

STARTING OUT IN TRIATHLONS

THE SWIM



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About the Author

With 30 years' experience in cycling and triathlon, Colin Leeson is a leading authority in affordable, quality performance components for the cycling and triathlon industry.

Colin is the owner and manager of the brand **TLR Performance** which supplies a broad range of Cycling, Running and Triathlon products. He has a passion for sport and loves competing in triathlons and sharing his knowledge with others.

Introduction

Triathlon is a unique sport combining the three disciplines of Swimming, Cycling and Running. Triathlons come in a variety of sizes and difficulties ranging from introductory events for first timers, through the sprint distance events and up to the ultimate endurance event the "Ironman Triathlon".

Many people come to the sport of Triathlon having previously focused on one of the three sports. In my case this was both cycling and running where, as a teenager I was a very competitive runner and keen recreational cyclist. It wasn't until I was in my mid 20's that triathlons started to become more well-known and after being invited to come watch a friend at this Australian event called "Noosa Triathlon" I decided to form a team and have a go for myself. Well I went in the event and was immediately hooked and have been doing triathlons ever since.

Starting the TLR Performance brand gave me the fantastic opportunity to contribute to, and make a living out of a sport that I love.

In the "**Starting out in Triathlons**" series of eBooks I will share my experiences and take you through the basics of triathlon and cover topics which will help you understand how a triathlon event works, the equipment you will need including where best to spend your money, some of the Gotcha's you may come across, training programs and a multitude of tips.

I hope you get some real value from this series and hope to see you in a triathlon event somewhere, sometime.

Colin Leeson

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Cover: The start of a long day for a group of Ironman competitors.

The Triathlon Swim Leg

You have watched a few triathlons and learnt the basics of the event and decided now is the time to do one for yourself. You have completed the process of entering, registering and setting up your transition area and now it's time to start the race. The first leg of the race is the swim and you are excited to get on with it.

In this eBook we will focus on the swim leg and cover how to prepare for the swim, what to expect during the race and talk about some ways of improving your time in this leg.

Check out the other eBooks in the "Starting out in Triathlons" series to get a more in-depth description on other specific topics.

Preparation

There are many things to consider and prepare for before jumping in the water and we will now look at a few of them:

Gear

For the swim leg of a Triathlon you will normally be wearing or have on you the following items:

- **A Tri suit.** These are tight fitting lycra items of clothing which include a bike short like pant and singlet like top. They come in both one-piece and two-piece kits and usually contain a couple of pockets. Because they are tight fitting they can be worn during the swim without causing any drag in the water.
- **Swimming Goggles** These are very important so you can see where you are going. They can get kicked or bumped by other athletes so a solid pair is important.
- **Watch and heart rate monitor (If you use them)** The heart rate monitor strap for brands such as the Garmin sports watches can be worn under the tri suit in the water. These type of watches are very valuable for tracking performance and setting pace particularly in the ride and run legs of a triathlon.
- **Swim cap (from the race pack)** The swim cap will be coloured according to your age group and wave start and you will not be allowed to start without wearing it. I'm often asked whether to put the swim cap or goggles on first. To be honest I don't think there is a right or wrong answer for

this question and it is a matter of personal choice. Some think if you put the goggles on first the swim cap will stop them coming off and others think the goggles on last help keep the swim cap on. My personal preference is goggles on the outside.

- Timing chip (from the race pack) You need this chip to record a time and you will be disappointed to complete a triathlon and not have a recorded finish time. Also there is usually a financial penalty for not returning the chip so make sure it is firmly strapped to your ankle.
- Lubricant You may consider applying some lubricant for chafing before the race. You can use “Vaseline” (petroleum jelly) or a more purpose designed product like “Glide”. Glide is the preferred lubricant for use with wetsuits as Vaseline can damage wetsuit material. I usually smear a lubricant between my legs, under my arms and on the nipples.

Wetsuit Swims

If the water is cool enough wetsuits are allowed in triathlon events. A triathlon wetsuit is specifically designed and is different from a diving or surfing wetsuit and there are restrictions around the types of wetsuits which are approved for triathlon events. Wetsuits are great to swim in as they give a little buoyancy and make the swim stroke much more effective. They can rub when worn particularly in salt water and the use of Glide lubricant around the neck, wrists and ankles is highly advised.

I learnt a great trick for putting wetsuits on only a year or two ago. The trick is to put your foot in a plastic shopping bag first then slip your foot, with the bag on it, into the wetsuit. The bag allows your foot to slide into the wetsuit really easy then you just pull the bag off your foot!!



Note: During a pre-race briefing it will be announced if wetsuits are allowed in the event or not.

Race Briefing

The race briefing gives details of the event and includes information and rules about each discipline.

For the swim leg it is really only significant for the start wave procedure and as a reminder about the layout of the swim course.

The Swim Course

The race guide, website and noticeboards will contain triathlon course guides for each leg of the race. These show the layout of the swim, the start and finish location and the direction of swimming.

The swim course is constructed using large buoys which athletes are instructed to swim to either the right or left. Generally a different colour buoy is used when a turn is required.

Of course in an open water swim there are no lines on the bottom so maintaining direction during your swim is important. As a triathlon swimmer you need to learn to lift your head every few strokes and sight the next buoy and keep aiming for it.



Nutrition

The last pre-race area to discuss is nutrition.

Even for a very short event I always have a gel or some other calorie product 15 minutes before the race start. These 15 minutes gives the product time to get into the bloodstream and have you energised before the race start. This is a far better option than starting the energy replacement process on the bike and playing “catch-up” with energy you have already expelled.

(In my eBook “Starting out with Triathlons – Nutrition” I will talk in more detail about race nutrition products and strategies for differing length events)

It's time to get in the water!!!

The preparation has completed and you are ready to race.

Starting Waves

In the race briefing and race notes you will have found details about your wave start. These details include the cap colour, age group spread and start time. As the time for your start approaches go to the start area and join in with others from your wave. With any luck you will have a friend or acquaintance to chat to while you wait.

Start Types

Triathlons can have either a deep water or shoreline start. In either case the field is lined up behind an imaginary line between buoys or flags. Technical officials are usually quite strict about athletes being behind this line and some jostling usually happens in deep water start as people try to find the line and get a good position behind it.

A hooter sounds to start the race.

If you are nervous about the swim the best idea is to find a position towards the back of the group and let the stronger swimmers go ahead.

Toilets

As a race start draws close most people have the need to go and relieve themselves. Triathlon events usually have a large number of portable hire toilets for use BUT they have a much larger number of athletes trying to use them. It is not uncommon to have a ½ hour or longer wait for the use of the toilets so this needs to be allowed for in your pre-race plans.

Gents, have a look for a portable urinal. I have seen these starting to appear in Brisbane events and most men don't realise they are there and standing mostly empty until they reach the start of the line.

Warm-up

It is likely you will want to do some sort of warm up or stretching before the event. I usually find it takes me 5-10 mins to get into a rhythm with any sport I do so I like to warm up for at least this long before a triathlon. I typically do some stretches and have a short run something like ½ hour before the start. The stretching loosens up the body and the run gets the blood flowing, the muscles activated and the lungs opened up and working properly.

Most triathlons allow a swim warm-up area and I like to be in the water about 10 minutes before the race if I can where I do another 3-5 min swim then join in the crowd to find my start position.

Start

The swim start in a triathlon is something not often experienced and is likened to a “washing machine” due to all the people thrashing around in the water so close together. The trick with the early part of the swim is try to find a bit of space to swim in and be careful of people around you that will either kick you if you are too close behind them, bash into the side of you or swim over top of you from behind.

The “washing machine” is the reason to hang back on the swim if you are not confident about your swimming.

Drafting

The swim is one place in the triathlon where you can draft. There is an advantage in swimming right behind another athlete so it is in your advantage to find someone swimming at about your pace and follow them.

Exiting the Water

Swim exits come in a variety of forms. On a beach you will finish on the sand, in a channel or river you might come to a bank or a ramp of some kind and if you are at a jetty you may come to some temporary stairs. The one trick in all these scenarios is to keep swimming until your hands touch something because it is quicker to swim than wade, walk or paddle.

The one slight exception could be a surf swim where the bottom is uneven requiring you to do some “Porpoising” (standing, diving in and floating then repeat like a dolphin or porpoise would do).

If the finish is a ramp, bank or stairs there will usually be a group of race volunteers there to assist athletes out of the water.

Run to Transition

Now that you are out of the water it will be a short run to the transition area where you change to the bike leg. At the start of the run chute you will cross a timing mat that will record your split time for the swim.

The thing to be aware of at this point is much of your blood has moved to the upper part of your body to power your chest and arms for the swim. It takes a few moments for the blood to return to your legs and allow you to run comfortably. It is a strange sensation starting to run to the transition. When you get to your transition you need to also be careful as you bend over in case you experience some light headedness or dizziness.

Now you are in transition where you are preparing for the ride and getting out on the bike course.

You can read more advanced information about the bike leg in the eBook “Starting out in Triathlons – The Ride”.