

Getting Started in Triathlon Part 1

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

What is this crazy thing called triathlon? Three sports in one event—usually swim, bike, and run, and usually in that order. It's a great way to expand your skill set and your approach to training. You'll probably have a background in one of the three sports, and you'll probably find another is challenging. Good! Challenge is how you grow. I guarantee you'll learn about yourself and redefine your perceived limits in the sport of triathlon.

Here is part 1 of a three-part getting-started plan to turn you—yes, you—into a triathlete. In this installment, we'll examine 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 how to combine workouts and how to make a quick transition from swim to bike and from bike to run, including a look at what to wear. Your second four-week plan will involve some combination (or “brick”) workouts, as well as a focus on speed. Finally, part 3 will prep you for race day, with four weeks of race-specific workouts and a timeline and equipment checklist to get you ready to do your best on race day!

EQUIPMENT

There's no way around it: you need some gear for triathlon. At the very least, you need a bike in working order. At the upper end, you could get a custom-built titanium bike with carbon aerobars, electronic shifters, an integrated drink system, and race wheels with a power meter. (Got \$15,000 rattling around in your pocket?)

Here's what you'll need to get started training for your first race. Most items you'll already own or be able to borrow. You can upgrade later, if you love the sport (you will).

Swim

- Goggles that fit well. You can test fit by opening the case at the store (it's fine!), pressing the lenses against your eyes, and seeing if they will stick momentarily without use of the strap. If not, keep looking.
- A wetsuit, if you'll be swimming in a cold body of water. You can borrow or rent one for the race, or get by without if the water temperature is over 70 or so (depending on your cold tolerance).

Bike

- A bike. Road bikes are great; hybrids and mountain bikes work too, especially if you can put on smooth, more narrow tires. Triathlon bikes come later in your career. (So do clipless pedals, unless you are already comfortable with these, in which case bike shoes and cleats are part of your equipment.) Your bike should be comfortable to ride. If it isn't, take it to your local bike shop and see if they can tweak the fit. If you are considering buying a new bike, take extra care to choose a frame that fits you. You can change out everything else later on—including the color—but if it doesn't fit, in the best case it will be uncomfortable to ride for any length of time, and in the worst case it will be unsafe to ride.
- A helmet. Your helmet should fit snugly and hit mid-brow. Don't wear it loose, and don't wear it like an Easter bonnet.
- A bike pump. Pump your tires before every ride. (Tires have a cheat sheet: they give a range of PSI on the sidewall. Aim for the center of the range.)

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Run

- Good running shoes. Find more on run equipment in [Get a Running Start](#).

Obviously, you'll also need workout clothes, including a swimsuit, a supportive bra, and sun protection. We'll discuss race-day clothing in part 2.

CHOOSING A RACE

Each year, the number of triathlons grows. You probably have many races to choose from in your area. Look for a sprint or super-sprint triathlon. If there are women-only races nearby, you'll find they are a great way to try out the sport in a warm, super-supportive environment. Women's race series include the [Trek Women's Triathlon Series](#), [Danskin Triathlon Series](#), [SheRox](#), [Iron Girl](#), and [Ramblin' Rose](#).

You'll find races online at [Active.com](#), [TriFind.com](#), and [USA Triathlon's website](#).

If you aren't comfortable swimming in open water, look for an event with a pool swim. In these races, each athlete has her own individual start time, and the swim distances are shorter. If you feel strong on the bike, look for an event where the bike is proportionally longer (18 miles, say, instead of the 12 or so more common in a super-sprint event). If running is your thing, you might choose a race with a trail run, to let your technical skills shine. Also consider whether you like the heat or would prefer an early- or late-season race, when temperatures are cooler.

BEGINNING TRAINING

Each article in this three-part series will suggest four weeks of training for you. If your race is more than 12 weeks out, you can repeat a block once or twice. Since rest is important to your improvement, the fourth week of each cycle should be easier, to allow for absorption of the progressively harder work in the preceding three weeks.

As you should as you begin any new physical regimen, please check with your health-care practitioner before you start.

Here's how your week could look:

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

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Note that, contrary to [my running plans here on the chi](#), this table gives only suggestions of which sport to slot on a given day. All of your workouts should be easy and conversational at this stage, building an aerobic base and giving your body time to adapt to working in three sports at once.

Your personal comfort with swimming, cycling, and running will dictate how long each workout lasts. If you are new to swimming, twenty minutes in the pool, resting on the wall between each length, might be a killer workout. If you swam in high school or college, you might be able to pound out 4,000 yards in an hour and feel great. Similarly, if you are gaining confidence on the bike, you might find that twenty or thirty minutes of tooling around your neighborhood is plenty of work; alternatively, you might be up for a two-hour group ride if cycling is your thing. Ultimately, you'll do well to have your peak bike ride take as long as your entire race will. That way, you'll be confident that you have the endurance to go the distance.

The run, however, is where you need to be consistent. Build up to running (or run/walking) 30 minutes easy. If you are already there, you could slowly build that up to 45 minutes or more, in increments of no more than ten minutes added to the longest workout of your week. And since running is an impact sport, you should stay (or become) consistent in the number of times per week you run, so that your body can adapt to the stress. In this case, I suggest three. Swim and bike, however, are nonimpact sports (provided you stay upright on the bike!), so if you would like to add a third, easy workout in either of these sports, that's fine. If weather doesn't allow for outside riding, you can substitute riding a gym bike or taking a Spinning class, but remember that nothing compares to being on the bike you'll race in.

Strength training, including Pilates and yoga, can be part of your plan, too. You might slot these workouts after your runs. For more on combining yoga and endurance-sports training, please see my books [The Athlete's Guide to Yoga](#) and [The Athlete's Pocket Guide to Yoga](#).

For now, choose a race, get together your equipment, and enjoy your swimming, cycling, and running. In part 2, we'll look at how to put them together into combinations that will begin to approximate your race-day experience.

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