

Stop asking me what sport I play.

By Hope Frost

I don't play a sport.

This usually earns me a confused look, which is fair, because I've structured most of my life around training. I ran Division I track and cross country in college. I now compete in triathlon in grad school. I train at least twice a day, schedule my days around workouts and operate in a permanent state of exhaustion. None of that qualifies as *playing*.

You can't play track.

You don't play in the pool at 5 a.m.

You aren't playing while dry-heaving behind a bush after pushing your body to its limit in practice.

I don't play a sport.

The word *play* implies a game. Something structured. Competitive. Entertaining. It implies a beginning and an end, a clear winner, a moment when everyone shakes hands and goes home. But what I do isn't a game; it's external competition built on extreme intrinsic drive, discipline and constant mental negotiation.

Play also implies fun. Vibes are relatively high, you're enjoying yourself, maybe even relaxing. Not just competition, but lightness — like you're doing it because it's enjoyable in the moment. Endurance sports don't really work like that. Sure, sometimes it's fun, but most of the time it's repetitive and demanding, and the enjoyable part is rarely the actual moment. It's the satisfaction afterward, when you realize you did it anyway.

I don't play a sport.

The sports we tend to *play* are easy to picture. They involve balls, scoreboards and natural breaks in the action. They make sense to spectators. They fit neatly into television windows and casual conversations. They're built to be watched — fast, dramatic and easy to follow, even if you don't know the rules.

And that's not a bad thing. Entertainment is the point. It's why people watch, why people care, why people show up in jerseys and paint their faces and scream like it's life or death. Games are built around moments — the fourth quarter, the buzzer, the final drive, the walk-off. Even if you don't understand every rule, you know exactly when the pressure spikes.

Endurance sports don't give you those same built-in moments. There's no timeout to regroup, no halftime reset, no quick switch of momentum. The pressure isn't concentrated — it's stretched. It's quiet, constant and mostly internal. And maybe that's why endurance sports are easier to overlook; they aren't built for spectators in the same way.

The irony is that many of the sports we don't *play* often demand the most. Endurance sports don't offer shortcuts. You can't hide behind a teammate or wait for the ball to come to you. When things go wrong, there's nowhere to look but inward. There's nobody else to hide behind. Training is repetitive and largely invisible. You spend months preparing for moments that last minutes, sometimes seconds. And if you do it well, no one notices at all.

I've learned to tolerate discomfort. I've learned to push past pain. I've chosen training over a social life, routine over spontaneity and discipline over motivation more times than I can count. I've pushed my body to places I didn't know it could go — and some places it probably shouldn't have.

But still, I don't play a sport.

Regardless, when people ask what sport I play, I usually answer anyway. I say "track" or "triathlon," depending on how much time I think we have. "Track" is easier. It ends the conversation faster. "Triathlon" invites follow-up questions — usually some version of "Oh, like IronMan?" (No. Please stop asking.)

The misunderstandings don't stop there. If I say "I swim," people picture splashing around at the beach, maybe doing a little doggy paddle, maybe diving under the waves. Which is another thing: when people say they "love swimming" and then describe floating in the ocean for ten minutes... I respect the sentiment. I support the enthusiasm. But that is not swimming. That is playing in water. Swimming is staring at a black line at 5 a.m., fighting for your life while your lungs scream and your arms stop working.

I'm not the only one who feels this pause. Talk to a rower, a cyclist, a swimmer or anyone in an endurance sport and you'll hear the same hesitation. We all end up translating. We simplify. We answer the question with whatever fits closest, because the question is built around a version of sport that doesn't really include us — and calling that out mid-conversation feels like overreacting.

The thing is, I don't need everyone to love endurance sports. I don't expect someone who's never run more than a mile to fully understand why I would willingly do this to myself. But I do want it to count without a disclaimer. I want to be able to answer the question without translating, shrinking or picking the version that sounds most acceptable.

Maybe it seems dramatic to care about one word. But I do. Because I've spent too many years working at something people call impressive but don't instinctively treat as real in the way they treat sports they understand. At the end of the day, "What sport do you play?" is a question that accidentally sorts athletes into real and not-quite-real.

And that's the point. Endurance sports aren't a quirky niche. They're not a fun little side category for people who like to run. They're sports. They're demanding. They're competitive. And they deserve language that doesn't automatically make them sound like an exception.

So no, I'm not trying to ban the word *play*. I'm just saying it shouldn't be the default.

Because I don't play a sport.

I train for one. I race one. I build my life around one. And maybe that's why the word *play* was never enough in the first place.