

Triathlon – Do you have what it takes?

Triathlon is the fastest growing sport in Ireland with new triathlon clubs and events starting nationwide! If you are looking for a sporting challenge to keep you fit throughout Spring and Summer the triathlon is perfect. The triathlon has 3 separate components so variety is automatic and any level of athlete can join in from the novice to the competitive athlete. I met with top Irish triathlete and UCC exercise physiologist, Trevor Woods to get some expert information and advice on the triathlon who agrees that this event is fast becoming the “new marathon”!



Trevor Woods

So what does it take? Well fitness wise Trevor explains that it’s a cardiovascular endurance sport which requires stamina to keep going through the 3 different stages of a Triathlon; the swim, the cycle and the run. Muscle strength particularly in the legs can be a vital component of fitness in the latter stages of the cycle and in the transfer from the bike to the run as fatigue can easily set in. For top athletes this has to be avoided so that times do not slow down. Good technique in the swim, cycle and run is another crucial fitness component for top athletes as extra energy can be spent when technique is not optimal and this leads to early fatigue and slower times. If however you are starting out and your main goal is to complete the event strength and technique are important but ensuring you have the basic cardiovascular requirements is the first step. For beginners Trevor suggests taking part in indoor events that are often organised by leisure centres. After that you should try one of the shorter ever growing list of outdoor triathlons organised around the country. This way you can build up your endurance and confidence gradually.

The “sprint” distance triathlon is the shortest event and is usually a very fast paced event for top athletes however it is a good way of starting your triathlon training.

The “Olympic” distance is the next standard distance and requires more endurance. The “Half Ironman” and “Ironman” distances are on the more extreme end of the scale but are always an option!!

There are some essential pieces of equipment you will need to start your triathlon training. For the outdoor events, a well fitted wetsuit is paramount as it provides insulation for the athlete with low body fat. In most cases it is an open water swim so I'm sure we would all appreciate the extra insulation!! Added to that is the extra buoyancy which will help you swim faster. Goggles are also important to protect your eyes. For the cycle and run there are different levels of equipment available depending on your abilities and goals but Trevor explains that a good racing bike is much easier to work with than a heavier mountain bike and will allow you to avoid unnecessary fatigue. A cycling helmet is compulsory and athletes will be disqualified if they are not wearing their helmet during the transfer to and from the bike and while cycling. A supportive pair of shock absorbing runners are very important for the run. Bike shoes, racing flats and triathlon suits as well as many other accessories are available as you become more competitive in the sport.

For more information on the benefits of Cranial Osteopathy please contact Frank Kelleher, Cranial Osteopath for Babies and Children at [Touchstone Osteopathy at Blackrock Hall Primary Care Centre](#).
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Trevor agrees that open water swimming (in the sea, river or lake) is definitely the biggest obstacle for most people as it is a completely different environment to pool swimming. He suggests that the only way to overcome this is to join your nearest triathlon club who will have a safe open water training location and who will have regular group training sessions. You must always be accompanied when open water training so joining a club or having a partner is very important. You will gradually get used to the open water environment so the next step is to accustom yourself to swimming amongst other triathletes where waves and turbulence create a lot of “whitewater”. This reflects the competition situation so it needs to be practised and the more you practise the easier it will become says Trevor.

Trevor recommends that every week of training should include each component of the event and optimally when starting out ideally try to swim twice, cycle twice and run twice each week. He does not recommend focusing on swimming one week, cycling the next and running the next week. This is because the event requires being able to immediately transfer from one event to the next so your muscles always have to be familiar with each activity. Your muscles have memory patterns and need to be constantly stimulated to contract the way you need them to for every event. It is a good idea to develop your training so that you do a swim followed by a cycle or a cycle followed by a run and eventually you should try doing the three activities one after the other. Transferring from swimming to cycling and from cycling to running requires a lot of skill and should be practised as much as possible as it can often be where time is lost. Trevor’s final training tip is to be 100% sure that you can complete the distance of each component of your event and a little bit more. What that means is if your event requires you to cycle 40km you should be able to complete 45-50km because in competition you will have to then face into the run so you want to be able to do that with the least amount of fatigue in your muscles as possible.

Recovery from training is very important and Trevor says the best way to recover is to get the required amount of sleep and food your body requires. Trevor recommends eating soon after training and in total eating as often as 5 to 6 times per day. Three main meals should be eaten with good wholesome foods with balanced proportions of carbohydrates, proteins and fats. For snacks Trevor suggests dried and fresh fruit, flapjacks, oat cakes, energy bars, etc and prefers to eat these types of foods regularly with plenty of water to keep fully hydrated instead of drinking energy or isotonic drinks. Trevor explains that he may only use energy drinks once per week and that would be during a long 4-5 hour training session when it is critical to replace energy while exercising. If you’re not training then water and eating the above snacks around a balanced diet should keep you properly hydrated and nourished.

As you develop as an athlete rest days are not as important because muscles recover faster so sleep and food are key. When starting out however muscle soreness cannot be ignored and rest days are required. Stretching is an important aspect of training and should be included in recovery to maintain flexibility and avoid injury. Trevor explains that generally the running section of the triathlon is where most injuries occur as it is a high impact activity. Achilles tendonitis, runner’s knee (patellofemoral pain),

plantar fasciitis and stress fractures are common leg injuries that occur in triathletes from running. Shoulder injuries can occur due to poor swimming technique and low back pain can also arise from prolonged periods of time on the bike. Regular deep tissue massage is another excellent way helping muscles recover from training and helps to avoid injury. Trevor says that he gets deep tissue massage every fortnight and would get more if he could!

Trevor finishes by saying that the Triathlon is an event like no other because of the energetic and fun atmosphere that is created by the competitors and the spectators on competition day. Shouting, cheering and laughing are heard in the background as there is such a range in abilities from beginners and relay teams to the national and international athlete. There are always refreshments greeting you at the finish line and a barbeque during the prize ceremony at the after party. The whole community seems to get involved!

Trevor Woods has been taking part in Triathlons since 1989. His first attempt at the event was as short as a 10 pool-length swim, a 10 mile cycle and a short run. Even though he had taken part in cross country training as a child he seemed to have a natural ability at the triathlon because the following year he was representing Ulster in an international triathlon. Having won numerous national titles over his career he is now the current middle distance (Half-Ironman) champion in Ireland (Bangor Sept.08) and the Olympic distance champion 08 in his age group. He held the Irish record for the Ironman distance in the 07-08 season at 9 hrs 18 mins. This record has been reduced since to 9hrs 12 mins (approx). Trevor is an unbelievable athlete and we wish him all the best for this season

The Triathlon season runs from May until September so you have loads of time to get training to be in top shape this summer!

For further information on events, distances, equipment and clubs check out the following websites:

www.triathlonireland.com

www.corktri.com

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