

10 Tips for First-time Triathletes

By Gale Bernhardt

I don't know if it is accurate to write that triathlon is "the" fastest growing sport in the world; but it has definitely got to be in the top few.

If you survey people that have completed a triathlon and ask them why they decided to participate in the sport—what got them there—you may get an answer included in the list below:

- I had too many running injuries and needed to do cross training to heal myself. Once I began cycling and swimming, I realized I enjoyed the variety and didn't want to stop.
- I wanted a new challenge, a change from my regular activities.
- It was a stake in the ground. I decided to make changes to my life and triathlon was the start.
- I wanted a way to celebrate my next birthday.
- I was decent at several sports and the idea of combining them into a single competition seemed to be to my advantage.
- I watched a multisport event and thought the madness looked like a lot of fun.
- It's a great way to stay fit because I get an overall workout—cycling and running do nothing for my upper body.
- My buddies and I made a bet. I say a good cyclist can slaughter a good runner or a good swimmer in a multisport event. My buddies disagree. I guess we'll just have to test those theories. Bring on the race.

The summer is still young and there is plenty of time for you to train for and successfully complete a triathlon. Need more help?

Here are ten tips for first-time triathletes:

1. Go short before going long. The Ironman World Championship event is arguably the most recognizable triathlon event in the world. The award-winning NBC broadcast of this event has brought the struggle and triumph of triathlon to living rooms around the world. However, a 140.6-mile event—2.4 miles of swimming, 112 miles of cycling and 26.2 miles of running—is more than nearly all first-time triathletes should attempt on the first outing in the sport.

Begin with a shorter sprint-distance event (400 to 500 yards of swimming, 11 to 15 miles of cycling and around 3.1 miles of running) or an Olympic-distance event (0.9 miles of swimming, 24.8 miles of cycling and 6.2 miles of running).

2. Stay close to home. For the first race, make it easy on yourself and select an event close to home. If the event is within easy driving distance from your house, it helps reduce race-day stress and hassle. You can also do some of your workouts on the course, increasing your confidence. You can find events close to you by searching the Active event listings.

3. Just a swim suit and goggles for the swim. If you do not own a wetsuit or are an inexperienced open water swimmer, select an event that is in a pool and does not require a wetsuit. If your event does require a wetsuit, and you don't own one, some retail stores rent wetsuits. A good pair of goggles and a swim suit made for lap swimming, not sunbathing, is all you need for the swim portion of the event.

4. Your bike is fine. Any bike you're currently riding will work just fine. It can be a road bike, mountain bike or hybrid. Many people have completed their first triathlon on a borrowed bicycle. Be sure the bike is correctly fit to you and is in good working order. (No rotted tires or frayed cables.)

Most races have a support motor vehicle (also known as sag support) following the race to pick up riders unable to complete the bike leg for one reason or another, but it is best that you know how to change a flat tire for training and race day.

5. You need running shoes. If you do not currently own a pair of running shoes, you need a pair. I recommend going to a good running store near you and let the experts in the store help you select the right pair of running shoes. They should ask you questions about your feet, running history and watch your gait while walking and running.

6. It doesn't take as much training as you might think. You are not training for a podium position at an Ironman event for your first race, therefore you do not need to be training 20 to 30 hours per week. You can be ready for a sprint-distance race on less than five hours per week of training. Most weeks are less than five hours. You can find detailed training plans here.

7. Plan to rest. For most eager racers, it is easy to plan to swim, bike and run. Be certain you plan to rest as well. You want to do enough training to complete the event and have fun. It is best if you finish the event with a smile and hungry for more races.

8. Transition time counts too. I have had some beginner triathletes write to tell me they were surprised that the time it takes to change from swimming to cycling and from cycling to running (known as transitions, "T1" and "T2") counted in overall race time. All of the time between the start of your swim and when you cross the finish line at the end of the run counts. Practice smooth and swift transitions.

9. Plan to do the first half of the race slower. Most beginners start too fast. Estimate how much time you think it will take you to do the entire event. Plan to do the first half of that total time at a slower pace than you think you're capable of doing. When you reach the half-way point, you can pick up the pace and finish strong. This is called a negative-split effort.

10. One piece of "trick" equipment. If you want to pick up one piece of "trick" equipment, purchase elastic shoe laces. One such brand is Yankz. Elastic laces allow you to slip your feet into your running shoes and eliminate the need to tie your shoes.

For your first race, try to keep things simple. Once you get hooked on the sport, you can look into ways to get faster or go longer.