I do most of my training in my ski against the sprint and marathon kayak squads. I supplement my paddling with trail running and a bit of gym work. I really enjoy my running because I'm naturally a heavy guy and it's the easiest way for me to keep any extra weight off. I've also tried to convince myself that the odd surf also helps with "cross training" (ha ha).

Dawid: At least 60-70% of my training is paddling. I also do some running, and then do a small amount of body work in the gym. Pre-season I will do some work in the gym also.

Michele: Depending on the time of the year, I swap between kayak and surf ski. I race a lot in kayaks, and around those events I will spend more time in the flat-water/river, and closer to big ski races I spend more time on the sea in downwind conditions. Generally most of my structured work is in a kayak though. I trail run, swim and surf as cross training.

When training in your boat, how do you structure your workouts for the week – how much focus is on distance vs. speed? Downwind vs. flat? Technique vs. fitness?

Sean: Most of the Surfski races I do are around the 1:30-2hr mark, so all my sessions are very similar to what the flat water marathon guys do. 2min, 4min and 2000m intervals with 1x 10km time trial and a 20-30km paddle every weekend. I paddle maybe 3 times a week on the sea; otherwise I'm on the flat water with the sprint/marathon squad.

Dawid: It depends on which part of the season we're in, but basically: Monday - morning run, evening paddle (steady paddle). Tuesday - morning paddle (steady longer intervals), evening paddle (short intervals/downwind/time trial session.) Wednesday - morning run intervals or hills, evening paddle (med intervals.) Thursday - morning steady paddle, evening intervals (short.) Friday - morning long distance paddle, evening off. Saturday - morning paddle (short session), evening off or downwind. Sunday - off.

Michele: All my sessions are based on intensity. I believe in quality over quantity. When there is wind I will try to go downwind. Also: technique is everything!

How much of your training is done in a group versus paddling solo? Are there times when one is more advantageous than the other?

Sean: I try and do every session with a group. If I can't get a group together I race my Garmin. I'm super lucky to have an awesome squad to train with most of the time. Training with stronger and faster paddlers is always much more advantageous than going solo.

Dawid: I prefer paddling with other people because it's more difficult to miss a session - i.e. someone is meeting you there. Also, you can measure yourself against someone else when in a group.

Michele: Quite a lot of solo, about 50%. When I am working on technique I usually train on my own, same for the low intensity stuff. Harder intervals and speed work I try to train with people faster than me.

How important is rest to your overall fitness/paddling goals? Do you set aside time each week to rest, or just go by how you are feeling?

Sean: I have 1 day off a week. I obviously keep a close check on how I'm feeling and if need be I might take an afternoon off or just tap out an easy session, just to catch up. There is a fine line between doing enough and too much.

Dawid: There is a delicate balance between fatigue and form. I manage this by incorporating rest based on structure AND on how I'm feeling.

Michele: Rest is vital, as this is when your gains are actually made. I build recovery sessions into the week, as well as go on how I am feeling.

What is your favorite interval workout?

Sean: 10 x 4min! It's the one I love to hate! That session will break even the strongest paddler if done properly.

Dawid: My favorite interval workouts: 10 x 2min, 10 x 1min

Michele: Once a week we do intervals around a group of rocks here in Plett, in a big group. I love it because it becomes the biggest race ever! The guys treat it like world champs, and will take all kinds of risk cutting the rocks just to get ahead! Also on the way back you get to chase small runs and even catch a wave off the reef if you are lucky!

What is your favorite downwind training run?

Sean: Well I would say the Millers Run would be my favorite downwind paddle. It's basically right on my doorstep, so it's very convenient for me to do any time the wind is up. It's also only 12km and takes between 40-43min so pretty easy to fit in after a day at University!

Dawid: Millers run, Reverse Buffels run

Michele: Knysna to Sedgfield. 30km's of pure fun!

Do you maintain the same intensity year-round, or do you dial it back at certain times of the year?

Sean: I take at least 4-6weeks completely off during Christmas time and most of January every year to catch up on quality time with my girlfriend, family and surfing. Racing on the International Surfski Circuit makes for a very long racing calendar, running from April to December with no real time to rest properly. Taking that time off does wonders for the body and soul.

Dawid: There are definitely times when I'm training less. Usually after major events, and a small off-season just after Christmas.

Michele: I race year round, but all the events are different, from surf ski to flat-water marathons to river races. So it all depends on the time of the year. I keep going, but the training changes based on upcoming events.

How big a role does nutrition & hydration play in your overall training regimen?

Sean: Well I eat A LOT! I love to eat! It's what I do best (ha ha)... but obviously that comes with responsibility as well. I stay away from the junk food as much as possible but never shy to tackle a good burger. I'm not a health freak but I always keep in mind that what you put in is what you get out.

Dawid: Effective nutrition during and after training is crucial to recovery and being able to make the next session count. If your nutrition is poor your performance will suffer. It's important to make it a core aspect of your overall training.

Michele: Massive. That's the final few percentages that give you the win or loss. Recovery in training is important as it allows you to train hard again the next day, and nutrition plays an important role in recovery.

What's your most important piece of advice to paddlers looking to increase their paddling fitness?

Sean: Humans thrive on reward for success by achieving our goals we set out. If you never set goals then you can never achieve success. Learn to enjoy racing. Race your Garmin, race your mate, and race the local ferry - even race the setting sun! Make your paddling enjoyable by coming out of every session with some sort of outcome, good or bad. If you're on flat water mark out a 500m, 1000m and 10km course. Time yourself over these distances continuously. Set your time goals and do it!

Dawid: Paddle more than you think you should. Paddle with a training partner. Race as much as you can.

Michele: Try and mix it up intensity wise. Make sure you are getting a medium intensity effort in, a low and of course a hard session! Don't be afraid to max out in the hard session, but also make sure you take the easy one easy!