

WHAT A TRIATHLON BEGINNER NEEDS TO GET STARTED

Before getting started, always remember the triathlon mantra: Nothing new on race day. That means don't wear anything or try anything that you haven't used in training! The information below was gathered from BeginnerTriathlete.com. It includes gear tips for the three disciplines of triathlon: swimming, cycling, running. It does not include setting up your transition area, transitions from the swim to bike and bike to swim, or training tips.

The Swim Portion

Required

The only thing you really need is a swimsuit and a pair of goggles. That's it. Easy, right? Well, it's not quite that easy. Goggles seem like they are all the same, but they fit quite differently. A little trick is to take a pair of goggles and stick the lenses onto your eyes without putting the strap on. Give them a little push. If you can take your hands away and the goggles stay on your face just from the suction, they are probably a pretty good fit. This will require taking the goggles out of their packaging at the store, but stores are pretty used to this.

Goggles come with clear or colored lenses. Clear is great for the indoor pool, but if you are swimming in a triathlon with the sun coming up in front of you, you might want tinted lenses. A light tint or blue lenses are a nice compromise, though some say it's difficult to see orange buoys on the swim course when wearing blue-tinted goggles.

Choosing a swimsuit

Since you aren't going to show up at the pool or lake at your first triathlon without a lot of swimming under your belt, you need to think about training in the pool as well as actually completing a triathlon. The reason this is important is that there are a few pieces of gear that don't switch very well between the two. For example, a nice trisuit or a pair of trishorts is going to deteriorate very quickly in chlorinated pool water, so you don't want to wear your nice race gear for training, unless you train exclusively in open water.

If you don't want to go through swimsuits like tissues, look into a suit made mostly or entirely of polyester, like the Speedo Endurance suit. (Polyester has come a long way since the days of the leisure suit.) Nylon and lycra will break down in chlorine and quickly become too stretched out (or see-through) to wear.

You also don't want something that is going to cause drag in the water and slow you down. For women, a suit that is fine for the beach -- one that scoops low in the back -- might act like a bowl and scoop up water when you are moving forward in the lap lane. Also, swimsuits with skirts and the like are not recommended for lap swimming. You probably don't have the body you want right now, but the people

you will run across in the pool and the locker room are more likely to look at you funny if you are swimming laps in a suit with a ruffle than if you are wearing a "real" swimsuit and trying your best, even if you are showing more leg than makes you feel comfortable.

The same goes for men. It seems a lot less embarrassing to wear regular old swim trunks, but you will be able to swim much more efficiently in a suit that is tight to your skin. If you don't have the nerve to sport a speedo, the "jammer" style that fits like compression shorts is a great compromise. When trying on a competition suit, it should be tight enough that it's a struggle to get it on. It will loosen up with wear.

Always rinse your suit in clear water and use the swimsuit spinner at the pool, if they have one. Hanging your suit by the straps or wringing it out can cause it to stretch out prematurely. If you must hang a women's suit to dry, try folding it in half and hanging it by the middle so there is not so much weight pulling on the shoulder straps.

Nice to have

If you are certain you are into this sport and you aren't going to do one race and quit, you may want to go ahead and invest in a triathlon suit of some kind. This is an article (or two articles) of clothing that will take you from the swim, through the bike and to the end of the run without changing, adding or adjusting anything. They are very nice to have and they eliminate all those headaches and questions surrounding what to wear if you are completing the swim in a swimsuit. There's no need to pull on bike shorts or running shorts or worry about your swimsuit rubbing you the wrong way, especially with another layer over it.

A trisuit is a one-piece suit that includes lightly padded trishorts and a connected top section that covers your torso. Trisuits are comfortable in the waist because there is no drawstring or elastic band to cinch your tummy. (For this same reason, they can be a bit unflattering on all but the leanest individuals.) For women, virtually all trisuits are designed to be worn with a sports bra underneath. Most of them not only don't have any support, but they are often cut very wide under the armpits, which doesn't work without a bra. Make sure to practice so that your bra-trisuit combination doesn't rub against your skin or pinch.

Some prefer a pair of trishorts (much like bike shorts but with a smaller, quick-drying pad) and a top or shirt of some kind. This is a popular combination because it makes it easier to navigate bathroom stops without completely undressing, and the tops and bottoms can be mixed and matched if something wears out, or if your size changes on top but not on bottom. For trishorts, the main thing to look for is that there is no seam running straight up and down through the crotch. An ill-placed seam is a surefire way to be uncomfortable on the bike. A good pair of trishorts will be sewn (inside and outside) along the edge of the padding, not through the middle of it.

Triathlon tops are meant to be worn on the swim and need to be very snug so they don't take on water. Pockets are a great feature for carrying a gel or something on the bike or run, but make sure they are super tight and don't cause drag in the water. Men's tops are pretty straightforward. For women, some of us can get away with the built-in bra that is part of the top. Others find they need to wear a separate

sports bra underneath to have enough support for the run. If this is you, make sure the sports bra is made of a thin, quick-drying fabric and doesn't chafe underneath the tri top.

Note

Don't pay money for a swim cap. Many races provide one. If you need one to train in prior to your first race, ask for a recommendation of a brand of swim cap from someone at the pool who has a swim cap with a race logo on it. They likely have 10 or 15 in the bottom of their gym bag and will hand one (or more) to you.

All the gear in the world won't make you a good swimmer. If you have a choice between buying a piece of gear or purchasing swim instruction (whether it's coaching, the fee for a Masters Swim club, a book of swim workouts, a video or a swim clinic) always choose the instruction. Out of the three sports, swimming is the one you really can't master just by working hard.

The Bike Portion

Triathlon doesn't have to be an expensive or equipment-heavy sport, but the bike portion is the most fraught with expenses of the three. However, you don't need to take out a second mortgage in order to be ready to complete your first triathlon.

Here is a rundown of what you absolutely need to train and race the bike leg of a triathlon, as well as some tips on adding to your gear later. There's bound to be a lot of debate and discussion about where these items fall on the continuum from necessity to luxury. Some people would argue a functioning bike and a helmet are all that is needed. Others would say it is silly to ride without a way to track your speed and distance, and it's irresponsible to go out without tools and a spare tire.

Required

The first thing you need is a bike. It would be great if the bike were the correct frame size to fit you, and it would be nice if the tires were meant for road riding, but when it comes down to it, if it has two wheels and moves forward when you pedal it, you can ride it in a triathlon. (USA Triathlon has some rules on making sure your bike is safe, such as ensuring that the ends of your handlebars are sealed, because hollow tubes could injure someone in the event of a crash.)

Bike position

It is nice when you are a kid or when you are riding recreationally to be able to put both feet on the ground while still perched atop your seat, but this is not ideal for riding longer distances. If your seat is low enough to accomplish that, then your legs will not extend fully when you pedal, and you will develop other problems with your posture and your speed. You want to have the seat high enough so your leg is almost straight (your knee should not be locked, though) when your foot is closest to the ground during the pedal stroke. That means when you stop the bike, you will have to get off the seat and stand over the frame to put your feet on the ground. If you aren't doing this already, you'll quickly

learn to stand up while you are braking with your weight on one pedal, getting the opposite foot ready to plant on the ground as you come to a stop.

Bike maintenance

You don't want your bike to fail you when you are several miles from home (nor in your big race) so pay a few dollars to have a mechanic at your local bike shop look it over. It helps to have a clean and freshly lubed chain, tight brakes, inflated tires, and responsive shifters, which are small things you can learn to do yourself or pay your local bike shop to do for you. Having properly inflated tires when you ride is very important. If your tires are low, it makes you pedal harder to go the same speed and makes you more likely to get a flat. If you stick with this sport, you will almost certainly become one of those people who pumps up her tires to 100-120 psi every time before heading out for a ride.

Your first purchase

Don't go and blow your entire budget on your first bike. You need to attain a certain amount of fitness before you decide on a "final" bike. Besides, who knows if your desires will change as you decide how committed you are to the sport? If you have an old bike in your garage or basement that goes forward when you crank the pedals, use that. If not, borrow a bike or buy something used. Most regular bike shops don't sell used bikes, but most cities and mid-sized towns have used bike shops. Online classified ads like Craigslist are good. Local bike shops may know of used bikes available even if they don't sell used. They can certainly provide advice on what you need.

Helmet and Hydration

A helmet is a must, and is required to participate in a triathlon, per USAT rules. Since you have to wear it for the race, wear it on training rides. If your helmet has been in a crash or otherwise sustained a blow, it needs to be replaced even if there isn't visible damage.

It's a good idea to have a place to carry water on your bike. Even for a sprint distance race, it's a good idea to drink some water during the bike portion. The bike is the only one of the three sports where you have easy access to a drink, but only if you are carrying a bottle. Also, during the bike segment your stomach is usually most able to handle hydration and nutrition. You can buy a water bottle cage cheaply, and it attaches to almost any bike frame with two screws. (You'll need an allen wrench for the screws, as you will for almost any bike adjustment or repair.) If you don't have a water bottle cage and can't get one, you can carry a water bottle in the back pocket of your cycling jersey, if you wear one.

Highly recommended

If you have a bike, helmet and water, you are capable of training and racing. There are a few more items you should consider adding to your bike, if your budget allows.

Tool bag and tools

A tool bag filled with the standard items, such as a spare tube, a mini bike pump, tire levers and a small set of allen wrenches are items experienced cyclists never leave home without. Even if you are still learning to change a flat, it can be useful to carry a tool bag. If you carry a spare tube and basics you can at least be prepared to accept help from others instead of walking their bike home or waiting for a ride. The toolbag is also a great place for stashing an emergency \$10 or \$20 bill and cell phone.

When you attach your toolbag to the bike, take the time to actually read the directions. It seems simple enough, but in every race there are a handful of athletes whose toolbags are dangling beneath their seat, getting looser and looser as the straps pull themselves open during the ride. Usually the straps on a toolbag are threaded through the rails of the seat first, then pulled around the bottom of the bag and secured to themselves using velcro or a plastic buckle. This prevents them from loosening during the ride.

Bike computer

A second item recommended is a bike computer, otherwise known as a speedometer/odometer. If you already have a GPS watch for running, you can skip this unless you want the additional functionality of tracking your pedal cadence. Although you can certainly ride without a bike computer or training watch, it's difficult to track your training, improve your performance, and estimate your finish time for a race without one.

There are many kinds. The cheapest uses wires (which you tape or zip-tie to your bike frame) to connect a sensor on the frame to a digital display that mounts on your handlebars. The sensor picks up signals from a magnet you attach to a spoke. The most versatile is a GPS device you can switch from your bike to your wrist for tracking runs as well.

Nice to have if you are an avid cyclists

If you are sure you are into this sport and you aren't going to do one race and quit, you may want to go ahead and invest in proper shorts, cycling gloves, clipless pedals and accompanying shoes, a jersey, and a bento box.

Shorts

If you only want to invest in one pair of shorts, it's a tough decision between bike shorts and trishorts. Bike shorts are more padded, and therefore more comfortable for a beginner who is just learning to meld his or her nether regions to his or her bike seat. Bike shorts, however, really can't be worn on the swim because the bulky pad sucks up the water and holds it; and they are a struggle to pull on over wet legs, if you intend to put them on over a swimsuit. Trishorts are the perfect solution because the padding is thinner and dries quickly, so they can be worn for the swim, bike and run. But the thinner padding can be a problem if you are just getting used to your bike seat.

Gloves and sunglasses

Gloves are nice to have, but most people don't race in them because of the time it takes in transition to get them on and off. On a long training ride, though, it's nice to have the padding on your palms, and extra nice to have the soft terry cloth strip on the backside.

The leather palms are also useful for running over the outside of the tire in case you ride through some glass. If you brush it off quickly before it gets embedded in the tire, sometimes you can prevent a flat. Most people have a pair of fingerless gloves for general riding. Some cyclists also pick up a full-fingered pair for riding in colder weather. Cycling gloves will also protect your hands in case of a spill. Most bike crashes are minor and generally involve just one person: the cyclist. A pair of well padded gloves will save cuts and scratches to your hands in the event of a fall.

Sunglasses not only help with glare from the sun, they keep the wind out of your eyes and more importantly protect them from insects or other objects blown by the wind. More about sunglasses in the run section.

Clipless pedals

One thing that tends to complicate matters is making the move from running shoes on flat pedals to cycling shoes with cleats embedded in the soles that click into special pedals on the bike. This is a big step. It takes skill to use them. It will improve your speed, but it's also a little expensive to make the switch. The pedals aren't cheap, they might require installation if you don't have the right tools, and the shoes are definitely not cheap.

The cleat should be screwed into your shoe in whatever position places the ball of your foot exactly in line with the spindle (metal cylinder) of the pedal. You can get help from your local bike shop, where you can put your bike on a trainer and have a mechanic adjust the cleat on your shoe until you are in the correct position. If your cleats are not in the correct place, or a screw comes loose and the cleat twists to one side, this can have serious implications for your knees and hips as you ride. As your cleats wear out from walking on them, they will become more difficult to clip in and out of the pedals.

Bike jersey

Bike jerseys have big back pockets with the elastic tops on the backside. Those back pockets can hold a lot of stuff, including power bars (and the wrappers after they are eaten), cell phone, and even a small bike pump. Because the pockets are on your back, they aren't scrunched up in the crease of your leg and inaccessible and uncomfortable while riding. Additionally, jerseys -- often for safety and fashion reasons -- tend to have bright colors and reflective strips. They generally come with a partial or full front zipper so you can open them at the neck when you get hot, and they have elastic at the arms and waist to keep them from billowing in the wind.

Jerseys are not, however, a necessity. If you see one on clearance or participate in some cool race or cycling event that has a jersey you would like to have as a reminder of the event, go for it. If you are looking for places to scrimp, you do not need a cycling jersey.

Bento box

This is a little box made largely of cloth and velcro that mounts on the top of the frame of your bike, right in front of you, just behind the handlebars. It is great for holding energy bars or gels, your phone, extra lights, or whatever you want to have quick access to on a long training ride. If you have a bike jersey with pockets you probably don't need this.

Nice to have, if you are serious about triathlons

Race wheels

Race wheels are a great investment if you can afford them. They are light and fast, and it's a great feeling putting them on the day before a race knowing you are going to be just a little faster the next morning. Disk wheels are not recommended for smaller cyclists or for races with very windy conditions, because the disk wheel can really catch the wind and put you in danger.

Aero helmet

An aero helmet is a nice addition to the otherwise fully stocked athlete's closet. It offers pretty good bang for your buck as far as increasing your speed. Aero helmets can become very hot, though, because they are not vented the way traditional helmets are. It is also very difficult to hear when wearing one, so they aren't the best for group rides when you need to be in tune with other riders.

Note

If you have an older bike that is neither very light nor very aero, you might want to avoid completely tricking it out with really great add-ons that won't transfer to another bike. In the event that you get a nice tax return, or a raise, or just can't live without an all-carbon tri bike, it's better not to have sunk a ton of money into a bike you know isn't going to satisfy you for more than a year or two.

On the other hand, you can race for years on a used aluminum frame bike. Over time, you can add aerobars, clipless pedals, and several other items at less cost than a new triathlon-specific bike.

And when it comes right down to it, fancy race wheels and an aero helmet don't make you a great cyclist. Time in the saddle is what counts. No matter how great you are and how aero your bike is, there is always going to be some older guy on a steel road bike who comes past on your left side, breezing by you without even breathing hard. It's just a fact of life.

The Run Portion

The run requires the least equipment. There is a broad spectrum of opinions, ranging from those who think shoes themselves are one piece of gear too many, to those who won't leave the house without a GPS tracker, music and a backpack full of water.

Required

Shoes

Much has been written about different types of running shoes and the differences between them can be overwhelming. The best place to begin is a running shoe store that offers a "gait analysis " or some form of analysis of your footfall. At such a store, employees can recommend a shoe that suits your footfall. Various shoes may correct for a flaw in your gait, or be less structured, more padded, or perhaps be more like running barefoot.

If you plan to keep running for the foreseeable future, you might consider buying two pair of shoes at the start and rotating which pair you wear. This makes the shoes last longer, according to some, because they have time to recover from a beating before being used again. If you pursue this strategy as a beginner, try buying two different brands of shoes. By switching between them, you may get a better idea of what you like in a shoe.

If you choose to pick up shoes somewhere other than a running store, a good rule of thumb is that they should be snug in the heel and arch, but you should not feel your foot touching the top or sides of the shoes in the toebox.

Also, beware of shoes designed to correct a problem you don't have. If you choose something off the rack at a department or discount store without any professional guidance, you may end up in trouble.

There is such a thing as a triathlon-specific shoe. A few manufacturers (Zoot, Asics, Inov-8, Newton come to mind) have created a special line of shoes for triathletes, featuring quick entry (usually built-in elastic laces and a decent place to grab behind the ankle to pull them on quickly in transition), soft insides for those who run sockless, and holes in the bottom to drain water if you are pouring a lot of water on your head to cool yourself. Most of these shoes are great, but if you already have running shoes, there is no need to purchase these. You can put elastic laces (Yankz and Speed Laces are two popular brands) in any running shoe. And the holes in the soles of the shoes are great unless you are wearing those shoes on a chilly training run and step in a puddle. (Hint: The water flow goes both ways.)

Socks

Socks are a must for all but the most hard-core. (And lots of hard-core people wear socks, too.) Anything that is not cotton will work well, although a big old pair of cotton crew socks is not going to kill you. They will just be sweaty and possibly cause blisters.

Shorts

Running shorts are an interesting topic in the triathlon community. Many triathletes, after racing and/or training in trishorts or other compression shorts, come to prefer them. Or they just don't want to buy another item. And so the flimsy nylon shorts that brush the top of the thigh -- worn by decades of marathoners and sprinters alike -- are not seen frequently in the triathlon community. However, you should wear whatever makes you comfortable, or whatever you already own. All types of running shorts (traditional split shorts, trishorts, compression shorts, etc.) are designed to be worn without underwear. Violating this suggestion can cause chafing and discomfort when fabric bunches together and gets sweaty.

Sports bra

For women, a sports bra is an obvious requirement. If you are heading out to purchase something new, you may want to think about selecting a sports bra that can double as your top on the swim.

Nice to have

Hat and/or Sunglasses

Some athletes can head out for a run in the blazing sun with nothing shading or protecting their eyes. Most prefer a hat or sunglasses or both. Regardless of whether or not you wear a hat, you should already have a pair of sunglasses used for the bike portion of the race. You can use those same sunglasses for the run.

You can spend \$8 or \$300 on sunglasses. It's entirely up to you. Features to look for include: Rubber along the arms, to keep them from sliding and bouncing around on your ears when you run; A design that doesn't hurt your head when you put your helmet on to cycle with them; And, if you want to splurge, interchangeable lenses, so you can put in clear lenses to keep bugs out of your eyes during dawn or dusk bike rides.

Fabric that breathes

While it's not necessary to replace all the cotton shirts you own with synthetic shirts, after you receive your first technical shirt (technical usually means synthetic performance fabric) for a race, you will realize how much lighter, less sticky and more comfortable it is than cotton. That should inspire you to ensure that any new purchases are made of lightweight fabric blends that dry quickly and pull sweat away from your skin, instead of absorbing it and sticking to you. Alternately, you could save the money you might spend on 2 or three coolmax shirts from your local running store and enter some triathlons instead. Most races are including technical shirts in their goodie bags.

GPS

A wrist-mounted GPS with heartrate monitor is a great toy. Rather than running the same old route you measured in the car, or sitting online for 20 minutes finding the streets and paths that generate the needed mileage, you can leave from your front door and go anywhere you want, and you'll always know how far you've run. Most models will even get you home if you get lost. If you think you may become addicted to this sport, please note that some models don't have the battery life to last for a full Ironman.

MP3 Player

Some people swear they cannot train without their playlist of favorite tunes to keep them going. Others feel this is a crutch or even an unfair advantage, in addition to being a safety hazard. It's one of triathlon's ironies that people who go running with earbuds in, are sometimes the same people who, when cycling, complain that runners on the path won't move over because they can't hear over their

music. However, if you come down on the side of having better runs with music, there are scores of MP3 players and related accessories to mount the player on your arm, waist, back or hat, not to mention earbuds designed specifically not to fall out while running. Just make sure the volume is not so loud that you can't hear someone calling out, "Passing on your left!" Also, you are not allowed to take music with you during a triathlon race.