



Preparing for your FIRST Triathlon

BY BILLIE MUNRO AUDIA

Triathlons are multi-sport events that include swimming, cycling, and running. They are exhilarating, intense, and fun. If you are considering your first triathlon, chances are that you already swim, bike, or run, or perhaps a friend recently raved about his or her triathlon experience and you want to give it a go yourself. Whatever your motivation, your goal should be to cross the finish line smiling.

“Most first timers cross the finish line exhilarated—albeit exhausted—with a huge sense of self-satisfaction,” remarks Charlie Taber, special event coordinator for Eastman Recreation in Grantham, NH. Charlie also is a century-distance cyclist and manages the Eastman Splash, Mash and Dash Sprint Triathlon held at Eastman Lake. He estimates that about a third of the participants are first-timers each year. “The Eastman Tri is a perfect event for first timers because the course is scenic and straight-forward, yet challenging enough to give you a true sense of accomplishment.”

To enhance the thrill of completing your first triathlon you'll need to prepare properly. Proper preparation includes paced athletic training, visualization, eating for energy, rest, and recovery, as well as race day logistics. If you're a beginner, here are some tips to help make your first triathlon a success. You may also want to consult online resources or a triathlon coach to align your fitness level and tri goals with an appropriate training plan.

IT'S ALL IN THE DETAILS

“The number one mistake first-timers make is not being prepared, that is not being organized for the actual event,” says Ann Greenwald. She should know—she manages the Upper Valley Triathlon Club, a group that meets regularly at the Upper Valley Aquatic Center for training rides, swims, and coaching sessions. She explains, “By being prepared, not only in terms of athletic training, but also from an organizational perspective, first-timers give themselves a boost over the competition, especially in the critical T-zones.”

T-zones are the transition stations in between each sport. T1 is the transition where you dry off from the swim, don your helmet, and head out onto the cycling course. T2 is the transition where you exchange your cycling gear for your running shoes and dash out for the run. The time you spend in the T-zones is part of your overall race time, so “smooth and short” is the t-zone mantra: logistically smooth and as short a duration as possible.

To nail the T-zone, you have to practice. Try to do a few swim/bike and bike/run combination sessions prior to the race. These are called “blocks” in triathlon parlance. Doing blocks allows you to experience the athletic shift your body makes when switching from swim to bike or bike to run. If you crank out 14 miles on

your bike, jump off and immediately set out to run 3 miles, your quadriceps will probably feel like cement blocks about 400 yards after you start running. Some consider that mildly uncomfortable, while others describe it as temporarily paralyzing. Working through it prior to race day is critical.

Block training also allows you to experience the transition logistics. Think about the gear you will need when you come out of the water: a small towel to dry off, bike shoes opened-up and ready to go, as well as water to quench your thirst. Set it all out for your practice T1, take note of what works, and make a checklist for race day. If you have the opportunity, attend a triathlon, hang out near the transition area, and observe the triathletes going through T1 and T2. You will pick up lots of tips. This type of preparation will set you apart from most first-timers on race day.

After you have the logistics down, time yourself doing a T1 and a T2. While it may feel as though you are transitioning at lightning speed, you'll likely be surprised how long it takes. Once you know, you can adjust accordingly prior to race day. In one of my first triathlons I wore neoprene booties in the open-water swim because I did not want lake-bottom muck all over my feet for the race. However, that “luxury” cost me, as I had to wrestle off the wet swim booties before I could dry my feet. In that tri, my T1 time was more than four minutes, which hurt my overall time. Now I swim sans booties and use a water bottle to rinse off my feet before drying them on the towel set out on the ground, while I simultaneously adjust my bike helmet. Much quicker!

Tugging bike shorts onto wet legs can be frustratingly time-consuming. After you do it during your T1 practice drill, you may decide to invest in a tri-suit (one suit that you swim, bike, and run in) or to slather BodyGlide® on your skin before the

race, so your bike shorts pull up quicker. If you plan to wear a wet suit for the swim, be sure to practice swimming in it prior to race day, as well as un-zipping it as you run out of the water and remove it as you prep for the cycling leg. At the annual Mooseman Triathlon Festival in Newfound, NH, teams of “wet suit stripping” volunteers line the beach and help competitors get out of their suits en route.

The distance for each leg of a triathlon varies depending on the particular event's designation: Sprint, Olympic, or Ironman (see side bar). Tackling a sprint-distance is your best bet for your first triathlon. Some first-timers may find it easiest to “get their feet wet” by competing as part of a relay team. The Eastman Splash, Mash and Dash Triathlon offers a relay option and that convinced Beth Weinman, a former competitive swimmer and recent Upper Valley transplant from Colorado, to participate as a first-timer. Beth admits, “Given that I am not doing the bike portion, I will have plenty of time to transition from wet suit to running clothes while my friend cycles. This makes the event easier for a newbie like me.”

Although Beth is a strong swimmer, the idea of a competitive swim in a lake is daunting, in particular, she says, “the lack of visibility, sheer number of swimmers, and water temperature are intimidating.” This is a common theme for first-timers.

Charlie Taber confirms, “Hands down, the open-water swim with more than 50 people in each wave is generally the most challenging piece.” Luckily to date, no one has ever crawled over me during the swim in any triathlon. A few unintentional kicks in the head should be expected, so try to space yourself away from other swimmers if possible without adding to much distance onto your swim. Also, try training when the pool is busy, so you get accustomed to swimming close to others and in choppy water.

Of course, you should do a few open-water swims prior to the event, as swimming across a dark lake, while raising your head to spot the buoy is far different from swimming laps in a crystal clear pool.

One last word of wisdom: don't do anything on race day that you have not already tried and tested. Don't let race day be the day you try out a wet suit or a new sports drink. If you have not done it before, race day is not the time to try it. If you train properly, practice transitions, and stick with what works for you, you will enjoy your first triathlon—and likely catch “Tri fever”—and be signing up for many more! ☑

Billie Munro Audia enjoys competing in sprint-distance triathlons. She also enjoys being a mom, a corporate lawyer, and a member of the Okemo Ski Patrol. She and her family live in the Upper Valley.



TRIATHLON EVENT DISTANCES

Sprint: 1/3-mile swim, 12-mile bike, 3.1-mile run

Olympic: 0.9-mile swim; 24-mile bike, 6.2-mile run

Ironman: 2.4-mile swim, 112-mile bike, 26.2 mile run

WHERE TO TRY A TRI

Many race and event organizers offer triathlons in Vermont and New Hampshire. For a complete list of various-distance triathlons, from sprints to half-ironman distances, see the Vermont Sports Calendar of Events on pages 18-19 in this issue, or visit www.vtsports.com/events.

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Team members not pictured:

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