

I raced my first triathlon back in 2012 and I was about as unprepared as I could have been for that race. I decided to do the race almost a year before, but for the months leading up to the race I rarely did a workout which wasn't on the bike. I ran maybe ten times in the last two months before the race and I probably swam just as many times if not fewer. Despite my lack of preparation, however, I was pretty confident going into the race.

I'm young, I'm fit, I'd think to myself. I'd run cross-country in elementary school and I could swim, I'd done lessons my whole childhood and I swam at my cottage every summer. I thought I'd be amazing.

Well, I wasn't amazing. Far from it, in fact. I was one of the last swimmers out of the water, and I was already exhausted. The bike went alright, but I only had water with me. No gels, no gatorade, nothing of real substance. Going into the run, I was dead. I slogged through it, my legs feeling like rubber. I hated myself for signing up for the race, and for the entirety of the run — eight kilometres which felt like 50 — I told myself that I would never do anything remotely close to a triathlon ever again. After I'd finished and had some time to recover, I changed my mind. By the time I was in the car, leaving the race venue, I was already planning my next race.

I realized that the triathlon wasn't the reason I'd hated my life and cursed myself for the previous two and a half hours of exhaustion. No, what it really came down to was my lack of preparation for the race. That's why I hated the race, I simply wasn't ready for what I'd volunteered to do.

In triathlons, so much can go wrong on race day which is out of your control, so you have to plan ahead and control as much as you can so that the day will go as smoothly as possible. I learned that lesson after my first race. Here are a few things that you can control in the lead up to your race so that the day goes as well as it can.

Training

Training is obviously a huge deal for triathlons (at least, it's obvious to me now, after I neglected to do it leading up to my first race), and a consistent training schedule goes a long way to helping you out on race day. Barrelman will be my first half-iron race, so over the course of the summer my coach and I have been increasing my weekly mileage so that I am prepared for the longest swim, longest bike and longest run that I will have encountered in a race format to date.

Before this year, I'd seldom gone on rides over 100 kilometres. Now I do a ride of over 100 kilometres each week. I'm swimming for longer and my track workouts are more geared to longer-distance racing, with many more mile repeats as opposed to the 400, 800 and 1000 metre sets that I'd grown accustomed to in years past when I was only racing sprint and olympic triathlons.

Triathlon can be a cruel sport. You could show up to race and just have no gas. But if you plan ahead and prepare for what's coming with an appropriate training schedule, you will significantly lower the possibility of doing what I did in my first race, trudging along and hating every minute of it.

Nutrition

Another mistake I made in that first race was my ignorance in regards to nutrition. I always biked with water and that seemed to do the trick for me, so I didn't even think about other drinks or foods to consume throughout the race. I've smartened up since my foolish beginnings and I always make sure to have several gels before and during the race. There have been other times when I have decided to try out new gels on race day and it has not gone well. I've heard many people say never to try something for the first time on race day, but for some reason I seem to forget that that also applies to gels.

The most recent occasion was in July at the Gravenhurst olympic race. I was headed onto the run, in good position, and I forced down some mixed berry gel which I'd never tried before. I swallowed it and about two seconds later it almost came right back up. Luckily I handled my self well and only had to stop for a couple of seconds before I could keep running, bowels still in tact, but I very well could have puked my guts out and had an awful end to that race.

So, before race day, find what works for you. Maybe you like a certain gel or gatorade or Clif Bars or whatever, but just make sure you test it out in training. Don't be like me. Don't become delirious because you neglected to think about nutrition. And if you do plan for nutrition, don't use some random food or gel or drink and almost throw up on the course.

The Mental Game

I used to get very nervous before the swim start of a race. In my first race, person after person swam right over top of me, I was kicked in the face several times and I swallowed so much water that I had to stop several times to gather myself and my breath. For a couple of years after that, I remained afraid of the swim start. I was terrified that the same thing would happen. That changed when I happened upon an article that said you should practice your swim start. That doesn't mean to practice diving or running into a lake. The article said to imagine that you were about to start your swim, to feel that anxiety, and to slowly work through the fear. I started to take this up, and so whenever I had a spare moment, I would close my eyes and picture myself in a lake with hundreds of other triathletes. Then I would control my breathing and just wait for the anxiety to pass. Eventually, once I'd gotten used to that scene of a swim start, I no longer found the swim leg of triathlons as daunting. Now, I barely feel any anxiety (other than regular, minor pre-race jitters) when I'm waiting for the horn to sound and to start the race.

For me, the bike leg is my biggest struggle. I find it can be so easy to just lose your concentration on the ride, and even if you only have a mental lapse for a single minute, you can fall out of your groove, which can sometimes be extremely difficult to get back. For me, one way that I stay focused is by breaking the race down into five kilometre increments, which is easy because most courses will have a marker every five kilometres. I don't have a bike computer or anything fancy like that for races, simply a wristwatch from Walmart. When I start the bike, I start my timer. When I get to the first five kilometre sign, I check my time. From there, I try to either maintain or improve my time from 5k to 5k. I find that this broken down ride is easier to help me keep my concentration as opposed to simply pushing for the full 20, 40 or 90 kilometres without any knowledge of how fast I'm going.

Finally, for the run, my mental strategy is easy. I shut up the voices in my head that are telling me to stop, that I'm hurting, and then I find someone out in front of me and chase, chase, chase until I catch them. If I succeed in catching them, I move onto the next, and the next, and the next, until the race is finished. If there's no one in sight, I just imagine a racer a few hundred

metres ahead who is always just a bit out of my reach. I find that this chasing game can help distract me from the pain I'm putting myself through while also helping me maintain a good pace, because I need to be going fast enough to catch the next runner up the road.

There are plenty of other variables which you can control on race day, but there are just as many uncontrollable variables, if not more, that you'll face. From bad weather to popped tubes, there's always the possibility of a race-altering moment down the road. So I say you should try to control as much of your race as you possibly can so that when problems come your way, you've only got that one problem to deal with rather than five others that you could have prevented.