

An Introduction to the World of Children's Triathlon

Introduction

There is a huge amount written on taking part and training for Triathlons and what you should and should not do - this short brief is in no way a substitute – just a simple practical guide for those who have children taking part in Triathlon. The aim is to take a little of the mystery away and advise on the minimum you need to take part initially. I am sure parents know much of this, but it may help as a reference.

The Event

A triathlon is a combination of 3 main disciplines: Swimming, Cycling and Running in that order. 'Transition' – the changing from one sport to the other – is often referred to as the 4th discipline. We will cover all 4 below.

The age groups for children are:

TriStars Start– 8
TriStars 1 - 9-10
TriStars 2 - 11-12
TriStars 3 - 13-14
Youth – 15-16
Junior – 17 - 18

Age taken as at 31st Dec of the year of the competition.

According to Triathlon England the maximum distances for juniors is:

TRIATHLON	SWIM	SWIM OPEN WATER	CYCLE GRASS	CYCLE TARMAC	RUN
TristarStart - (age 8)	50m	50m - 100m	800m	1.5k	600m
Tristars 1 - (age 9-10)	150m	150m-200m	2k	4k	1.2k
Tristars 2 - (age 11-12)	200m	200m-300m	4k	6k	1.8k
Tristars 3 - (age 13-14)	300m	300m-350m	6k	8k	2.4k

What to wear

I'll cover this here as it always seems to be a topic of great interest.

Shorts & tops - Some triathletes wear either a Triathlon specific suit (Tri suit) or Triathlon shorts and top. These are usually tight Lycra numbers which you swim, cycle and run in.

The advantages are obviously you don't have to change – disadvantages are cost and not everyone suits Lycra!! Personally, I did my first half dozen Triathlons without buying anything at all. I swam in my swimming costume and then put on my running stuff on top for the cycling and running phases. It was not the quickest transition but worked okay. With the speed that youngsters grow out of kit then my view is that unless keen stick with shorts and a tee shirt.

A number belt is useful as an investment as you attach the number and it then sits around the waist out of the way. If you wear a tri suit, then you will need a number belt as you cannot attach to trisuit or swim with number on. Number belts are about £4.

Note: if you compete with an Open Water Tri – i.e. swim in a lake, river, dock or the sea rather than a swimming pool you will most likely need a wet suit unless it's very warm when wetsuits are optional. You can hire for the day at £10-20 or so or buy one at about £50+.

Shoes and socks – you may see some keen young Triathletes with special clip in shoes for the bike – you also need special pedals for them to clip into. At the distances the youngsters are cycling and the grass courses I would not advise them personally – stick to standard training shoes for the bike and run. For a small investment of £2 elastic laces are excellent and I have them on all my training and race shoes. Socks are probably the biggest time waster in transition – drying feet and putting socks on over damp skin. Some people use talc in socks to help – however, if you can do without then do so – but practise first. However, if you are prone to get blisters, then it's worth taking an extra 30 seconds to put on comfy socks.

Cycle Helmet & glasses – Wearing a cycle helmet is **mandatory**. All helmets bought in the UK from reputable dealer or of a standard make are to an acceptable CE standard. Please make sure they are adjusted correctly – helmets need to be worn on entry to transition and will be checked.

Bikes will also be checked for general serviceability – i.e. bits hanging off, working brakes and pumped up tyres as these present a danger to the rider and others. Also please make sure the ends of the handlebars have ends in or are taped over as they are always checked.

Watches etc – other gadgets such as cycle computers, watches, sunglasses etc are not necessary for youngsters and just tend to get in the way in my experience.

The Disciplines

Swimming

Many events usually take place in an indoor swimming pool and you are allocated a start time (or Wave) depending on your swimming ability. The slower the swimmer the earlier you start in the pool. You generally have 4 or 5 swimmers in a lane and then you get started 10 secs or so apart and so should have a clear swim. Some events such as Oldbury have a snake start when you go every 5-10 secs and 'snake' down the pool. The key is to relax and swim your own speed.

Cycling

This is the fun bit for most triathletes –the range of bikes is huge – from the serious Triathletes who have kit worth more than my car to competitors with a bike from ‘Bargain Bikes’ in the Retail Park. For a first Tri some people use mountain bikes, hybrids or racing cycles. I would certainly not buy anything expensive until your youngster shows they are keen. It’s the cyclist who turns the pedals so you can have the best bike in the world and still be uncompetitive. The key part of the bike is to count laps as most junior tri’s are around a field course. Parents can help as there is nothing in the rules to stop you shouting ‘last lap’ – just in case!

Running

This is just a run like any other the child has taken part in with the exception that you re just competing against the clock. Obviously, the end of the run is the end of the event and so the youngsters always manage to find that extra bit of effort for a sprint finish.

Transition

This is what sets Triathlon apart – the change from one sport to another. It can be daunting to the first timer but need not be. There are 2 transitions, and both are covered below:

Swimming to cycling (T1) - When you finish the swim you get shown out of a side door of the pool and pad to the ‘Transition area’. This is a roped off area which only the competitors can access and is where you store your bike and other gear. Depending on what you wear you change from your swimwear to cycling gear, collect your bike and set off on the cycling route.

- So simply you do this:
 - Run into transition – you will be wearing swimwear and carrying goggles
 - drop goggles by the side of you bike on your towel
 - put on helmet first before you touch the bike and number belt (if used)
 - put on any clothes you wish to use – Tee short & shorts (if no tri suit) – socks (if required)
 - put on running shoes
 - pick bike off rack and run out of transition where it says ‘BIKE OUT’ in large letters. If you struggle with your bike, then ask a marshal to help.
 - Go over the mount line and get on bike. Don’t try any fancy mounts – stop bike, get on and off you go.

Cycling to running (T2) – When you come back from the cycle course and approach transition it’s good to have a drink if it’s warm as the bike is a good place to hydrate. Follow the marshal’s directions to transition and then stop before the dismount line which will be the same as the mount line when you went out.

- Then you quickly do this:
 - Run/walk/scamper to where your transition place is (see transition tips as this can be tricky!!).
 - Put your bike back on the rack as it was and make sure its secure before doing anything else
 - Take off helmet and put neatly by bike
 - Take of cycle shoes and replace with running shoes – if used
 - Swivel your number belt so the number faces forward

- Run out of transition where it says, 'RUN OUT'.

Transition Tips – what I wished I had got right when I started – and still do get wrong on occasions! Remember that parents are not allowed into most triathlon transition areas – the athletes are on their own – below is some advice which may help.

- When you register you will be given a lable to put on your bike and sometimes your helmet – you will also get a number for your Tee shirt/number belt – you may also be drawn on hand, calf or shoulder with indelible marker. You will not be allowed into transition unless these identifications are all correct and where they should be. So, when you get to the competitor's entrance to transition you should have:
 - Bike lable on bike
 - Helmet lable on helmet (if they give you one)
 - Helmet on head (they want to check it)
 - Number on (number belt or tee shirt) – they will want to check it against the bike and helmet
- The person checking your bike and numbers will then direct you to your transition area – usually it's numbered.
- It may be that the transition is 'live' when you are setting up etc. This means that there will be competitors from earlier waves coming through to change and collect bikes etc. Just be aware of this – the marshals will shout to be careful – and get out of the way. You will want a similar courtesy when your race has started. However, when it's your wave then all bets are off – don't obstruct but don't be too polite!!
- When setting up take your time and be sociable - Transition is for me what sets Triathlon apart from running or cycling events. First, it's a great social event – leave yourself time to set up your own transition area and have a chat to those around. Don't be afraid to ask for advice as most people are all too happy to chat, loan bits and pieces etc. Even good athletes will take time to pass on advice and help.
- Set up your bike with the saddle on the pole of the racking and then make everything else easy to access in order you need it – so easiest to get to is helmet, number belt (tee shirt), glasses. Do remember a quick check to make sure your helmet is unbuckled ready to be put on and running shoes loose and easy to slip on etc.
- Don't be put off by people with huge boxes or bags of stuff. It is probably surplus rubbish and just gets in the way. You need the essentials – leave the bike maintenance stuff in the car – or at home.
- Very important point – when you are set up look at the exits and entrances to transition – walk the route – ask if you don't know where the swim in is – or bike and run out. Walk the route from 'swim in' to your bike then to the 'bike out' then back to the bike and then to 'run out' as you would in the event. Be familiar so when you are ready to go you are not looking around wondering where to!!
- Even more important point – when you set up its all neat and tidy and you can see your bike easily. When you come in from the swim and bike legs then bikes will have gone, and stuff will be dumped around you and you will be dis-oriented from your swim and cycle efforts. Use easy visual markers and memory joggers – for example from run in then its 2 rows left and opposite big tree etc. You cannot mark your transition area with balloons or flags but use subtle markers – a bright towel – turn your running shoes toe in or whatever takes your fancy. Believe me it is what most people get wrong – especially in a large transition – and they are running up and

down thinking that their bike has been stolen – to realise that they are in the wrong row – it easily happens.

- Most of all keep calm in transition – don't panic and just work through what you need to do. If in doubt there are always marshals about so ask.

And finally – rules of transition – to keep on the right side of the event law.

- No nudity – if you get changed then use a towel – men must wear a top which does not show the chest when cycling/running (i.e. zip on top fully done up)
- No friends/relatives in transition – athletes only
- No pets!
- No mobile phones, MP3 players etc. This generally also extends for the whole event.
- Do not touch your bike without your helmet being on and done up
- Keep all your kit within your transition space - so do not throw kit about or just dump it – keep it neatly in your area
- No marking transition area (with markers, flags, balloons etc) – be subtle
- Do not ride bike in transition
- Do not abuse marshals (on rest of course also)
- Do not deliberately obstruct other riders
- Do not interfere with anyone else's kit

Other stuff you may have heard about

- Number belts – you put your number on the belt and then quickly put on in transition – you can also swivel it after the bike to run to show number of the front. If you are using a Tee shirt you will have a number for the front and back. A good investment at about £4. Stops putting holes in your running tops also!!
- Elastic laces – cheap and a good investment – once you have them in your shoes you can just keep them even if you do more running than tri
- Other Carbon fibre, Shiny or techie gadgets – you don't need them. Triathletes love gadgets and bling but I bet you find yourself overtaking a few on the way around. At the end of the day it's about swimming, cycling and running.

So finally,

If your youngster is interested, then give it a go. Some children feel then are not good enough in a particular sport (often swimming) but they will most likely be better than a lot of those competing. Just tell them to treat their first few events as training. Ask questions and don't worry about performance. Because of the staggered start no-one knows what position you are finishing in anyway. Most of all they should enjoy the experience and have a good time. It's a great sport and very welcoming and friendly.

Below is an on the day checklist. Bold essential - the rest optional.

Event:		Date:	
Category	Item	Check	Remarks

Docs	BTF Membership Card		If a member
	Directions and race information		
	Race Pack/Numbers		
	Money		
Pre-race (wearing)	T-shirt		
	Socks		
	Bottoms		
	Running Shoes		
	Hoodie/jacket		
Base	Tri Suit (or swimwear/shorts/top)		
Swim	Wetsuit (open water)		
	Lubricant (open water - cuffs & ankles)		
	Goggles		
	Hat (issued)		
	Towel		
	Sunscreen		
Bike Transition	Bike		
	Race Belt		
	Safety Hat		
	Protective glasses		
	Water bottle		
	Emergency repair kit		
	Pump		
Run Transition	Running Shoes (elastic laces)		
	Sun hat		
Post-race	Recovery Drink/snack		