

Doing Your First Triathlon

By Steven Jonas, MD, MPH

Many readers of this journal are experienced endurance athletes, and many are marathoners. I have done 10 of them myself, including three at the end of ironman-distance triathlons. That being said, my primary endurance racing experience is of the multi-sport variety. Therefore, that is the experience from which I'll share. Whether or not you are a distance athlete yourself, if you do any kind of sports medicine, patients or clients may ask you for some practical advice about doing these type of events. Here are some suggestions for talking with them about this subject. Although I focus on advice related to multi-sport, you will find that the principles apply to all endurance events.

If your patient is intrigued with the idea of participating in a race, you are not facing the issue of "selling" the concept; instead, it becomes a matter of facilitation. Your patient may have seen endurance events on television, read about one or another type in the sports pages, been a spectator at a race, or had a discussion about it with a friend or family member. They may be curious about its mystery, and are ready to tackle the challenge.

Before getting into any of the tangible details, you may need to first talk to your patient about what it's like to undertake your first multi-sport race. Some of the feelings they may experience are apprehension, anticipation, anxiety, wonder, and may ask them self "Am I crazy?" or "Can I really do this?" For most of you who do these races, I'm sure you can agree that a very important part of preparation is the "mental stuff." If one puts one's mind to it, it *can* be done.

For me, the most important first step is goal setting, something I write about on a regular basis. And to help with the goal setting, you need to question why he or she is doing what they are doing? What do they expect to get out of it? For whom are they doing it? What are the "give-ups" necessary for achieving the goal and are they really worth it to the person?

For that very first endurance race, I suggest that that goal be simple: to finish happily and healthily. The concern should not be with speed but with endurance and getting across the finish line comfortably. They should not try to go too fast, both in training and in the race. If they like the sport, they will do more races. If they

do, in fact, race well (fast) and/or can train up to speed, they will have plenty of opportunity to show their "stuff" in the future.

Both triathlon and duathlon are complex sports, especially when one is new to them. In addition to the race itself, there are the details of logistics and equipment to which attention must be paid. The first race (or even the first several) should be considered a learning experience and should be chosen with care. First, if possible, the race should be reasonably close to home; hopefully, close enough so they can sleep in their own bed the night before the race. As for distance, I suggest certainly nothing more than the "Olympic" distance triathlon (1.5k swim, 40k bike, 10k run) for the first race. For most people, I believe it is better to ease into the experience with either a "sprint" triathlon (1/4 to 1/2 mile swim, 8 to 15 mile bike, 3 to 4 mile run) or a short-distance

duathlon (1 to 3 mile run, 8 to 18 mile bike, 1 to 3 mile run). In the last 10 years or so, sprint-distance races have become increasingly common and are fairly easy to find.

There are certainly folks who do a long race the first time out. Years ago, a friend of mine started his triathlon career with the 1985 Bud Light Endurance Triathlon (Cape Cod Ironman), and did fine. *However*, he had already done several ultra-marathon road races, thus building a strong base.

I believe it is important to stress to your patient that in multi-sport racing, whatever distance it may be, they are doing a "real" triathlon or duathlon. In some of the reaches of the sport, there is an "Ironman ethic" where participants suggest it is only the Ironman distance (2.4-mile swim, 112-mile bike, then the marathon) that constitutes a real triathlon (see my "Message from the Editor" in this issue for



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further commentary on this topic). If the first-timer is exposed to this type of negative message and misinformation, it can be very discouraging and perhaps destructive to their goals.

If possible, the date of the first race should be chosen so that training can be done in desirable weather, and the climate where the race takes place should match that in which the athlete has trained. As we head into summer months, you may see a patient who is contemplating doing a short triathlon or a duathlon before the season is over. This would be the person who is a regular aerobic athlete and comfortable with their skill level on the bike and the swim.

For those individuals just starting out, the rest of the summer/fall season is a good time to start building an aerobic base, with continued building through the winter. Then next spring they will be ready to get into a race-specific training program, enabling them to compete before the end of June. (For multi-sport training programs, I recommend the magazine *Triathlete*, books by Joe Friel and Gale Bernhardt, and my website ordinarymortals.net).

Another detail you need to consider when choosing a triathlon is the temperature of the water. I suggest going with a temperature above 70 degrees Fahrenheit. It is fairly comfortable and you won't have to worry about borrowing, renting, or buying a wetsuit. You should also try to find a race in which the bike and run courses are reasonably flat and smooth, and have some shade. It is also advantageous to have plenty of parking close to the "transition area" (where bikes are racked and equipment is changed between the race segments) and a race day check-in so that you don't have to bother with that the day before the race.

It helps to know in advance that the race is well-organized from check-in to after-race food and the awards ceremony. Look for adequate water stations on the course, good traffic control, and well-managed safety on the water and the roads. The best way to get this information is to talk with someone who has done the race before and to read race comments online. As for equipment, it's best to check out the recommended reading resources mentioned earlier in this article.

Finally, where to find races? First, race notices can be found at bike and specialty running shoe stores. Second, there are a number of local/regional triathlon clubs or organizations around the country that put on races. For example, the one I'm associated with, the New York Triathlon Club, has a very busy race calendar (www.nyc.org). There is an extensive list of local triathlon clubs, listed by state and city, at the USA-Triathlon website (www.usatriathlon.org/Clubs). The USA-Triathlon site also includes an extensive list of races they sanction. Third, there are a variety of websites that list races. Three that I like are www.trifind.com, linmarksports.com, and www.active.com/triathlon.

As many of you know, there are very good times to be had in endurance and multi-sport racing, if one goes about it the right way. You can certainly help your patients and clients get off to a good start. And for those of you endurance athletes who have never tried multi-sport racing, maybe this little introduction will have whetted your own appetite!

Note: This column is an updated version of my column "Talking About Training: Doing Your First Triathlon" published in the AMAAJ, Summer-Fall, 2005, p. 15.

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Talking About Training is a regular feature written by Dr. Jonas; however, articles from guest coaches are always welcome. To view submission guidelines, go to www.amaasportsmed.org and click on AMAA Journal.

Triathloning Tip

For many new triathletes, swimming can be a daunting and technique-driven discipline which elicits more panic and fear than bicycling and running. To ease this apprehension, look for a reputable swim coach or swimming group to work on mechanics and provide direction for building fitness and confidence in the water.

– AMAA Member Ryan Rau, CPT, USAT Elite Team Member, IM Pro