



JUMPING IN

The 6 key triathlon-training guidelines for newbies

By Matt Fitzgerald

There are many good reasons to become a triathlete. One of the best and most commonly cited reasons points to the physical and mental challenges the sport offers. It is human nature to enjoy a good challenge because we typically become stronger through the process of taking on the right sorts of personal tests.

Among the greatest specific challenges new triathletes face is learning how to train effectively. By virtue of the sport's composite nature, triathlon training is more complex than training for most other sports. Many new triathletes find it downright intimidating to contemplate how little they know about effective training methods compared to how much there is to know.

One can only compress this learning curve and accelerate the learning process so much. You're bound to make mistakes and find it necessary to correct your course as you go. The best way to minimize the number of errors you experience in becoming an effective triathlon self-coach is to learn and absorb the most basic core principles of effective training.

I have summarized the fundamental principles and the most effective methods of triathlon training in the form of six basic guidelines. These guidelines do not provide all of the specific practices you need to be familiar with to fully implement them.

They represent a framework that will help you understand the big picture of physical preparation and steer your training with confidence. As such, these guidelines constitute not only a good primer for beginners but also useful review material for more experienced triathletes.

1. BALANCE ALL THREE DISCIPLINES

Swimming, cycling and running are all equally important to triathlon success. Sure, you spend a lot more time on the bike than you spend in the water or on foot, but weaknesses in swimming or running are just as likely to limit your overall performance as weakness on the bike. Therefore, you should do a roughly equal number of swims, rides and runs each week. At a minimum, you should do two workouts per week in each discipline. Three workouts per discipline each week is a suitable schedule for most competitive triathletes. There's nothing to be gained by doing more than four workouts per discipline each week. It's a good idea to do one combined bike-run (or brick) workout each week. The bike and run segments of this workout can each count toward your total number of workouts in each discipline, or one segment can count as an extra session in that particular discipline.

Following are four basic weekly workout templates. One features two workouts per discipline per week; the second features three workouts per discipline per week; the third features four workouts per discipline per week; and the last features three workouts per discipline per week plus either a fourth ride or a fourth run (alternate the additional ride and run on a weekly basis, as outlined in template #4 below).

SAMPLE WEEKLY WORKOUT TEMPLATE #1

2 SWIMS, 2 RIDES, 2 RUNS

MON	TUES	WEDS	THURS	FRI	SAT	SUN
OFF	SWIM	BIKE	RUN	SWIM	BIKE	RUN

SAMPLE WEEKLY WORKOUT TEMPLATE #2

3 SWIMS, 3 RIDES, 3 RUNS

MON	TUES	WEDS	THURS	FRI	SAT	SUN
OFF	SWIM	BIKE	SWIM	RUN	BIKE	BIKE
	RUN				RUN	SWIM

SAMPLE WEEKLY WORKOUT TEMPLATE #3

4 SWIMS, 4 RIDES, 4 RUNS

MON	TUES	WEDS	THURS	FRI	SAT	SUN
SWIM	BIKE	SWIM	BIKE	SWIM	RUN	BIKE
		RUN	RUN	BIKE	SWIM	RUN

SAMPLE WEEKLY WORKOUT TEMPLATE #4

WEEK 1: 3 SWIMS, 3 RIDES, 4 RUNS

MON	TUES	WEDS	THURS	FRI	SAT	SUN
OFF	SWIM	BRICK*	SWIM	RUN	BIKE	BIKE
	RUN				RUN	SWIM

WEEK 2: 3 SWIMS, 4 RIDES, 3 RUNS

MON	TUES	WEDS	THURS	FRI	SAT	SUN
OFF	SWIM	BRICK*	SWIM	RUN	BIKE	BIKE
	BIKE				RUN	SWIM

* brick= bike and run

2. TRAIN AT VARIOUS INTENSITY LEVELS

The body adapts differently to different speeds, or intensity levels, of swimming, cycling and running. Doing very short sprints at maximum speed enhances your ability to produce power and activate muscle mass to propel forward motion, whether it's in the pool, on the bike or on foot. At the other extreme, doing very long workouts at a moderate speed enhances your body's ability to use fuel efficiently and to continue moving efficiently despite mounting fatigue, again whether you're swimming, cycling or running. And training at various in-between speeds carries other distinct benefits. (See chart at right for the varying intensity levels and workout examples.) Your ultimate goal is to maximize your efficiency and fatigue resistance at your triathlon race pace in all three disciplines. But training at race pace all the time is not the best way to achieve

this objective. Rather, the best way to maximize your race performance is to regularly train at a variety of intensity levels. Most of your training should be done at intensity levels below race intensity, because doing so allows you to spend more total

INTENSITY	DEFINITION	SAMPLE WORKOUT	% OF TOTAL TRAINING TIME (BIKE AND RUN)	% OF TOTAL TRAINING TIME (SWIM)
RECOVERY	A very comfortable effort that initially feels like a 4 on a 1-10 scale of perceived effort, where 10 represents your maximum intensity	Relatively short, slow recovery-oriented workouts undertaken between hard workouts (example: 30-minute bike @ effort level 4). Warm-ups and cool-downs. Active-recovery periods between fast intervals within an interval workout	10-15%	5-15%
AEROBIC	A comfortable to moderate effort that initially feels like a 5 or 6 on a 1-10 scale of perceived effort	Steady, moderate-intensity base workouts (example: 45-minute run @ effort level 5-6). Long workouts (example: bike 2 hours @ effort level 5-6)	60-70%	40-55%
ANAEROBIC THRESHOLD	A manageably hard effort that initially feels like a 7 on a 1-10 scale of perceived effort	Threshold or tempo workouts (example: Run 30 minutes @ effort level 7 between warm-up and cool-down). Long intervals (example: Swim 5 x 400m @ effort level 7 with 45-second recoveries)	8-12%	10-15%
VO2 MAX	A hard to very hard effort you could sustain for no longer than 10 minutes	Hill repetitions (example: Bike 8 x 2 minutes uphill @ effort level 8 with 3-minute active recoveries)	3-5%	10-15%
SPEED	A very hard effort you could sustain for no more than 4 minutes	Short intervals (example: Swim 10 x 100 @ effort level 9 with 20-second recoveries)	3-5%	5-10%
SPRINT	A maximal effort, sustainable for no more than 20 seconds	Very short sprints/steep hill sprints (example: Run 4 x 10 seconds up steep hill @ 100% effort after completing base run)	1-2%	5-10%

time training than you could if you tried to train fast all the time, and spending a lot of time training is the most effective way to boost aerobic fitness. Still, you cannot truly maximize your race fitness unless you also regularly spend a small amount of time training at higher intensity levels.

The table on page 61 summarizes the fundamental training-intensity levels and provides workout and training guidelines for each. Notice I recommend spending a greater amount of your total swim-training time at higher intensities compared to cycling and running. I could write a separate article on the reasons why, but suffice it to say this pattern represents the norm in triathlon training because swimming tends to create less orthopedic stress on the body, meaning you can recover more quickly from hard pool sessions.

3. TRAIN PROGRESSIVELY

When you begin formal triathlon training, the challenge level of your workouts must be appropriately scaled to match your current fitness level. The result of doing such workouts will be an almost immediate increase in your fitness level. To continue building fitness, you must scale up the duration and/or speed of your workouts so they remain challenging throughout the entire training process, as you continue gaining additional fitness. This practice is known as training progressively.

For example, at the beginning of the training process, a one-hour bike ride at a moderate pace might provide an appropriate challenge to stimulate an increase in your cycling endurance. After completing one such ride, you may take advantage of the resulting endurance increase by completing a 70-minute ride the following week, and so forth. Similarly, at the beginning of the training process a swim main set consisting of 4 x 100 intervals at speed intensity with 30-second rest periods might provide the right level of challenge. But after doing this main set a couple of times, you will probably need to add one or two intervals to this main set to get the same level of challenge, and you should.

You cannot increase the duration and/or intensity of your workouts indefinitely, of course. Thus, when you begin training, take some time to sketch out the toughest workouts you would like to do before competing in the race you're targeting. These workouts should all fall within the final four weeks of your preparation. The workouts you do between now and then should move steadily toward that peak level in small steps. For example, suppose you decide you would like to complete a peak long run of one hour before doing your first Olympic-distance triathlon, and you are currently able to run 30 minutes at a moderate pace. In this case, you might increase the duration of your weekly long run from 30 to 60 minutes in six, five-minute steps.

4. GO FROM GENERAL TO SPECIFIC

There are two ways in which your training should evolve from the beginning of the process to the end. The first, just discussed, is progression. The second is movement from generality to specificity. A workout is considered race-specific if it emulates both the speed and endurance challenges of racing. In other words, a race-specific workout entails swimming, cycling or running at a speed that's close to race speed—either in a single effort or in multiple intervals—until you're fatigued. General training encompasses every other type of workout. Workouts in the general training category establish a foundation for specific training by emphasizing either speed or endurance.

In the first phase of training, your highest priority is to

establish a twin fitness foundation of speed and endurance. Your toughest workouts should be long, moderate-intensity swims, rides and runs plus interval workouts featuring relatively short efforts at speeds exceeding race pace. As weeks go by, make your training increasingly race-specific by doing your long workouts at faster speeds, by doing increasing amounts of training in the range of race speed and by doing longer intervals that are still fast but not quite as fast as the very short intervals you emphasized in the beginning.

5. OBEY THE HARD-EASY RULE

Your hardest workouts provide the strongest stimulus for improved fitness, but you can't train hard all the time. This is true in part because the physiological adaptations triggered by your hardest workouts don't occur during those workouts but between them. If you do a second hard workout too soon after completing an initial hard workout, your body will not have the chance to fully respond to the stimulus of that first session. You will improve most consistently if you alternate hard workouts with moderate and easy workouts. Use this guideline regardless of your training frequency. If you train six times per week, do one hard swim, ride and run each week and one moderate or easy swim, ride and run. If you train 12 times per week, do two hard swims, rides and runs each week and two moderate or easy swims, rides and runs.

It's also advisable to modulate your training workload from week to week. Some weeks should be hard so your body is carrying a fairly high level of accumulated fatigue by the end of it. Some weeks should administer a moderate workload and others a fairly light one. The right mix varies from athlete to athlete. A good place to start is with the following four-week cycle:

- Week 1: Hard
- Week 2: Moderate
- Week 3: Very Hard
- Week 4: Easy

6. EMPHASIZE SWIM-TECHNIQUE DEVELOPMENT

My sixth and last basic triathlon-training guideline is specific to swimming. Technique is more important to success in swimming than fitness. In this regard, swimming is very different from cycling and running. If you don't come to triathlon from a swimming background, you will advance quickest in this discipline if you make technique development the highest priority of your swim training.

To that end, roughly 20 percent of your total swimming yardage should consist of technique drills. Also, executing at least one component of proper freestyle technique (which you can learn from magazines, books, videos, other swimmers or a coach) should be the top thought in your mind throughout the rest of each workout.

IT NEVER STOPS

The learning process never ceases in triathlon—or at least it shouldn't. Even the most seasoned veterans continue to make discoveries they use to improve their training practices. But learning is never more important than in the beginning. By applying the guidelines you've learned in this article, you will be able to hit the ground running, so to speak, as a triathlete. ▲

Matt Fitzgerald is the author of Brain Training for Runners (NAL, 2007) and editor of poweringmuscles.com.