

The Primal Blueprint Podcast – Episode #1: Chronic Cardio with Mark Sisson

Topic: Chronic Cardio and How to Train Effectively for Endurance Sports

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Brad Kearns: So Mark Sisson is back on Podcast. It's so nice to be here. I'm Brad Kearns the host. It's been a long time since we talked.

Mark Sisson: It's been a long time.

Brad Kearns: It's been a long time. One of the things that's really a hot topic that's still a hot topic amazingly after your post back in 2007 about chronic cardio. It still seems to be an issue and it still seems to be a major issue and is one of the major stumbling blocks for people to try to balance their health and proceed to fitness. I thought we'd talk about chronic exercise today and just get back to kind of a basic starting point about this topic.

Mark Sisson: Yeah, it is interesting. That first post I did was actually in 2005. It was a guest post on Art Devany's site in which I sort of spilled my guts about how I felt about the years I...I won't say wasted, the years I invested, probably foolishly, in pursuit this endurance effort that had lead my life for so long. I had my own set of issues with all of the injuries and advance illnesses that I got and the chronic infections and all that stuff we

have talked about. But almost, more importantly when I put that post together, I was looking at all of my friends in the field of endurance activities, whether it was marathoning, triathlete or cycling. All these people, that, before the age of 40, had fallen apart. They either had heart attacks, or died, or had defibrillators installed, or pace makers, or had open-heart surgery. It was like the number was really mounting up. I thought there was something just bad about this. It's not just coincidental that all these people were training so hard are having heart issues. Forget the joint issues. Because that was the other aspect, cuz, you know, that is what kept me out of it. It was the over-using my joints. That first post in 2005 was kind of a wakeup call for me to start really looking at...okay. What is it about exercise that is causing us all these problems because we thought that it was supposed to be good for us? And, then, you know, is there a way to have our cake and eat it too? (Bad pun.) But is there a way that we can, that we can still participate in sports and these endurance activities and still be fit and uninjured and not get sick? Aah. And for the longest time I thought, I thought, you couldn't do that. And now I am slightly changing my mind. But that was the original premise. It was that endurance training was just flat out bad, and doing too much of it was just antithetical to health.

Brad Kearns: And so you are saying your position is changing now? That there is a way to do it without destroying your health, and your joints, and your immune system.

Mark Sisson: Well, yeah. I still don't recommend to people that if you want to get in to some healthful, anti-aging program, that you should go complete an Ironman triathlon. I am not really advocating that. But what I am saying is that if you are somebody who wants to do a marathon or wants to participate in triathlons, I can show you now how to do that in a way that will not be deleterious to your health. I can show you how to do that in a way that sort of involves all of the tools that we've picked up over the last seven or eight years, whether it's means of training in a weight room, whether it's a specific, aah, ways of doing interval training, or weight training, or maximum overload principle in a

gym with weights, or whether it's low-carb ketogenic, cyclo-ketogenic eating styles that we can figure your fuel partitioning so that you burn fat more efficiently. All of these texts are now available and they weren't really available as recently as six or seven years ago, at least the scientists hadn't proven it.

So the bottom line is: yes, if you want to go do an endurance contest and you don't necessarily want to make a life out of it, but you want to do one just as a bucket list item, I can show you how to do that and still retain your health and your vitality.

Brad Kearns: It sounds like, "If you insist..." on running a marathon or doing an Ironman, then we'll talk about it, but generally speaking, first of all, don't try to pursue an elite level and then do you really have to go 26 miles?

Mark Sisson: Yeah, yeah. Any level...It's still...that's what I did and, I am happy and I am glad I did it. I got a lot out of it. It's not something I really regret. I got out of it early enough. Luckily, I got injured early enough, that it didn't manifest itself in other more serious health issues later on. So I am not opposed to even being an elite athlete. But I want to just...really my goal with Mark's Daily Apple, the Primal Blueprint is to provide the kind of information and education so that people make well-informed choices. That's all. So if you choose to dedicate your life around to an endurance activity, I just want you to recognize that there may be problems with it. There may be issues you haven't thought through, and if you are willing to understand what those issues are and that there may be compromises in your health, whether short term or long term, and you accept those compromises as part of the deal in a pursuit of a medal, or a trophy, or a stack of money, I am fine with it. I'm not going to judge that. But I just..my whole thing is at what point do you make this decision blindly? And that's what I did. I made this decision blindly 25-30 years ago...40 years ago to become an endurance athlete. It's not a good or bad thing, it's just that if you are making a

choice, make a choice with the greatest amount of information about the ramifications and the outcomes.

Brad Kearns: Okay, so let's say the person is going to make that choice and it seems like now the prevailing approach is still advocating chronic accumulate this many miles per week or be consistent with your triathlon training. You get three workouts in each sport. So let's try to take an alternative path if someone is willing and they want to aspire to, not only endurance goal, but a cross fit person who is so excited about it and wants to go, go, go in that direction. What would be the starting point to depart from something that compromises health and still gets the high fitness goal?

Mark Sisson: Well, the starting point would be maybe a reframing of the challenge. So in the old days, the challenge was, okay, I want to go do a 10K or I want to do a spartan race or I want to do a triathlon and knowing that I went to do that, I am going to train as hard as I can without falling apart. Well, if you reframe that a little bit. And this is what I do now. Okay, I want to do a 10K, a marathon, a triathlon, or a spartan race, what is the least amount of training I can do and still do well? In other words, I reframe it for myself as when I line up with all these other poor bastards that have trained their asses off for the last six months for this one race in mind, how many of those people can I beat on my minimal training? You know, it's just a different challenge. Whether I finish fourth in my age group or twelfth in my age group, as long as I don't finish 150th in my age group, I am going to be satisfied with that sort of concept. It becomes a game. It really does become a game. How can I put together a great race with the least amount of pain, and suffering, and sacrifice and now I am starting to see this even at the elite level. A friend of mine just finished the Ironman in Hawaii on 12 hours a week of training. Which, if you are an Ironman triathlete and you are in the elite level, 12 hours a week is nothing. And he did it on a low carb strategy. He spent time in a gym. He was very very judicious about the time he spent on the bike, and how much time he spent in the pool,

and he ate a low carb diet so he became good at burning fat. That, to me, is a tremendous success because it didn't beat him up, he is not suffering for the next three weeks because he went to the well too deeply. All of those things are now tools that we can use to apply to, not just the average guy who just wants to complete one, but to even to the elite level.

Brad Kearns: Let's just say pursuing a hobby or goal of completing a half marathon (13 miles.) The traditional approach is to get your mileage up to 30 miles a week, maybe 40. How would you counter that when you are sitting down with the person, saying, "Here is a better way to approach this goal?" You still have to run 13 miles on race day.

Mark Sisson: Yeah, I mean, you can't get away from the reality that at some point you have to do a long distance run. If you want to race at a long distance of any configuration, whether it is a triathlon or a marathon or open water swim. At some point, the interval work that you do and the gym work you do, you still have to go through the repetitive motion at some level of completing that. It is probably faulty logic that you can do cross fit training in the gym and then go out and run a half marathon, never having run further than a mile. But, there are ways to put this together so that you don't have to run 40 miles a week, when, in fact, you can run two runs a week, one of which is an interval session, one of which is a moderate tempo session, (that would be at race pace) but not nearly the distance, and then one easy long, slow run a week that is approximately the distance. Or maybe for the half marathon, maybe you get up to 9 or 10 miles once before you do the event. It's not like you are going to go completely away from the concept of putting in all these miles and never replicating the distance, it's that you don't have to do that same high mileage strategy that people have used for so long to be able to compete in an endurance contest.

What we are doing is, we are looking at breaking the event down to the different sections of metabolism that are involved. We are working on strength and sustained power over time and we're working on repartitioning fuels so we do become better at burning fat. A lot of that repartitioning happens literally at the dinner table, not on a 10 mile run or on a 40 mile bike ride. That fuel partitioning, that repartitioning, that ability to extract energy from stored body fat or from fat that is in a supplement you might take during a race. Those are skills that don't require that you be hammering the miles out. You can just learn that, again, partly through diet. Some of that you can also pick up through metabolic conditioning work in the gym. So you can be doing maximum overload which we've done with guys like Dave Zabriskie, who last year was training to complete the season almost ketogenicly and spending a lot of time in the gym and wound up getting injured. He crashed on his bike, otherwise, now we'll never know. But he was very excited about the concept of this maximum overload principle of ketogenic strategy and access to stored body fat and ketones.

Brad Kearns: This is national champion cyclist, Dave Zabriskie, you are talking about...Tour de France, yellow jersey holder in past years.

Mark Sisson: Yes.

Brad Kearns: He is going through another phase of his career trying this new experiment.

Mark Sisson: Absolutely. So we know that it can be done. It's just how much are you willing to suspend disbelief and sort of walk away from that old tried and true carb-loading and ultra-mileage training strategy that virtually every endurance athlete that has ever participated in the last couple of decades has undergone.

Brad Kearns: Back in the old days when you coached me as a professional triathlete, one of the things that was really revolutionary was that I should just test myself on my best workout. I found that I couldn't train at the same daily level that the top guys I was trying to race against. And you called it breakthrough workout. Tell me more about that.

Mark Sisson: Yeah, the idea behind breakthrough workout was, that the only reason training works is that you stress the body beyond what it is normally capable of. And provided you get enough rest and enough nutrition to recover, the body builds itself back a little bit stronger and it is better able to handle that kind of a load the next time you do it. Where people get caught up, particularly in the elite level training, is they think that a little is good and more is better and so they train hard every day and they never give themselves enough time to recover.

What I suggested with that breakthrough training strategy was that you would pick days that you were well rested, that you were well hydrated, and that you well recovered and your nutrition had been good the day before and then those are the days, provided you woke up and felt really good, that you could hammer a really hard workout. The caveat was that you didn't work out the next day or the day after that because you allowed yourself enough time to recover. And that's really what we are trying to do with this new endurance training strategy.

We are trying to break the race down, or the event, into these component parts and say, okay, how can we train hard in the high end of the aerobic zones when needed or how can we go anaerobic at times and go completely glycolytic and still be able to do that in short bursts and come back and be aerobic and access the same amount of fat as fuel? All of these different aspects of a race, if you just break the race down into component parts, you can practice strategy that does that but you can't go out and hammer it hard every day. And even as I got older and I was coaching, and I was coaching you and I used to train with you guys.

You were one of the best triathletes in the world and I could go out at the age of 38 and 39 and I could still hang with you, even though I wasn't racing. I could hang with you on a ride. I could hang with you on a run. But not every day. But some days. Those were my hard days. Where you could come back and recover within two or three days, it might take me four or five days to come back and recover. As long as I didn't go hard in those

four or five days, then I got the same benefit you did. You were just compressing your workouts into a shorter time frame. I was doing the same workout with a longer time frame, giving myself more rest and more recovery.

Again, we get back to the concept that we see in a lot of these metabolic conditioning strategies and programs that out there right now. CrossFit is one example. It is really hard to go three days on hard and one day off. For the elite, elite, elite, who are well rested, maybe not well rested, but don't work, and who don't have a lot of other things to do, maybe that's an okay training strategy but for the average citizen athlete going in to any kind of gym, three hard days followed by one day off just is way too much work. No matter how short the workout it, even if it is a twelve minute workout, it is still going to be way too hard to recover within 24 hours to go do it again.

Brad Kearns: That's an important point and I have seen you coaching average people and dealing with questions at the seminars and stuff from people that are not necessarily interested in big performance goal but they are in the gym doing they are actually doing the same thing to their body without realizing it. So it is relative what a hard workout is and you see these people who are trying to be consistent with their workout routine and sometimes that leads them in to problems. They don't even realize that they are overtraining.

Mark Sisson: Well, one of the problems with magazines like Lava magazine or Triathlete magazine or Runners' World is a lot of times you see what the elites are doing for their training and you try to emulate that as a citizen athlete who is an age group participant, who's got a real job, who can't take a two hour nap in the middle of the afternoon, or has family or whatever. The fact that you can do the workout once in a while is great. That is really a testament to your current level of fitness. But the concept then of trying to do all those workouts and emulate every one of the workouts is when you get in to trouble.

And that's why I say as long as you can get back to the idea of primal endurance strategy....as long as you can do those kind of workouts once in a while that's enough to increase and improve your fitness level to the point where you can toe the starting line of a race and not have overtrained and not have been beaten to crap and not have adrenal fatigue already from you training and be ready to go into the race fresh and rested and enthusiastic and perform at your best and accept whatever outcome happens and walk away and go, "You know what? I am ready to get on with my life the next day or two," and not have to suffer the consequences for days or weeks at a time because you overtrained and over-raced.

Brad Kearns: So, let's talk about where the diet fits in. You mentioned low carb strategy or the ketogenic athlete. Let's say the average person just wants to pull back. Let's say in this podcast, they are relating to some of the chronic patterns that we described. What would be a starting point to reevaluate this carbohydrate dependency and chronic carbohydrate burning with the chronic exercise?

Mark Sisson: If you have been high carb your whole life and you've been training high carb your whole life, the first thing you should do is cut WAY back on your training for three weeks. Go low carb and reconfigure that dynamic, that fuel partitioning dynamic, and not tap in to any of the old enzyme systems yet, that you any of the sugar burning pathways that your body is so used to. So take three weeks very easy, reconfigure diet and then start the training maybe three weeks into it.

Brad Kearns: So, what is very easy? What is the distinction between a comfortably-paced workout that is going to burn mostly fat and getting into the danger zone of glycolytic or maybe one that contributes a lot to the glucose burning and glucose eating.

Mark Sisson: Well, again, if you are coming from being a carbo-loading, sugar-burner endurance athlete, then you are not going to do any interval training for that first three weeks, really to speak of. You are going to keep your workouts 70 to 75% of your heart

rate as a maximum. So if you are a runner, that would probably be jogging slower than you have ever jogged before or may just taking some hikes. Or if you are a cyclist, it is the same thing. It behooves some people to wear a heart monitor just to keep them honest. Just to keep their heart rate below a certain level..70 or 75% of max heart rate. Just during this transition period. And go to the gym and certainly lift weights and do some squats and do some lunges and some upper body stuff that is going to add to the pursuit. I don't want to get real specific on this because in fact in the new book that is coming out next year, we'll have all sorts of specific exercises.

Brad Kearns: "Primal Endurance" you are talking about?

Mark Sisson: Yes, exactly. For now it just the idea that I didn't know we were going to go down this pathway right now with real specific information, but, yeah, the idea is to not go to the well or train really hard during that first transition period. After you transition, then you can start to experiment with harder workouts and more intense workouts

Brad Kearns: So even with the intensity stuff that you mentioned, you mentioned the gym and the important distinction of staying there too long versus doing.....

Mark Sisson: Yeah. Any weight lifting workout in the gym, particularly if its sports specific, if you are going to do a hard day in the gym I really would suggest not spending more than 35 minutes in the entire workout. If you are going to be that specific then there's only so many sets or repetitions of a particular you can do without, again, getting into that overtrained phase. So 35 minutes would be plenty. In fact, I have spent time in the gym just doing squats and single leg lunges for a max workout of 12 minutes.

Brad Kearns: That sounds like a great overview to kind of pull out of a chronic pattern and try to do some new stuff. And we'll get in to maybe some more responses to questions from Mark's Daily Apple and tackle some of these topics in more detail. I appreciate that overview that set the tone, so Mark Sisson here at Mark's Daily Apple podcast. Thanks for listening.

Thank you for listening. We hope you can join us at Primalcon Tulum, March 1 through 6, 2014, at the fabulous Dreams Tulum Resort and Spa on the Mexican Riviera.