An Interview with Jef Geys, author of **REST IS THE NEW SPORT** (PrimeFit Nov.)

# Q. How did your experience as a competitive cyclist change your belief that "the more you train, the better you are at it?"

A. At 20 years old, once in a while I would win a race but I was without a doubt the champion of training. I could train longer and harder than anyone. But when overtraining syndrome hit me, I was forced to stop completely for the first time in my life. I was training within the limits of human capacity and I would never get sick, yet my body didn’t let me continue. I was extremely confused because I was one of those rare people who actually follow doctor’s advice, almost obsessively, so something couldn’t be right. I had no virus or infection.

# Q. What happened when you entered a competition after enforced rest and no training?

A. Two weeks after absolute rest, I was given the green light to test myself and “slowly” begin training. I was simply going to start with the same routine, after all what had happened to me was clearly something unrelated to my physical condition (or so I thought). I had always felt great training. Following my usually impulsive nature, I inscribed myself in the next race, just to see if I was still in shape, not expecting much. As I started the race I felt very strong and wondered when the rush of energy would wear off. To my own amazement, it didn’t and I found myself winning the race effortlessly.

# Q. Is that how your question became "How little should I train to be in top shape?"

A. I didn’t win too many races or become a legend of cycling, but this was the moment I realized there was a strong relationship between rest and performance. Somehow that was being undermined. I experimented for the rest of my cycling career with rest and performance with surprising results.

# Q. What is your vision of exercise and training?

A. I believe the real difference between exercise and training is intention, how you approach the activity not the activity itself. The fundamental goal of exercise is to keep you healthy, while the goal of training tends to be about improving something--speed, muscle tone, jumping capacity. For exercise to have a positive impact on one’s health, it should be monitored. With training there is almost by definition a plan that does not necessarily have better health as a goal. People competing in a sport or bodybuilding will sometimes risk negative health consequences, if it means being the best at a given moment. Both training and exercise can be risky if not monitored. Both activities are the only stressors you can decide 100% by yourself, which makes them key to a balanced body.

# Q. What are signs of fatigue and when should a person pay attention to them?

A. Most people have a routine (average sleeping time, waking up at a certain time, showering, breakfast, work, leaving work) Within this “usual” routine a person expects a certain daily performance. If this changes for no apparent reason (prolonged sleeping schedule changes, sickness, new babies at home) and they wake up feeling tired and it takes longer to feel rested; if they experience brain fog, muscle pain,

they should take note of the changes. This fatigue is abnormal and they may want to seek medical opinion to check what's wrong.

# Q. Can you boost a body's ability to recover?

A. Yes, it depends on the type or types of fatigue the person suffers and the severity. There are local recovery techniques that give immediate results, such as ice baths for muscle pain, rest and naps for physical fatigue, mindfulness and light meditation with alpha brain waves stimulation for mental fatigue, food and supplements for metabolic or hormonal fatigue. But these are only some of what's available and not every treatment gives the same results to every person. There are many ways to boost recovery.

# Q. What is fatigue, when is it normal or not?

Fatigue is a feeling of weakness. When we speak about physical fatigue, we experience our muscles not responding, a lack of energy. When we speak about mental fatigue, it's difficult to focus. There can be brain fog, irritation, lack of initiative. Fatigue is a nonspecific symptom, meaning it can be caused by many different factors. If you’re sick, then feeling tired is undoubtedly normal. But if you’re in good health and one day your usual morning walk to work leaves you panting, catching your breath and dizzy; we are talking about something abnormal.

# Q. How does a regular person, a non athlete, manage the impact of modern life on their body?

A. No two people are alike. Even if their profiles seem the same, they could have completely different physiological/genetic makeup. But there are basic steps to manage impact. First is **awareness.** The connection between mind and body is frequently lost, as a person leaves the structure and comfort of their parent’s home. Add to that new responsibilities in a hectic and competitive life. Often too worried trying to make ends meet to think about their health, people start sleeping less, eating worse (or skipping meals altogether) and then don’t want to lose their social life either. They have to stop and pay attention to the signs their bodies give, **recognize** what is happening without comparing what is "normal" for other people. Because you’ve survived with headaches for the past 15 years, doesn’t mean this is "normal" and you shouldn't find the cause and seek a cure. T**ake action** to understand the cause of your ill health, instead of just patching up symptoms with painkillers. Then, be honest to yourself and write down what results do you expect from the efforts you are willing to make, then identify your limitations, and make sure they are real limitations and not self boycott. Finally give your body and mind time to adapt and change, most significant changes don’t happen overnight. Be disciplined but gentle.

# Q. Can trainers create a personal fitness plan based on a type of fatigue and its severity?

A. No. In my experience, a trainer starts assuming the body is in balance. They can be aware of the fatigue or impact of the training on the body, but most of them assume generalizations such as: after high intensity training your muscles need between 48-72hs of recovery. Most trainers are not aware of the general population with no sports past, so even if the results/performance that they get from them may be the same as someone with an athletic past, the biological cost is probably much higher. For a trainer to achieve this, they should understand the impact of their schedule, family situation and be able to monitor

to assess the readiness (best moment of the day to train maintaining risk of low injury while getting the highest performance).

# Q. Holistic is an often misunderstood concept. How do you define it?

A. I must clarify. I’m strongly influenced by osteopathy where the body is regarded as one unit. No part of the body is indifferent to what is happening to another, regardless of how far away or independent from each other they may seem. For example, flatfoot can be related to incontinency. An emotional impact in the body can affect digestion, resulting in diarrhea. It’s very important to have a broad perspective when looking at a body to know where to connect the dots, instead of dissecting the body into unrelated parts. That approach overlooks intimate relations between the systems that must work together in harmony.

# Q. What is the relationship between stress and fatigue?

A. Inadequate stress management may lead to fatigue. Stress is not itself the problem, stress is necessary. For example in situations of extreme danger like a terrorist attack or a natural disaster we are able to perform extraordinary feats, like the mother who lifted a Jeep with her bare hands to free her baby. This reaction is normal, the problem today is that we get stressed by insignificant things, for example a long queue at the supermarket, the battery of your smartphone died too early, a traffic jam. When we don’t have enough time to recover from so much stressful stimuli, it results in fatigue. The impact of these small stressors accumulate and sleep is not enough anymore to regain balance.

# Q. Can fatigue and stress be measured to determine a type of fatigue?

Yes, with HRV (Heart Rate Variability), ECG and DC potential (EEG) we can measure the type of fatigue you suffer and how severe it is. There is a whole battery of tests than can diagnose adrenal fatigue, but in practice I consider adrenal fatigue within hormonal fatigue. This last one is probably the approach a medical doctor would take. Most of the time we speak of a combination of different types of fatigue. I can also identify which fatigue came first and which one followed to better understand (and explain) the mechanism that lead the body to that imbalance.

# Q. Can you explain different scenarios of mental fatigue?

A. You can experience mental fatigue when your body doesn’t get enough glucose (glucose is the fuel of the brain). You can also feel signs, when you’ve had arguments with people that you care about. Another road to mental fatigue is physical exhaustion, where your central nervous system has to compensate for the activities of the autonomic nervous system so you feel depleted. Noisy environments or those with other intense sensorial stimuli can trigger a faster mental fatigue response.

# Q. How do people relax, when mentally fatigued?

A. This is different for everybody. Some people relax when they are around people they care for or enjoy being around (family, friends). Other people relax during a light exercise such as a walk in the forest or a swim, water activities have in general a soothing effect on the body. Other people use techniques, like mindfulness or light meditation with alpha waves. The most important thing is to know why you are

mentally fatigued. Is it an emotional trigger that caused the fatigue, a rational trigger or did you not ingest enough sugar? Once the source is figured out, it is easier to decide the approach.

# Q. What's your prescription to increase the ability to sleep?

A. We must first understand which are the causes of bad quality/inability to sleep. Nutrient deficiency can affect production of melatonin, high levels of stress / high adrenaline maintaining the body in permanent fight and flight mode, excessive exposure to blue light can also inhibit the production of melatonin (think of morning light, it naturally wakes you up.), too much brain activity before sleeping may also affect your ability to relax and fall asleep. Recognize your problem and do what works for you. Red flags are waking up sweating, or gaining weight without a particular reason. I would advise you to get a medical check-up.

# Q. Can you explain the function of neurotransmitters?

A. Neurotransmitters are chemical messengers who transmit signals from one neuron to another. Most of them are built from amino acids and some even perform two functions and are also a hormone. In my book I describe 3 different neurotransmitters : dopamine, serotonin and gaba. Dopamine influences your motivation and is a break for anxiety. A lack of dopamine can result in anxiety, lack of initiative and emotional instability. Serotonin is responsible for your mood and sleep, often referred to as the happy hormone. A lack of it may derive in sleep disorders, feelings of depression, mood swings and hypersensitivity to pain. Gaba, is an inhibitor, it keeps your emotions under check and also is responsible for muscle tone. It makes you calm. A lack of it may result in you being hyperalert and lacking of patience and focus.

# Q. What is homeostasis to your body?

A. It is the ability of the biological systems of the body to maintain relatively constant conditions within the body regardless of changes in the environment. For example, when it’s hot the body sweats to regulate its temperature and stay in balance.

# Q. Are patients who take medicine for acid reflux "lazy?"

A. Acid reflux or GERD can be caused by many different factors. Some result in a constant reflux like hiatal hernia which affects the motricity of the stomach juices, some are merely hormonal and temporary like when it occurs during pregnancy. It can also be caused by overweight. What is clear is that if you suffer constant acid reflux you must take medication to at least temporarily control/correct the acidity or motility of the gastric juices, while you are fixing the problem either by losing weight, getting an intervention or whatever works. The reason is exposure to acid reflux is one of the causes of oesophageal cancer. So it isn’t that they are lazy, but an easy fix to the symptoms may frequently result in people not seeking the underlying cause of their GERD. Every day we hear of new side effects of drugs used to regulate stomach acidity, so it’s no joke to rely perennially on medicine for something that could be fixed by healthier means.

# Q. Can you explain your Daily Nutrition Program for everyone?

A. My Daily Nutrition Plan for everyone is not a one size fits all. It depends on the type of activities you perform, your speed of digestion, how stressed you are. Physical activities need more kcal than mental activities. Depending on your speed of digestion it may be better to eat 6 times a day or only 3 bigger meals a day. People who get stressed very fast, are usually not hungry during the day, but in the evening they will compensate and start eating fast carbs as sugar-- chocolate, candy. In **Rest is the New Sport,** I explain, depending on your type of fatigue, your goal is a recommended approach to follow nutritionally. It’s a whole chapter, not 1 plan that suits everybody, more like different options to match all the possible needs.

# Q. Is REST THE NEW SPORT?

A. The title was supposed to be a provocation, because at the end of the day many more things than just good rest should be correctly managed to achieve a balanced body. But in this rat race we’re at, too often without choice, we find ourselves in a performance loop where if we need REST we are somehow considered weak, so we devalue our sleep. Sleep is the most accessible, inexpensive medication and yet it has become a luxury, but we spend more and more in medication to treat symptoms that could probably be handled with proper rest in the first place.

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