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STARTING OUT IN TRIATHLONS

WHAT IS A TRIATHLON?



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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: TLR Community member Craig Willows-Keetley finishing his first EVER triathlon which happened to be the inaugural Sunshine Coast 70.3 at Mooloolaba, QLD, Australia.

What is a Triathlon?

Perhaps you were talking to a friend who announced that they were doing a triathlon in the near future or maybe you were flicking the TV channels and found this crazy sport where people were in the water one minute then on a bike the next and you are wondering “What is a Triathlon?”

Hopefully this eBook can answer your question. It is an introduction level guide which covers off the basics of the sport of triathlon and will set you on the path to competing in one for yourself.

In this book we will breeze over topics and give a helicopter view of the event.

Refer to the other eBooks in the “Starting out in Triathlons” series to get a more in-depth description on specific topics.

So what is a Triathlon?

A triathlon is an event which starts with a swim, is then followed by a bike ride then finishes with a run. These legs immediately follow each other and the timing for a triathlon race starts at the beginning of the swim and finishes as the athlete crosses the line at the end of the run. Intermediate time “splits” are also recorded.

The change-over activity between each leg is called the “Transition” and this occurs in the “Transition Area” which is a compound set up with bike racks for all the bikes.

Race lengths

Triathlons come in a variety of lengths and cater for all age groups and levels of ability.

Kids triathlons At a typical triathlon event a kid’s triathlon will be put on to encourage kids into the sport.

These races are for children between the ages of about 7 and 12 and are very short to match their abilities.

First timers At many of the “sprint distance events” an introductory event is held which is aimed at people giving triathlon a go for the first few times. In a triathlon series near where I live this race is called the “Enticer” event.

Typical lengths for this event are a 300 m swim, a 10 km bike ride then a 2.5 km run.

Note. Triathlon race lengths are generally written this way (300/10/2.5) or (300m/10k/2.5k)

- Sprint distance** The Sprint Distance triathlons are the shorter of the regular triathlon events. Often there is a series of sprint distance triathlons over a summer season where the early races have a length of something like 400m/15k/4k then over the summer they lengthen to become a standard sprint distance triathlon which is 750m/20k/5k.
- Olympic or Classic** The “Olympic” or “Classic distance triathlon” is the most common length for the big events around the world. The length of an Olympic distance triathlon is 1500 m swim, 40 km bike and 10 km run.
- Some of these events are very large with the Noosa Triathlon in QLD, Australia that I mentioned in the introduction, attracting about 10 000 athletes a year.
- If you were paying attention you may have noticed that the sprint distance triathlon is ½ the length of the Olympic or Classic triathlon.
- 70.3** The 70.3 triathlon is another “1/2 length” event and is the shorter of the two long distance events. The 70.3 or “1/2 Ironman” race has an 1800 m swim, a 90 km bike ride and then a 21.1 km “half marathon” run.
- Ironman** The Ironman Triathlon is the pinnacle of the long distance events and for most is a lifetime achievement when completed. The Ironman consists of a 3.8 km swim, a 180 km ride then a 42.2 km “marathon” run. In this event competitors have a cut off time of 17 hours in which to complete the course. Most athletes who complete an Ironman Triathlon train for up to a year beforehand.

Clubs and Training Groups

Most triathletes join with others to do their training. This can be done through clubs where there is coaching or through groups of friends.

TLR Performance has set up the “TLR Community” to be a good starting point for people wanting to get involved in triathlons. It has an active online community and the group attends events around South East Queensland, Australia. Our members learn the basics from someone more experienced making their experience a much more enjoyable one. <http://www.tlrperformance.com.au/community>

There are many groups like this all around the world and there will no doubt be one near you.

In the remainder of this eBook I will step through the components of a triathlon in a little more detail.

Triathlon in detail

Events

Triathlon events are held all around the world during the summer months. Triathlon events are run by clubs, state triathlon associations, regional businesses and international businesses such as the Ironman and Challenge businesses. If you search for events in your local area you will undoubtedly find many,

Entries usually open for events some months beforehand and depending on the popularity of an event can sell out very quickly. In Australia some triathlons fill up in a matter of a few hours after opening so it is important to be ready if it is these popular events you wish to enter.

Event Entry

Entry into a triathlon is through an age category. Mostly these are in blocks of 5 years by male and female e.g. 30 – 34 Male, 35 – 39 Male etc.

There is usually an “Elite” or “Open” category for men and women as well.

Triathlons usually also have an option to join a team where the legs are done by different people. Teams are great for beginners or where someone is unable to do a particular leg (e.g. Can't run due to knee problems)

Registering

On race weekend the first thing an athlete needs to do is “Register”. This usually means going to a registration tent where you are given your race pack.

The race pack typically contains the following:

- The race number (for wearing while running)
- A number sticker for the bike and another for the helmet
- A coloured swim cap
- An electronic timing chip.
- Some events give a numbered wrist band which is needed to get in and out of the transition area.

The bags also contain a range of promotional items and “freebies”

Racking – transition setup

The next step is racking your bike and setting up your transition area. As you enter the transition area with the bike for the first time you will be asked to wear your helmet and it will be checked to be in good order and the chin strap checked to be tight. The bike will also be checked to be sure it is safe. One thing officials do is to check the plugs in the end of handlebars. You will not get through if these are missing.

Usually there are designated rows for race number groups set up in transition. You will need to find your row and select a position to rack your bike.

(In the eBook “Starting out with Triathlons – The 4th Leg” I will talk in more detail about using the transition more effectively)

Once you rack your bike you need to set up your area for the race. Again this will be elaborated on in the other book but the short version is you need to have the cycling gear and running gear set up so you can change as quickly as possible to the next leg of the race. Paying attention to having shoes open and ready for your feet, helmet straps out of the way and ready to go on your head, sunglasses facing the right way in your helmet are small things that make a big difference in transition.



Transition flow

The last thing you need to do is be very clear on the flow of the transition area. Access in and out of the transition area is through a series of “Chutes”. These chutes are designed to make transition even for all competitors. This way if you end up racking your bike “way up the back” you are no worse off than those near the front.

It is important to walk the route and be sure where it goes, which is your row and where your bike / transition area is located. I always look for landmarks to help with this eg. “In the second row and past the 3rd tree” or light post etc.

On the event website, in the information pack and usually on posters are maps of the course including this transition flow.

Learn it well!!!



Now it is time to race!!!

As you can tell by now there are separate phases to a triathlon race and we will step through these one-by-one and highlight some key points. Once again I will go into more detail about these stages in other eBooks.

“I’ve got nothing to wear!”

What do I wear in a triathlon? Most people wear a Tri Suit while competing in a triathlon. They are made of lycra and have a short like a cycling short but with a smaller chamois and usually a couple of small pockets. The top is also lycra and has no sleeves. Tri suits come in both two-piece and one-piece. They are not cheap to buy so as a first time triathlete you might swim in speedos, and ride and run in a singlet and bike shorts (See also the eBook “Starting out in Triathlons – Equipment” for cost effective progression through triathlons)

Starting waves

As we discussed in the entry section, you will be entered in an age group wave for the start. The wave will have a specified start time and these start times are also in the race information packs and on the notice boards. The waves are differentiated by the colour of the swimming cap so you will be starting with a heap of people wearing the same cap as you.

Be sure to know your start time and be near the start as this time approaches.

The Start

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. A hooter sounds to start the race. If you are nervous about the swim the best idea is to hang back and let the stronger swimmers go ahead.

Swim

The swim in a triathlon is often likened to a “washing machine” due to all the people swimming so close together. The “washing machine” is another reason to hang back on the swim if you are not confident about your swimming. In the swim the important thing is to be aware of where you have to swim and keep an eye on the buoys which mark the swim course and try to keep away from other swimmers.

Transition

After the swim, run to your transition location and prepare for the bike. You will see more experienced triathletes have their cycling shoes attached to their pedals already and they will slip their feet into the shoes once they are riding. For your first triathlons don't worry about this.

So put your shoes on, put your helmet and sunglasses on. Be sure to have your helmet done up before removing your bike from the rack.

Note. Your race number doesn't have to be on in most triathlons at this stage so the best idea is to have it on a "race belt" with your running shoes.

For more information on the transition see my other eBook "Starting out in Triathlons – The 4th Leg"

Ride

The ride is my favourite part and is a good time to catch your breath a little after the swim and ahead of the run. While on the bike make sure you get some fluids in to your body (water and electrolyte drink) and if it is a longer event some calories like Gels.

A few things to be aware of on the bike:

- At the transition entrance there is a "Mount line" and a "Dismount line". As you start the ride you have to wheel the bike PAST the "mount line" before you get on the bike and as you finish the ride you have to get off BEFORE the "dismount line".
- Drafting (or slipstreaming) is the other thing to watch out for. In a triathlon you are not allowed to follow someone else and have an advantage from their slipstream. There are a number of rules around drafting but in summary you have to either be 12 metres behind or be in the process of overtaking the bike ahead of you.

Transition 2

Next it's time to get off the bike and prepare for the run.

After dismounting the bike at the correct place, run with it back to your area. This time you don't have the bike to look for so will be looking for your shoes or towel so it's more important to be aware of how to locate your transition spot. Once back at your transition area, rack your bike BEFORE unclipping your helmet. Put your run shoes, race number and cap if you use one on and head out the run chute for the run.

Run

The last leg now so you are almost done.

As a triathlete when you try to run after riding your legs will feel heavy and somewhat lifeless. Triathletes train for running after riding to get used to this.

As you start your run be aware of this and keep pushing through it. Within 5-10 mins your legs should start to feel pretty much normal again and you can go on to finish the race.

As you finish you will run down a finish chute and under the finish banner where the electronic timer will register you as finished.

Try to listen for the person on the PA system to call out your name because it's pretty cool to hear.

Post-race

After the race you will be in the recovery area where you can have a drink to get rehydrated and usually some fruit etc. to eat.

I like to go back to the edge of the course as quickly as I can to see all my friends finish their races.

You may be keen to get your bike from the transition area and leave. You need to be aware that transition stays closed until after the last competitor has finished the ride so you can't get your bike till then.

Sometimes this can be quite a wait if you are in an early starting wave.

HAVE FUN

As I look back over these pages it seems like you need a lot of information to do a triathlon and this could be a little overwhelming. My advice is, have a look at this stuff but don't get too hung up about learning all if it for your first few events. Just go out and have a great time!! If you do this, I expect you like me, will find that triathlons are fantastic and you will want to continue doing them and challenging yourself to do better.

In the book "Starting out in Triathlons – Tips" I will share experiences for dealing with pre-race stress, sleep and nerves.

For more advanced information look for the other eBooks in the "Starting out in Triathlons" series.