

How to be a Tri-Geek

An Introduction to the sport of Triathlon

So you've never done a Triathlon before? Congratulations on signing up (or at least thinking about signing up) for a race! This short article is designed to give you some basic information about what it takes to do a triathlon.

How it works: Triathlon is a multi-sport event combining swimming, biking, and running with the crucial element of "transitioning" between the different sports. Your time will begin when the start siren goes off for your wave and will end when you cross the finish line. Everything, including transitions, is part of your time.

First Steps: Triathlons are a test of endurance and speed. The best way to get ready for a race is to train and have the correct gear. Training takes time and discipline, but is really most of the fun. Having daily challenges to conquer, knowing that you are doing something healthy and seeing your body develop athletically are all exciting and motivational. You'll find yourself constantly wondering what you can do next or how far you can go now.

Getting the right gear usually takes people who know what they are talking about to give you good advice. The best place to go is a tri specific shop; otherwise, check your local bike shop and ask to talk to someone who has triathlon experience. Be wary of anyone who tries to sell you something for a sport that he or she has never done. You'd be amazed how many employees at bike shops try to push a aspiring triathlete onto a bike that is completely inappropriate for what that person needs. There are major differences between touring bikes, racing bikes, time trial bikes, and triathlon bikes. If someone tries to convince you that you can put aerobars on any road bike to make it "triathlon-ready", they are not giving you accurate information. Triathlon bikes are designed with a steeper seatpost angle and more compact geometry in order to create the most powerful riding position possible. Road bikes are not shaped the same way, so to try to put aerobars on one may compromise the rider's position, stretching that person too far out and making the bike both dangerous and uncomfortable to ride. Find someone who knows triathlon bikes to put you in an aero set-up and fit you to it properly.

For more information about training and gear, check out www.trimainiac.com

Race Day: It is usually a good idea to show up to a race an hour to an hour and a half early. This gives you ample time to get through the following pre-race steps:

1. Registration – If you didn't do this the day before, you have to do it before you do anything else.
2. Body Marking – You need to have your race number written on your body.
3. Setting up Transition – You will be assigned a specific bike rack, where you can set up your gear and bike. Typically, competitors bring a towel for the ground and lay out everything on top of it.
4. Warming up – Most athletes will take their bike for a short spin, both to loosen the legs and to make sure that the bike is functioning correctly. Running is okay, but be careful that you don't go too long or too hard because you might tighten up. Definitely swim for a few minutes before the race, both to loosen your arms, but also to get used to the wetsuit.

6. Relaxing – By far the most important pre-race step is having enough time to take some deep breaths and enjoy the excitement of the event. Think about how hard you have worked to get here and how good it will feel to finish!

The key to a successful pre-race routine is to not get flustered by all of the people around you or the flashy bikes or the minutes ticking away until the Race Start. Just focus on yourself and what you need to do to get ready.

The Race:

Swim: You will be assigned a starting wave based on either your age, gender, or estimated swim time. Some races have a novice wave, which goes after all the age group waves. Warming up before the race is great. Once you get out of the water, it is important to stay warm while you are waiting for your heat is to stretch continuously. First-time athletes are often intimidated by the idea of an open-water swim. The best way to prepare is to feel confident in your ability (which comes with practice in both a pool and in open-water) and to know what to expect. When you line up for the start, make sure that you are situated in a place that reflects your confidence in your swimming. Don't be in the front if you aren't a great swimmer, because you will be trampled. There are no real rules to open water swimming, except that you have to follow the course by keeping the marker buoys to the correct side. Be prepared to be smacked, kicked, pushed, splashed and swam over during a race. To practice or simulate the craziness of an open-water swim, have two people swim side by side in a pool in the same lane. It's good to be ready for contact with other athletes, so you don't get freaked out on race day. When swimming, stay at your own pace and try not to overexert yourself. Remember that no triathlon has been won in the swim, but many have been lost by people going out way too hard. It is a good idea to use less of a kick than you might usually, in order to save your legs for the other parts of the race. Wetsuits are excellent both for warmth and for buoyancy. Although they may look restrictive, they are actually very flexible and peel off quickly. However, you should probably practice with a wetsuit before you get to the race. Wetsuits should fit tightly, but not so tight that you can't breathe. It is a good idea to have yourself fitted to a wetsuit at a tri shop, where the employees know how it should fit. When you get out of the water and head to Transition, you will probably feel a bit off-balance. The jog from the water to the Transition area is usually short, so you won't need to worry about shoes. Don't try to rush through transition (you might forget something important), but also don't use it as a break. Remember that the clock is ticking...

Transition 1: You've made it through the swim and now you have to switch gears (excuse the pun) completely. It doesn't hurt to sit down, especially if you feel at all dizzy. Bending over to put shoes on will oftentimes cause an uncomfortable head-rush, perhaps resulting in a fall. Sitting down will relax you, take pressure off your legs, and lower your heart rate. Use a towel to wipe off your feet and then put on your cycling shoes, followed by your helmet, and sunglasses. Use socks if you have to, but realize that it takes a lot of time to put dry socks on damp feet. If you train without them, you won't need them in the race! Finally, grab your bike from the rack, take a last swig of water, and off you go. Remember that you can't mount your bike until you cross the Mount/Dismount line (which is usually at the exit of the transition area).

Bike: Cycling after swimming might feel a bit bizarre, but that is normal. Let your legs adjust before you start trying to push hard. Be very aware of the traffic

around you (car and bike) and always obey the rules of the road unless told otherwise by a Police officer. When going around turns, slow down and stay as close to the shoulder of the road as you can. You should probably bring a water bottle along for the ride, especially if it is anything over 12 miles. Be careful about drafting! Oftentimes, competitors do not mean to draft, but end up too close to the people around them. If you aren't sure that you are a legal distance from someone, move further away. All the rules for triathlon can be found online at www.tri-maine.com/Rules_Corner.htm. Also, wear your helmet the entire time that you are on the bike course, from transition to transition.

Transition 2: Take your bike back to the same place that it came from (you have to remember where that was...) and put it on the rack. Take off your biking shoes, helmet, and shades and throw on your running shoes, shorts, and hat.

Run: Perhaps the most challenging aspect to triathlon is the infamous bike-run transition. It is referred to as the "brick", because of the heavy feeling that people typically have in their legs. Many triathletes believe that "jell-o" is a better way to describe the sensation. Either way, it can be very frustrating and painful for anyone not prepared for it, especially first-time competitors. The best way to deal with the "brick" is to realize that it is coming and that it will be over soon. Also, you can train for it, by running (at least 10 minutes) after you ride, to simulate the sensation. Typically it takes about a half a mile to get your running legs back. One strategy that people use at the end of the bike to get ready for the run is to increase the turnover (cadence) by switching to an easier gear and "spinning". This will often loosen up the leg muscles. Also, you can stand up out of the saddle, to warm up the running muscles. Whatever you choose to do, the truth is that you *will* experience the "brick" and it *will* eventually go away. The key is to work through the best you can. Once you get past the "brick", the rest of the run is easy.

Post-Race: Completing a triathlon is one of the coolest feelings you can experience and the best way to thoroughly enjoy it is to hang around the Post-Race area and talk to the other finishers. Typically races have food, drink, and massage to help you recover from the race. Often, there is an awards ceremony for the top three finishers in each age category, male and female, followed by a raffle with prizes. Be sure to check it out! It is very important to eat the right kinds of food after the race, to expedite your recovery. Your body needs protein, carbs (long-chain), and fats (unsaturated). The ideal time to consume food after a race is within 30-60 minutes. Expect to be sore the next day.

Equipment and Gear

Perhaps the most common question for first timers is "What should I bring?" The answer is "less than you think".

Below is a list of necessary equipment and what to use it for:

1. **Suit** – Typically, athletes wear one base layer for all three events, and add other clothing if necessary during transition. A "tri suit" is a pair of thin biking shorts with a small chamois pad for cushioning. These shorts can be worn during all three sports and dry quickly. On top, you can have a singlet, which is a tight-fitting, non-cotton sleeveless shirt, designed to wick moisture away from the body and keep it cool. Also, these shirts have small pockets in the back to carry fuel. Other than a tri suit, athletes will often wear a bathing suit, a pair of biking shorts, or a pair of running shorts as their base layer. You don't need to wear your race number during the swim or the bike, but you have to have it on during

the run. I recommend using a race belt (which displays the number and clips around your waist) or pinning it to a pair of running shorts or a shirt and pulling them on during your bike/run transition over your base layer.

2. Goggles – Although not required, these are essential to a successful swim.

3. Towel – I recommend putting this on the ground next to your bike, to dry off your feet before putting on your shoes. Drying off your entire body takes longer than it is worth; let the wind do it.

4. Shoes – Some people have different biking and running shoes, but having one pair is fine. One tip – consider not wearing socks. If you don't understand why, try putting a pair of athletic socks on wet feet while standing up. It usually wastes precious time. On the other hand, if you are just worried about comfort, it is definitely nice to have socks on.

5. Sunglasses – important for wind and sun protection

6. Water Bottle – although there will be plenty of water stations, it is always good to have something to drink during transition or on the bike

7. Energy Bar or Gel – Some people swear by these and other people don't think they are necessary. It is up to you. Be careful if you have never used them before because you don't know how your digestive system will react. Bananas and bagels are good choices as well.

8. Helmet – for obvious reasons

9. Bike

What you don't need:

- Bike gloves
- More than 1 water bottle (for a sprint)
- Extra shirts
- Lots of food

Final Notes:

- Remember that sleep has been proven to be extremely important in determining athletic performance. The key night for getting sleep is two nights before the event.

- Eat whatever you have been eating during training. Don't think that having a huge pasta dinner the night before will drastically increase your endurance (in fact, the spike in insulin levels that comes with a big carb meal can throw your body for a loop). Be smart with what you put into your body in the days leading up to the race. The morning of the race, try to avoid dairy or other "heavy" foods (sausage, bacon, etc.). Fruit and whole grains are probably the best thing to eat.

- Train hard, but more importantly, train smart. You know your body better than anyone else and you can tell if you are pushing yourself over the limit (i.e. risking injury). Triathlon is about self-improvement, but don't keep the focus only on yourself. Include your friends and family in the journey by training with them or talking with them about your experiences. You'll be amazed how many people you can inspire by telling them what you are doing.

Finally, remember that it is quite natural to feel some nerves before your first triathlon. However, always keep in mind that this is an exciting and fun challenge. You are only competing against yourself. And when you see all of those spectators and volunteers cheering you on, the nerves will quickly disappear...

Good luck!!!!