

From Macrocycle to Podium: What Triathlon Periodization Taught Me About Coaching Optimist Sailors

A Different Way of Planning a Season

Most Optimist coaches plan their season regatta by regatta. I don't. I plan it the way I'd plan a triathlete's build toward a big race: in macrocycles and microcycles.

I'm a triathlete myself, and that way of thinking about training — build a broad base, sharpen it progressively, and arrive at race day exactly when you need to peak, not before — is the same logic I brought into youth sailing. It's not a metaphor. It's literally how I structured my sailors' 2026 season: one long macrocycle that started with small summer regattas and was deliberately built toward the championship at the end.

Very few Optimist coaches work this way. I think it's a big part of why this season's results looked the way they did.

The Macrocycle: Treating a Season Like One Training Block

In triathlon, you don't show up to an A-race without weeks of base volume, followed by intensity, followed by a taper. Every phase exists for a reason inside the larger block.

I applied that same structure to my sailors' season:

- **Base phase:** smaller summer regattas, where the goal wasn't to win at all costs but to log reps — starts, wind reads, decision-making — in a lower-pressure environment.
- **Build phase:** mid-season regattas, where we started demanding more tactical consistency and closing out the recurring mistakes we'd flagged earlier.
- **Peak phase (microcycles):** as the championship approached, the work got sharper and more specific — short, focused microcycles designed to get sailors to the start line sharp, not fatigued.

No single regatta in the season was an end in itself. Each one was a training load inside a bigger plan.

Before the Water: The Same Discipline as a Triathlete Before a Race

Before every session, my sailors take time to read the conditions — wind direction, pressure changes, shifts, current, and how the surrounding land affects the course. It's the same habit as a triathlete studying a course profile before the gun goes off. You don't race blind; you race prepared.

During training we work the technical and tactical side — boat handling, starts, upwind and downwind sailing, positioning, strategy, adapting on the fly. But just like in endurance periodization, the real learning happens after the effort, not during it.

Post-Race Like Post-Session

In triathlon, a session isn't over when you cross the line — it's over once you've gone through the data. I run the same process with my sailors, minus the GPS watch: why did you make that call, what did you see out there, what would you do differently next time? I don't hand them the answer. I make them work through it themselves.

The goal is for them to stop asking "what should I do?" and start being able to say, "I saw this, I decided this, and here's why." That's the same principle a good endurance coach lives by — the athlete has to understand their own body and their own decisions, not lean on outside instructions in the moment that matters.

The 2026 Season: The Macrocycle Under Pressure

The 2026 season was the chance to put this approach to the test against strong fleets and actually measure it.

Regatta at Shelter Island Yacht Club: consistency across fleets. 1st and 3rd in the White Fleet, 1st in the Blue Fleet — proof the development wasn't riding on one standout sailor, but showing up across the group.

Douglaston Regatta: still in the build phase, my sailors put together multiple podium finishes across both fleets — 1st and 2nd in the White Fleet, and a full podium sweep in the Blue Fleet with 1st, 2nd, and 3rd. Off the back of that regatta, I received a Coaching Recognition Award for the 2026 summer season.

Ice Cream Cup: heading into the peak phase, my sailors posted a top 6, an 8th place, and a top 2 finish overall in the general classification — a strong signal the microcycle work was on track heading into the championship.

2026 JSA of LIS Optimist Championship: the peak of the macrocycle. Two of my sailors finished Top 4 in the White Fleet and Top 6 in the Blue Fleet, backed by strong results across both fleets overall. Watching them apply months of decision-making habits under real championship pressure was one of the most rewarding parts of the whole season.

Why It Matters

A training plan without a macrocycle behind it depends on every regatta going well on its own. A periodized plan depends on the whole season being built toward something. That difference, I think, is exactly why I was able to take sailors from small summer regattas to championship-level performance consistently — not as a one-off.

A trophy shows you the result of a race. A macrocycle shows you the work that made that result possible.

That's what I try to build as a coach: not a string of separate events, but a process — one where young sailors learn their sport, race with confidence, and take on more and more ownership of their own performance.