Teaching Old Dogs New (Old) Tricks

I spent Sunday at NENSA's coaches clinic at the Dublin School in Dublin, New Hampshire. Thanks to Rob Bradlee, Kathy Maddock and Dublin's host, Brad Bates, for a great day. On the 90 minute ride back to Norwich, I contemplated how Firstbeat's technology can help junior athletes and coaches at all levels of sport - not just the elite level.

I asked myself a simple question. What is the single biggest lesson I have learned using Firstbeat? The answer is just as simple. The cost of poorly executed easy training is far greater than I ever imagined and surely results in (1) poorly executed intensity training, and (2) either overtraining and injury or the need to alter the training plan. I have been actively involved in running and skiing since I was a child. Yet here I am at 50 learning a lesson we all have known to be true for years.

What is it about Firstbeat's analysis that drives that point home? Again, the answer is simple. Firstbeat provides a graphic representation of workload (EPOC) and we quickly learn that EPOC does not increase in a linear way. A well executed easy run will produce a EPOC workload somewhere between 20 and 40 ml/kg. It is shockingly easy to go slightly harder (5% change in average heart rate) and produce a workload that is even as high as 100 ml/kg — 2.5 times the optimal level. Exacerbating this problem, it is easier for younger athletes and less well condition athletes to zoom right through the easier workload levels. Consequently, in those times when one most needs easy, aerobic training it is easiest to make a mistake.

Rob Bradlee astutely pointed out in the seminar that cross-country skiing and running tend to attract highly motivated kids. Getting them to train hard is not difficult. It is more difficult to teach them the importance of training easy. Maybe with this new technology we can help kids learn this lesson well at 14 and 15 rather than writing about learning it 35 years later!