

**Getting Started in Triathlon
Part 1**

by [Sage Rountree](#), USA Triathlon Certified Expert
Coach and Expert Registered Yoga Teacher

Congratulations: you’ve climbed the learning curve for triathlon and are ready to put your skills to the test! Now that you’ve got a handle on equipment, combination workouts, and transitions, race day is drawing near. There’s so much to manage in the days before your race—and, of course, in the race itself—that it’s the sole focus of this last part of the series. (To get up to speed, check out [part 1](#) and [part 2](#).)

Here’s how the last 4 weeks leaving up to your race could look:

	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	Swim	Bike	Run	Rest	Bike, run	Race	Walk

COPING DURING RACE WEEK

OK, “coping” may be a strong word, but the days before your first triathlon may be filled with nerves. Here’s how to relax and enjoy the experience.

First, breathe. Long, deep, belly breaths. Exhale fully. Next, consider why you signed up for the race—your own, personal reasons. If that doesn’t calm you down, take a moment to appreciate the experience of getting nervous or excited over something that you voluntarily committed to do. Life throws us so many unexpected stressful situations, it’s a treat to have a controlled stressful situation that you chose for fun! As part of your reflection, you might choose an image or a word that will remind you of a positive part of your training. You can come back to this as you relax, breathe, and smile during the race.

As your mental training ramps up, your physical training should taper down in the week before your workout. Shorten your workouts, so that by midweek everything is light. If you have a Saturday race, take Thursday off. You can spend your free time packing and practicing transitions. Friday, then, is a day for an equipment check, with a short (less than 20 minutes) ride, a very short (less than 10 minutes) run, and a final transition practice. If you have a Sunday race, shift the timeline a day forward.

If you’re traveling for your race, drive the bike and run courses (or drive the bike course and bike the run course as your last pre-race workout). Don’t worry: hills always look worse from the car. Note the road surface, the degrees of the turns, and landmarks as you approach the finish of each leg. Many races hold a pre-race briefing; attend if you can. Most of your fears will be allayed. You’ll be able to ask questions of the race director and race officials. Pay attention; triathlon has a lot of rules to ensure fairness and safety. You can read about them on [USA Triathlon’s website](#)—head straight to the “Most Common Rules Violations” document.

In the few days before the race, try to get plenty of sleep and plenty of fluids. The night before the race, avoid spicy foods and don’t eat too much fiber. (A glass of wine with your pre-race dinner is fine; it can help you relax.) If you can’t sleep, that’s OK; practice relaxing, breathing, and smiling.

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Here is a list of the items you'll want in your race bag, with a few annotations. Not every one may apply to you. It's useful to print out the list and check off each item. Lay out the items according to their category (general, swim, bike, and run), then pack them into a backpack (so that you can carry them and still have your arms free to walk your bike to the race site).

RACE BAG CHECKLIST**General**

- Race outfit ([see part 2 for clothing ideas](#))
- Sports watch
- Snacks (for before and after)
- Nutrition, water (nutrition can be a bottle of sports drink on the bike)
- Body Glide (anti-chafing lubricant, for your bra's neckline and armholes and anywhere else you might chafe)
- Waterproof sunscreen
- Powder (for the inside of your shoes, if you're going sockless)
- towel
- Mat to cover a wet, grassy transition area
- Duct tape (you never know when you may need to go MacGyver!)
- Plastic garbage bags (these can cover your equipment on a rainy day)
- change of clothes

Swim Gear

- Goggles (bring two pairs; you never know)
- Swim cap (the race may issue you one)
- Neoprene ankle strap for chip (these are more comfortable than plastic anklets)

Bike Gear

- Bike!
- Water bottle(s)
- Tire pump (pump your tires on race morning!)
- Helmet
- Sunglasses, two pairs for different light conditions
- Cycling shoes, if using

Run Gear

- Socks
- Shoes
- Hat/sun protection
- Race belt (attach number after packet pickup)

[-CLICK HERE FOR A PRINTABLE, CUSTOMIZABLE RACE BAG CHECKLIST-](#)

SETTING UP ON RACE DAY

When you've smartly packed your bag, your race morning will go smoothly. Set up your equipment at the site (race instructions will tell you where to go). Some folks like to use brightly colored objects to mark their transition spots. I'll hang a bright bandanna on the end of my bike row—and tell my neighbors that's the cue for "turn here!"

Once you're set up, you'll need to get your body marked. Kind volunteers will write your race number (and your "race age"—your age on December 31 of this year) on you with permanent markers. This is a momentous occasion—you are now marked as a triathlete! Sunscreen will rub the numbers off, so be careful, but do apply sunscreen. If the markings fade a little, that's OK; remember, you'll need to wear your race number on your front at the finish, so that you can get an official time and avoid a penalty. You can scrub them off easily with a loofah after the race (or you can leave them on for bragging rights).

Return to your transition area and review your setup. Move anything that you won't be using during the race itself, placing it out of the way at the end of your row. Be sure you have put something to drink on your bike—ideally, something you've been using in training. I like PowerBar Endurance sports drink, which has a light flavor and some sodium to keep electrolytes in balance. If your race will last over an hour, you'll benefit from using a sports drink that works for you. (Read more about sports nutrition in these posts: [Sports Nutrition Part 1](#) and [Sports Nutrition Part 2](#).) Remember to drink throughout the bike, a few gulps at a time.

Once you're set up, depending on the race start time, your nerves and energy, and your experience as an athlete, you might go for a short warmup. I like to take my bike out for a few minutes and run through the gears. If this reveals any technical issues, you can visit the onsite race mechanic. A short run can calm you down and loosen you up. If you are a stellar swimmer—or, on the other hand, if you are a new swimmer—a swim warmup can get you ready to do your best when the starting horn sounds. Try to time these warmups to finish just before your start.

Whether or not you warm up, do take the time to physically walk from the water through the transition entrance to your bike; from your rack to the bike exit; from the bike entry to your rack; and from your rack to the run start. This will keep the layout fresh in your memory once you're moving faster.

GO FOR IT

When the race begins, the hard part is over. All the training, the hours of commitment, the nerves—all the work is done, and you get to go celebrate the wondrous things your body can do when your mind conceives of them, your heart is in it, and you follow through! Relax, breathe, and smile.

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