

When race day finally arrives, will you be ready?

By Mikael Hanson

Now that the triathlon season has officially begun with the completion of several early season events (like St. Anthony's, St. Croix, and Wildflower – yes, all in warmer climates), it is time to look at your own specific race preparation to ensure you get the most out of your performance (seems like a reasonable expectation given all the hours of training logged). I will keep the focus of this article to sprint and Olympic distance events, as tapering and race day preparation for Ironman events could fill its own book.

We've discussed before the importance of categorizing your events according to their importance (using A, B, and C to designate them). Perhaps your 'A' (or most important) events are still a ways off, that does not mean you should approach race day for a 'B' or even 'C' event any differently. Outside of your season long training, specific preparation for an upcoming event begins several days before the actual race. It is important to adjust your training schedule to allow for some recovery time during the week preceding the event (even if we are 'training through' this race – a phrase I love, especially with entry fees for regional events exploding to \$100 and more). For everything but your 'C' races, try to move your higher intensity workouts to the first part of the week (like moving your normal Thursday speed work to Tuesday), with a full rest day occurring two days before the event (such as taking off Friday for a Sunday race). The day before the event should be used for limbering the legs with an easy ride/run. The less important the race, the longer the duration your training can be the day before – but always keep the intensity at a minimum so your legs are fresh come race day.

Know the course: This is very important, especially if you are racing in a new event (and one reason why I have a mild dislike for Saturday races – it leaves you very little time to study). For out of town events, I like to arrive at least the day before, giving you plenty of time to not only check in, but also drive or ride the bike course (yes, just like the Pros do for the Tour de France). I often find one race director's idea of a 'rolling course' differs dramatically to my own (i.e. more than 5 minutes in a 39X21 gear on a climb is not my idea of a rolling course). Seeing the course first-hand will help decide not only the proper gearing to be used, but also the proper wheels (such as whether or not a rear disc is advisable for those with more than one set of race wheels). Also check the run course, noting the location of any hills and their duration, pot holes, turns, water stations, as well as checking for how much shade is on the course (an important item during the dog days of summer). Below is a list of what you will need come race day and it is highly advisable you pack the night before.

List of race day necessities

- ❑ Bike (don't laugh, I've seen it happen)
- ❑ Helmet (and this happens more than you think)
- ❑ Cycling and running shoes (plus something to wear after the race)
- ❑ Spare wheels or at least tires (tires inflated night before – so if you have a slow leak, you will know by morning)
- ❑ Air pump (don't hope the guy next to you has one)
- ❑ Race uniform (tri top and bottom, running/swim shorts, etc - bring two options just in case)
- ❑ Wetsuit (if new, make sure you've tried it on and it does help to trim some off the bottom of the legs to ease in the removal process)
- ❑ Swim goggles and cap (although most races provide you with a cap)
- ❑ Body glide or cooking spray (helps a dry body get into a wetsuit more than you know)
- ❑ Sunglasses
- ❑ Several pairs of socks
- ❑ Gloves
- ❑ Water bottles (several)
- ❑ Water/energy drink/race food
- ❑ Towel (two in fact, one to place by your bike, one for after event to dry off)
- ❑ Lubricant and tools (especially allen wrenches, zip ties and electrical tape)
- ❑ Race packet (with race number, course map, starting info, wave info, etc)
- ❑ Race belt, safety pins and rubber bands
- ❑ First aid kit / Vaseline / sunscreen / talcum powder

Setting up your Transition zone: Many of my athletes have a hard time believing me when I say I can help them shave a minute or more of their Olympic distance time WITHOUT setting foot on a track or in a pool, or even climbing on a bike. How - by simply making them more efficient in their TWO transitions.

During the early months of the triathlon season, I constantly hear athletes tell me they plan to add in a few extra early season miles to their training program, all with the hopes of shaving off 30 to 60 seconds from their 40km bike split or 10k time. However, very few of them mention working on improving their transition skills, where it is not uncommon for a person new to the sport to spending 3 minutes or even longer in each transition. Seems to me, shaving a minute from T1 and T2 is far easier than upping your weekly run mileage! Like all aspects of a triathlon, the transition must be practiced. I work on my swim to bike or bike to run skills at last once a week during the season, and given that the triathlon season is upon us, everyone should take the time to practice their transition skills.



POOR Transition Zone



Good Transition Zone

Simply mapping out your ideal transition area is a great place to begin. An organized transition area (like one above/right) includes: helmet placed upside down on the handlebars and unbuckled (perhaps with your sun glasses inside or clipped into the air vents of the helmet), bike shoes either already clipped in or open besides the bike, running shoes out of the way (but still near the bike), preferably equipped with speed laces. Avoid bottles and shoes carelessly thrown next to your bike, equipment left in backpacks, as well helmets hanging by the straps over the handlebars (like photo to left).

Pre-race warm-up: The shorter the event, the more important the warm-up. For sprint events (say under 90mins), it is key to spend a fair amount of time before the race warming up, so your muscles are ready to operate near a maximal effort right away. I typically like to spend 10 to 15 minutes on the bike beginning at an easy pace, before doing a few large gear efforts of 30 seconds or if biking is not your pre-race thing, run for 5 to 10 minutes with a few race pace strides thrown in. Then head off to the water to warm up those arms for the swim. In an Olympic distance event, I will typically leave out the running all together and just do my 10 minutes on the bike and then 5 minutes in the water (by the time you begin the final 10K run, you should be more than warmed up)!

Race day nutrition (before and after): How many times have you heard the saying, 'breakfast is the most important meal of the day'? Well in terms of race day, that phrase is the gospel! Food is the fuel that drives the engine and thus our muscles (or at least most food is – the jury is still out on potato chips). For endurance athletes, like triathletes, eating a good breakfast 2-3 hours BEFORE the race is of the utmost importance. Carbohydrates are the key not only before your race, but as fuel during the event. For a sprint distance event (say 90 minutes of duration or less), it is probably not necessary to eat during the race (other than drinking water/sports drink), thus a simple gel before the start should be enough. For Olympic distance events, I typically will eat a modest pre-race meal 2.5 hours before the race (bagel/fruit), and then take a shot of a sports drink before the swim (or even a small cup of coffee as caffeine is an endurance athlete's friend). During the race, I will consume either a gel or an Enervit Cheer pack (sorry for the product plug – but it truly is my personal favorite) about half way through the bike leg and again at the start of the final run. For longer events (1/2 IM and up), you will really need to work on a specific nutritional plan that works for you (ie: solids vs. liquids). The key number to remember for fueling is 60 grams of carbs per hour (as that is the max the body can metabolize). As for

hydration, one should be drinking a MINIMUM of one water bottle per hour (and considerably more than that if it is hot).

After your race, it is very important to re-hydrate and eat. The critical window is 30 minutes to 2 hours after a race, and according to most nutritionists, high volume of water or a sports drink still remain the best route to recovery (save the beer for later). After easily working off your breakfast with your race effort, food is next up and make sure your next meal has roughly a 3 to 1 Carb to Protein ratio (pasta and chicken or perhaps pancakes and a side of sausage links)!

Post race thoughts: Your race is over and hopefully you are feeling good about your performance. Now what? Take time to revel in your effort, but at the same time take stock in how each segment of the race went – as past experiences can only better prepare us for the future. How did you feel in the water, on the bike, or on the run? Did you run out of gas near the end or did you finish with too much left in the tank? Did your nutritional strategy pay off or did you find yourself cringing at the thought of another gel pack? How about the transitions? Were you smooth or did you find yourself getting hung up in a certain area? Once you have these answers, then you can look at altering your training to help improve the weak areas.

Hopefully, your effort on race day was 100%, thus proper recovery is the next step. I hear too many stories of people following up their race day with a hard tempo run the next day (because they were feeling good or because it was on their training schedule). My advice - take it easy! It might take a day or two for your body to fully recuperate from the effort for even a sprint distance event. Slowly ease back into training during the following week, beginning with some easy spinning or light running/swimming, then gradually building toward your higher intensity workouts later in the week (that is unless you are racing again – then keep the entire week low key and recover).

Following these few simple guidelines will not only improve your race day experience, but hopefully better your results. Remember, one can not gain any additional fitness in the week before an event, but one can slip into a fatigued state by doing too much. Better to error on the side of caution!



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