





TRI-ING TIMES

Mainers are competing
in triathlons
in record numbers.

BY ERIC CARSON

PHOTOGRAPHS BY KARSTEN MORAN

For a growing number of Mainers, a good, crisp run isn't enough exercise anymore. A brisk bike ride on hilly terrain doesn't cut it either. Even a swim in the choppy, cold waters of the mighty Atlantic can't get it done.

But put all three together and complete them on the same day, over a few hours, and you have yourself a serious workout.

Yep, it's the triathlon. And folks in Maine, like sports warriors all over the country, are running, biking, and swimming in organized endurance events in record numbers.

For some, competing in a triathlon provides a motivation to exercise regularly. Others participate in the three-part races to raise funds and awareness for charity. And a few take their triathlons very seriously, training year-round and showing up to win.

If the thought of completing three difficult athletic tasks one after another conjures up the image of the battle-tested Olympian stumbling to the finish line, think again. Athletes from 12 to 76, and even older, are finishing triathlons in Maine. For most of the participants, it's about setting a goal, achieving it, and enjoying the experience. The best finish in just over two hours, but many complete the circuit in five.

Here in Maine, one of the driving forces behind the rising popularity of triathlons is Will Thomas and his staff at Tri-Maine on Market Street in Portland. Thomas, a 2003 graduate of Bowdoin College, is busy organizing seven races at different Maine venues for the 2008 summer. Heading into their third year of operation, Thomas and his staff plug away at Tri-Maine's cramped headquarters, hoping to attract tourists, athletes, and spectators from all over the country.

"It's definitely become a national trend," said Thomas. "There were no races of any substance prior to 2004. It started in California, and it's creeping its way to Maine. We want to provide world-class events right in our own backyard. We're encouraging others to kick-start their life, and giving ex-athletes something to look forward to."

His plans make sense. Plenty of sunshine, beaches and ocean vistas, low humidity, and the chance to break out the plastic bib for the inevitable lobster dinner are just a few of the reasons to make a trip to the Pine Tree State for a triathlon.

Last year, Tri-Maine stacked up some pretty impressive participation numbers, registering 2,718 athletes from 28 different states, and raising \$13,500 for charitable organizations.

This year, Tri-Maine has two more events than last. In partnership with the Maine Cancer Foundation, it's holding the first all-woman triathlon in state history. The Tri For A Cure, slated for August 9 in South Portland on the campus of Southern Maine Community College, sold out in just over two months.

The ROMP takes place on August 31 in Rangeley Lakes over Labor Day Weekend. The local terrain should provide plenty of challenges. Fittingly for Thomas, the season kicked off at Bowdoin College on May 3 with the Polar Bear Triathlon, an event so popular that the 500 slots sold out in 45 minutes.

On September 13, Tri-Maine will host the L.L. Bean-sponsored Lobsterman Triathlon in Freeport, boasting 700 competitors for the one-mile swim, 40-kilometer bike ride, and 10-kilometer run. The Lobsterman, along with the Zone Urban EPIC, are Tri-Maine's signature events.

This year's Zone Urban EPIC will take place on July 26, beginning with a swim from Mackworth Island to East End Beach and culminating with a sprint down Fore Street in the heart of Portland's historic Old Port. The Zone Urban EPIC is at the core of what Tri-Maine is working to develop in Maine—a next-generation event with beer gardens, live entertainment, and spectator sports like wall climbing.

Will Thomas (facing page, top left), executive director and founder of Tri-Maine, and scenes from the Lobsterman Triathlon in Freeport last September.

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"It's a spectacular venue," said Thomas. "The athletes are blown away by the beauty of the landscape. It's a high-profile race, well-organized. We want to provide a destination race. We're working with the state and the city to package it as a vacation."

Last year's Zone Urban EPIC champion, Kurt Perham (2:14:54), a California native with a degree in exercise science, is owner and "head coach" at Personal Best Multisport Coaching, an organization that works closely with Tri-Maine. Since relocating to Brunswick 11 years ago when his wife took a new job, Perham has been working with all kinds of tri-athletes, from first-timers to Ironman world champions. He has every intention of defending his title at this year's Zone Urban EPIC.

"It was a great time," said Perham of last year's event. "To be a local athlete, wake up in my own bed and take a 20-minute drive to the event is a good thing. It's a great spectator event. It's not like running in a marathon, where you might see someone once. I saw my wife and son four times in a two-hour event. I'm hoping it takes off. I think it's going to be on par with other national races."

Responding to the triathlon trend, several companies have sprung up in Maine to offer equipment, training, and instruction. "We do everything from coaching individual athletes to holding lots of team training clinics," said Tim Brewer, owner of Peak Performance Multisport in Portland. "We have the bikes and we have the gear. Plus, we are connected with just about every coach in Northern New England. We have nightly clinics on everything from nutrition, to transitions, to properly maintaining your bike. We have male and female athletes of all ages, but the fastest growing demographic is definitely women from 34-45."

The Maine Running Company in Portland is another niche store. It helps runners find the right shoe by assessing their biomechanics and gait. The company also offers training classes and clinics, including the popular "Reach to Beacon" program that helps some 70 participants prepare for the Beach to Beacon race each August.

Triathletes tend to be between the ages of 30 and 55 and are well-educated homeowners with household incomes around \$95K, noted Perham.





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He generally lumps them all in one category—Type A personalities who expect and want immediate gratification.

“You need to be patient. Persistent, consistent training over a long period of time gets the best results. Usually, the people interested in learning the endurance sports are hard-charging, successful people. They want to do too much too soon. I spend a lot of my time trying to slow them down. I give them permission to take some time off, back off a little. They might want to go ride their bike for five hours every Sunday when they should be home laying mulch. It’s important to be balanced.”

Mary Schendel of Cumberland, 57, enjoys the challenge of preparing to race in a triathlon. The Minnesota native moved to Maine 32 years ago, and last year participated in Tri-Maine’s Lobsterman in Freeport. For Schendel, a lawyer by profession, setting a goal has a way of keeping her training “honest” during the months leading up to the event. She found out another thing along the way—triathlons are fun.

“There is great camaraderie among the athletes,” she said. “You don’t have to be an Ironman. And having three disciplines to train for makes it less boring. At my age, I can’t run everyday, so the cross-training is a good thing for me. The complicated part is the logistics of the training, and the transitions during the race are challenging. Figuring out what day to run and what days to bike or swim, as well as what to wear at the race and what to eat are complicated. Now, with the shorter distance triathlons, particularly the sprint races, everybody can do it.” +

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