

The time is now to start training for a spring triathlon

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It's that time of year when many people are meticulously planning out holiday parties. For others, the transition from fall to winter involves a

different type of planning altogether – training for a triathlon. In Canada, race season typically begins in early June. That means those taking on the challenge have just over six months to prepare. According to coaches, it's perfect timing; plotting out a training schedule now ensures you'll be up and running (and biking and swimming) in time for the big day.

Despite most people's claims of "I could never do a tri," it's accessible to anyone willing to put in the work. "There's literally a triathlon for everyone," says Tara Norton, a certified triathlon coach and Ultraman world champion. "What's really cool about triathlons is that everyone races together. It doesn't matter if you're a pro athlete or first-timer, everyone has the same respect for each other."

Here's how to tackle a tri safely and with the right mindset.

Leave your comfort zone behind

"Life begins at the end of your comfort zone," Neale Donald Walsch famously wrote in his bestselling series, *Conversations with God*. For the nearly 50,000 Canadians who compete in a triathlon each year, it means pushing themselves past their limits. "It's an opportunity to see who you are, and who you become, when you're faced with things that are uncomfortable and outside the scope of what you normally do. That's when the growth happens," says Michelle Dukowski, co-owner of Toronto's RedLeaf Fitness (she completed her first half-Ironman tri in July).

A study published in the *Journal of Positive Psychology* found that relatively less happy people who engaged in activities outside their comfort zone saw an increase in life satisfaction.

That's certainly the case for triathletes. "I think you get hooked on the feeling of success, that feeling of, 'I put in six months' worth of effort and it felt awesome to put it all together on race day,' " says Dukowski. "You get to show your kids and community what it's like to commit to something difficult and that when it felt scary or hard, you did it anyways."

Michelle Dukowski, second from left, completed her first half-Ironman tri in July.

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Choose your own adventure

Beginners will often start with a sprint-distance triathlon (750-metre swim, 20-kilometre bike, five-kilometre run) or even an adorably named try-a-tri, also known as a super sprint (500-metre swim, 10-kilometre bike, 2.5-kilometre run), though some opt for an Olympic-distance tri (1500-metre swim, 40-kilometre bike, 10-kilometre run) from the get-go. It's about deciding what's realistic in terms of your current fitness level. "The distance has to scare you at least a little bit; it has to feel just outside of what you think is attainable today," says Dukowski.

Determine your why

Andrew Feifer, 47, dove right into the world of tris with an Olympic-distance race this past June in Gravenhurst, Ont. When he first signed up, in September, 2023, he had never run more than five kilometres, swum in open water or even been on a road bike. He committed, nonetheless. "I spend my days taking care of everyone else," says Feifer, a urologic oncology surgeon and associate professor of surgery at University of Toronto. "I wanted to do something for myself, from a health and achievement standpoint." Whether it's to push your physical (and mental) limits or simply to kickstart a healthy lifestyle, set an intention beforehand.

Find your people

When it comes to triathlons, community counts. Lots of people hire a coach for a customized training schedule, nutrition plan and accountability. If that's not in the cards, there are plenty of online training programs and local meetups of like-minded people looking for camaraderie and motivation. "In life, community is everything," says Nancy Schmeler, owner of Dig Deep Cycling & Triathlon Club. Schmeler coaches primarily women and is a firm

believer in group bonding. “We do all kinds of stuff as a community – we donate blood together, do charity events, go to races. It’s so important, especially for middle-aged women who are coming out of peak craziness in their lives,” she says. “Training for a tri, especially as part of a group, helps you realize you can overcome fears.”

While triathlons are about individual skill, training with others can improve performance. A study published in the Sport Journal found that athletes who participated in a competitive trial had faster sprint times than those in a solo sprint trial. Performance aside, it’s simply more fun working out with a crew who often become lifelong friends.

“In life, community is everything,” says Nancy Schmeler (far right), owner of Dig Deep Cycling & Triathlon Club.

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Take baby steps

Distances can be daunting. The trick is to start small and build from there. For example, Dukowski recommends beginner runners set a 30-minute timer and repeatedly jog for two minutes, then walk for one: “At that point, your distance is irrelevant. The best place to start is by time.” She suggests running once a week and increasing your time by five minutes every two weeks.

For swimming and biking, distance is a good measure. “Maybe you need to take some lessons to learn to swim, in which case 25 metres is a lot. Slowly, as the weeks progress, add another 25 metres, then 50 metres and so on. If you can already swim, start with 250 metres and increase from there,” she says. During the cold winter months, an indoor ride is a good starting point on a Peleton or Concept2 BikeErg exercise bike or better yet, a trainer, which allows you to practise clipping in and switching gears. Indoor cycling apps such as Zwift are great for riding virtually and tracking progress.

Lay out a plan

People have busy lives and only so many hours to commit to training – and that’s okay. At a minimum, plan to devote five hours a week to training: one hour to each modality, plus a couple of strength-training workouts to build muscle and prevent injuries (think deadlifts, squats, lunges). If you have the time, training each sport twice weekly is even better.

In the months leading up to race day, incorporate “brick workouts” into your weekly routine – a workout that includes two disciplines, typically bike-to-run (for example, a 40-kilometre ride into even a 10-minute run will prepare your body for the challenge of moving from one sport to the next). Also aim for at least one open-water swim prior to race day so that you get the feel of swimming in a wetsuit (mandatory in some races) and gain some practice sighting (looking up from your stroke to see where you’re going).

Rest days are as important as training days. In her decades-long career coaching hundreds of athletes, Norton has seen far too many resist a day of total rest (or low-intensity activity, such as walking or stretching).

“Sometimes it’s like pulling teeth. ... ‘Okay, you can do yoga but it has to be easy yoga,’ ” she laughs. “Everyone should be taking a minimum of one full day of rest each week so that your body recovers.”

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Eat for endurance

The general rule is to prioritize carbohydrates – bananas, sweet potatoes and whole grains, for instance – before or during training. That said, most people are inclined to eat healthier overall once they experience how it affects performance and recovery (for example, upping protein intake to build and repair muscle tissue); studies show that active people require 1.2 to 1.4 grams of protein per kilogram of body weight daily.

Don’t skimp on post-training fuel, too – preferably within an hour of exercising. “You want that to be your most nutrient-dense meal of the day,”

says Dukowski. It'll lead to better recovery and less muscle fatigue. Aim for a balanced meal or snack with a combo of complex carbs, proteins and healthy fats (plain Greek yogurt with berries and slivered almonds is a solid option).

Up your mental game

Experts agree that a person's mental state is as important as, if not greater than, physical strength. A lot of people insist they could never do a tri but as Schmeler explains, "You need to believe that you can do it. The mental component is the biggest factor to even getting into the sport." She adds that endurance athletes come in all shapes and sizes; there are no prerequisites to looking a certain way in order to compete.

Cut yourself some slack

"Don't beat yourself up if life gets in the way and you miss a few training sessions. The goal is to compete [in your first tri], not to win," says Schmeler. It's advice that Feifer, a doctor, triathlete and dad of three, takes to heart: "I have a very busy life. There are nights I go sleepless when on call." There was one week where he missed three planned workouts because of illness; having to operate through the night; and driving his son to Niagara Falls, Ont., for a hockey tournament. "There's constant pressure to perform, but you can't judge yourself. You can't consider every week you don't go to the gym a failure because you can't plan for the unplanned," he says.

Feifer's advice? "Start [training] early, ease into it and surround yourself with the right people."

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