

Is the sport of Duathlon dead? Not on the east coast!

By Mikael Hanson of Enhance Sports



Do thoughts of a mass start swim with 300 plus eager triathlon-types haunt your dreams? Or is it the fear of having to swim in a body of water that might not be as peaceful as that calm pool and the ever helpful blue line along the bottom to guide your progress? Just what lurks in the dark depths of all those lakes and rivers we so freely jump into? Maybe nothing at all, but if you were a spectator for the 2005 New York City triathlon, watching the legions of triathletes emerge from the Hudson river with a slight brownish hue to their complexion might leave you wondering!

With countless triathlons under my belt, I still get nervous before the start of the swim and certainly think twice about those non-wet suit swims (the wet suit is my version of a safety blanket). Does this dissuade me from participating in triathlons? No. My fear washes away once I safely reach that first buoy with my goggles still firmly in place. As the numbers participating in triathlons grows exponentially, are these multi-sport addicts over-looking something which on paper appears far easier, yet in reality might be an even more challenging event – the Duathlon?

Just what is a duathlon (or as some refer to it – biathlon)?

No, we are not talking about that obscure winter sport we only see on television during a Winter Olympic year. You know, the one where the athletes cross-country ski and shoot at tiny targets with 22 caliber rifles they carry on their back. While that might be the more global sporting definition of a biathlon, what we are talking about is a triathlon without the swim. Let's be frank, just as Lance Armstrong revived American cycling, the Ironman has done wonders to the sport of triathlon. In fact, many multi-sport athletes might not even know of the existence of the sport of duathlon. I am willing to bet if you told your co-workers you competed in a duathlon over the weekend the likely response would be a look of utter confusion. However, mention you competed in a triathlon and all will not only understand, but perhaps share their own triathlon aspirations – as the triathlon has replaced the marathon as the 'in' endurance event for weekend warriors alike!

Last fall, *Inside Triathlon* ran a story entitled 'Demise of Duathlon'. The story cited the go-go years of duathlon which in the late 80s and 90s had its own national series (which boasted huge prize lists for the professionals) sponsored by none other than Coors Light. Unfortunately, Coors Light left the sport long ago, being replaced on a smaller scale by Dannon, who left the sport in 2004 citing declining participation. While many professional duathletes have followed the money train to triathlons, which is getting the lion share of the national advertising dollar thanks in part to the growing legions of Ironmen, does this mean duathlon is dead for us amateurs? Of course not!

This past April I toed the line for my sixth March Madness biathlon in New York's Central Park and once again I was joined by a sell-out crowd of over 500. While common in triathlons, a sell-out is a rare occurrence for a duathlon in most parts of the country. But that is not the case for this early season New York City race (fittingly called the March Madness Biathlon), as dormant multi-sport athletes emerge from their hibernation to test their early season form. This classic New York City biathlon has seen some big names grace the winner's podium over the years, including multi-sport legends Mark Allen (who won here in 1986) and Kenny Souza (won in 1987). Does Dan Honig, president and founder of the New York Triathlon Club (and the one responsible for the March Madness race), think the sport of duathlon is dead? Doubtful, as the New York Triathlon Club schedule of events has been steadily growing every year since the mid-80s and will feature an amazing 12 duathlons in the 2006 season, with many running along side of triathlons – a recipe that is growing in popularity for race promoters.

Personally, I got my multi-sport start with duathlons. A cyclist in college, I had always done some running on the side, so duathlons seemed an easy choice. I resisted triathlons for many years for several reasons. My first excuse was the most simple – time. Where was I going to find time to swim? Cycling and running already occupied the majority of my free time, so how could I conceivably fit in another sport (especially one I had not participated in since college?) My second excuse would be categorized by my therapist as a 'fight or flight' response (ie. the thought of a mass start swim scared the heck out of me). Ironically, it was a running injury that forced me into the pool and my triathlon career began. Have I forgot about duathlons? No way, as there is few better ways to prepare for a triathlon than a nice fast duathlon.

But I am a Triathlete – why should I do a duathlon?

When I competed in my first duathlon, my idea of a transition area was a place to put my Green Bay Packers folding chair as I leisurely swapped my running shoes for cycling shoes. With two nearly identical transitions, a duathlon is the perfect opportunity to practice your transition skills. Sure, there is no wetsuit to contend with, but now you have to change shoes twice and you will quickly learn that every second counts as the pack of racers tends to stay closer together when there isn't a swim to break it up.

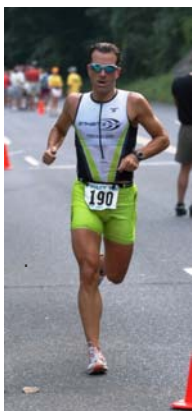
Besides the transition area practice, a duathlon is the ultimate combination workout (or 'brick' as we have come to call them). As multi-sport athletes, we have to teach our body to perform a variety of athletic tasks while fatigued. If you think the running segment of a triathlon is challenging after swimming and biking, try running twice in an event - it will make that sprint triathlon feel like a walk in the park! Trust me when I say a duathlon is the ultimate 'brick' workout.

The final appeal for the duathlon is the lack of a swim – something many of us could do without on occasion. I am not afraid of the water, but I can do without that guy who refuses to swim in a straight line and thus swims over the back of your legs, or better yet feels you in his draft and does a dolphin kick that catches your nose and rips the goggles from your face. That is when my version of panic sets in! Trust me when I say the swim portion of a triathlon does get easier with experience. Perhaps it is this not so uncommon fear of the water has kept potential multi-sport athletes from joining our ranks? If so, what better way to get you feet wet, than with a duathlon?

While the sport of duathlon might not have the same support and following across the country, the Mid-Atlantic States are full of duathlons, with a race calendar that stretches from March through October (check out my own list of local duathlons below). To find out more info on duathlons, go to http://www.usatriathlon.com/Duathlon/duathlon_home.htm or visit the only website dedicated to the sport (www.duathlon.com).

2006 Duathlon Calendar for the Mid-Atlantic region

April 2	Virginia Duathlon, VA	June 24	Parvin State Park duathlon (& tri), NJ
April 2	March Madness Biathlon (2/12/2), NYC	June 25	Westchester biathlon, Rye, NY
April 8	Brandywine Duathlon (5k/30k/5k), DE	July 2	West Branch Multi-sport duathlon, Lockheaven, PA
April 9	Powerman Alabama (8k/50k/8k)	July 9	Blackwater Traverse Duathlon, MD
April 23	Powerman North Carolina (8k/53k/8k)	July 9	Philadelphia Women's duathlon (& tri), Philly, PA
April 23	Bronx Biathlon (3mi/20mi/3mi)	July 16	Hudson Valley biathlon (& Tri), Kingston, NY
May 6	Duathlon Nationals, OH (10k/40k/5k)	July 22	Sunset Sprint duathlon (& tri), Bridgeton, NJ
May 7	Brooklyn biathlon (2mi/10mi/2mi), NY	July 30	Flat as a Pancake duathlon (& tri), Staten Island, NY
May 14	Trooper biathlon (2mi/14mi/2mi), NY	Aug. 13	Lums Pond duathlon (& tri), Bear, DE
May 21	Powerman Ohio (8k/58k/8k), OH	Aug. 26	Lighter than Air duathlon, Lakehurst, NJ
May 21	Queens biathlon (3mi/18mi/3mi), NY	Sept. 16	Fox Run duathlon, Lums Pond, De
June 4	Belleplain duathlon (& tri), Cape May County, NJ	Sept. 17	Skylands duathlon (& tri), Clinton, NJ
June 11 & Aug 20	Harriman State Park duathlon (& tri), NY	Sept. 17 & Oct. 15	Central Park duathlon, New York, NY
June 17	Thundergust duathlon (& tri), NJ	Oct. 8	Cape Henlopen duathlon (& tri), Bear, DE
June 18	Gold Coast duathlon (& tri), Port Washington, NY	Oct. 15	American Zofingren (5mi/84mi/13mi), NY
June 18	Wilkes Barre duathlon, Wilkes Barre, PA		



Mikael Hanson is a Level 3 USAC certified cycling coach, a Level 1 USAT certified triathlon coach, a certified Schwinn indoor cycling instructor, and soon will be completing his USA Track and Field coaching certification. Mikael is the ultimate multi-sport junkie, competing in numerous cross-country ski races, bike races, running events, and duathlons/triathlons during the calendar year. Mikael is the founder of **Enhance Sports**, a multi-sport coaching and racing company based in New York City. **Enhance Sports** helps athletes of all ages and abilities achieve that fine balance between work, family and athletics.

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