

**Getting Started in Triathlon  
Part 2**by [Sage Rountree](#), USA Triathlon Certified Expert  
Coach and Expert Registered Yoga Teacher

In [Part 1](#) of this three-part series on getting up to speed in triathlon, we examined equipment and choosing a race, with a training plan to give you four weeks of base-building in each discipline. In part 2, I'll explain combination workouts and transitions between sports, including a look at what to wear so that your triathlon will go smoothly. This part also suggests four weeks of workouts to help you get faster. The final installment in the series will talk you through your race day.

**COMBINATION WORKOUTS**

Combination workouts are at the heart of triathlon training. In the race, you'll segue from swim to bike to run, with the clock running the whole time. The more comfortable you are with the feeling of switching disciplines, the better your experience will be.

While you can do all three sports in order as a workout—and while this is a good idea to try at least once before the race—it's usually more feasible to combine swim and bike into one workout, and bike and run into another. The transition from a horizontal position in the water to a cycling position in sometimes fast-moving air is an interesting one. Consider that you will be wet and moving pretty fast. You'll need to get used to the feeling of water dripping down your back and legs, and the air cooling, sometimes chilling, your head. In addition, the postural shift from swimming to cycling takes some getting used to. Take your bike to the pool and ride from there, taking as little time as possible in transition (see below). You can even practice going back and forth a few times.

The bike-to-run transition presents its own challenges. We sometimes call it a “brick.” Conventional wisdom attributes this to many reasons: it's “another brick in the wall” of your fitness, it's stacking workouts one on the other, and your legs often feel like bricks when you start to run off the bike. This feeling does get better with practice, both because your legs will start to come around a little sooner and because you'll get used to the feeling and know it won't last too long.

A workout with a long bike ride and a short (say, ten-minute) run off the bike is a good addition to your weekly routine. I often tell my athletes to simply run until they feel like they are running, then cool down with a jog or a walk. While you can also run longer after a long bike ride, this is a taxing workout and will require longer recovery.

Another option is to do a short bike ride, then a longer run. In this case, you'll ride until you feel warmed up on the bike, then make the transition to running.

Once you get the hang of the combination workout, insert five to ten minutes at your intended race intensity at the end of the bike ride, so that when you begin running, your legs have been working hard. If you do only easy bike-to-run workouts, you'll be surprised on race day at the different sensation.

**TRANSITIONS**

Central to each combination workout is a fast transition between the disciplines. Think through what you will need to take off and what you will need to put on as you move between the sports. For example, at the swim-to-bike transition, which we call T1 (for first transition), you'll be dropping your cap and goggles, removing your wetsuit if you wore one, getting on shoes and maybe socks, donning a helmet and sunglasses, possibly adding clothes, and taking your bike from its rack. As you move from bike to run (T2), you'll be removing your helmet, possibly changing shoes (if you wear cycling shoes to clip in to your pedals), and adding a cap or visor.

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Set up the equipment you'll need, laying it out in an orderly fashion by your bike. Practice each transition a few times before you do them in context, and revisit this practice once every week or two. A friend—or your children!—can time you as you make the transitions. The smoother and quicker you transition, the shorter your total time will be, and the less flustered you'll feel on race day.

One tip: boil down your actions to a short list that you can repeat like a mantra. For example, T1 might be “glasses, helmet, shoes, bike, go!” These simplified routines help keep you on task in a crowded and bustling transition area.

**WHAT TO WEAR**

As you think through your transitions, you'll need to consider what you're going to wear for the race. There are two options: using pieces you already have (a great idea for your first race), or buying new, tri-specific clothing.

If you'll be working from your own closet, or you're not quite ready to invest in triathlon clothes, you'll wear a bathing suit for the swim. This can be one- or two-piece. If it's a one-piece, you might wear a sports bra underneath (choose synthetic fabric, which dries faster than cotton). A two-piece should have an athletic cut with a neckline high enough to prevent cleavage drag.

Some brave souls will complete the entire race wearing nothing more than a bathing suit. If you'd rather add clothing, you can put bottoms on in T1. For the bike, you can wear running shorts or bike-specific shorts with a chamois for padding. Consider, though, that you won't want to run in bike shorts, unless you like the feeling of running in a wet diaper. Whatever you choose should be form-fitting, to make you more aerodynamic.

If it's cold, you'll need to add a layer on top. A bike jersey or windbreaker with a full zip goes on a lot more easily than a shirt you have to wrestle over your wet torso. Gloves can help keep you warm, too. Running gloves should be sufficient for the bike and the run.

Triathlon clothing is typically made from swimsuit fabrics and fits pretty tightly. This is so you don't take on water in the pool, lake, river, or ocean. Tri tops will have a high neck—again, to resist drag—and many have zippers so you can ventilate on the run. (Keep them up on the bike; it's more aerodynamic and keeps insects off your chest.) Tri tops usually run short at the waist, just kissing the waistband of tri shorts.

Tri bottoms have a minimal chamois, enough to give a little padding on the bike without feeling bulky on the run. One-piece suits feel great, leaving nothing to cinch your waist, but if you anticipate needing to use the portalet before or even during the race, two-piece is a more convenient choice.

One useful triathlon-specific purchase is a race number belt. These are around \$10 at running and triathlon stores. They hold your bib number, which needs to be displayed on your front at the end of the run. You don't have to wear your bib in the water or on the bike (where it flaps around noisily), just on the run, so having a belt you can grab at T2 and put on while you are starting the run saves time.

Experiment with everything to find what works best for you. Maybe you can go comfortably without socks; maybe you prefer a two-piece suit over a one-piece suit. Once you have your wardrobe set, practice your transitions so that they become second nature.

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Check out Athleta’s [performance swimsuits](#) and [triathlon gear](#) for training and race day clothing.

WORKOUTS

As in part 1, the table of workouts suggests simply which disciplines to do and in which combination:

|        | MON | TUE        | WED | THU                       | FRI  | SAT       | SUN  |
|--------|-----|------------|-----|---------------------------|------|-----------|------|
| WEEK 1 | Run | Swim, bike | Run | Rest or easy swim or bike | Swim | Bike, run | Rest |
| WEEK 2 | Run | Swim, bike | Run | Rest or easy swim or bike | Swim | Bike, run | Rest |
| WEEK 3 | Run | Swim, bike | Run | Rest or easy swim or bike | Swim | Bike, run | Rest |
| WEEK 4 | Run | Swim, bike | Run | Rest or easy swim or bike | Swim | Bike, run | Rest |

Sunday’s workouts—rest—are just as important as the other workouts. In the fourth week of the cycle, reduce your volume to give your body a chance to absorb your work.

Designate your Monday or Wednesday run as your “long run,” and build it, no more than ten minutes per week, to the length you’ll be running in your race. If the run leg of your race is short, you can go over distance—this will depend on your running experience. Similarly, build your Saturday bike/run combination workout toward the duration you think it will take you to do the race. Emphasize the bike here; keep the run pretty short and focus on best form running off the bike.

Throughout the bike, work on getting smooth at your transitions and familiar with the feeling of switching between the various sports. In the next part of this series, I’ll talk you through race day.

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