

A Supporters Guide for Extreme Triathlon

*Extreme Triathlon grows apace with global membership thriving and actual races increasing all the time. To maintain and drive our ambition to embrace that demand, grow the sport, and compliment our First Timers and Training Guides, **Mark Stadhouders** led the way pulling this Supporters Guide together with input from The Forum, myself & Advisory Group members. As Mark says "As an athlete and as a supporter, we are seeking new adventures to make the most out of life." We believe this will help you do just that.*



- Dave Caldwell, Co-Founder of The Global Extreme Triathlon Forum

NB Photos courtesy of Sean McFarlane and Col Barber (Dave was his Celtman Support in 2021)

Introduction

Whether it's to support a loved one or friend, or gain valuable knowledge before doing one yourself, this will be an incredible experience that will stay with you for life.

For those new to this sport, an extreme triathlon is a full distance triathlon over demanding terrain in a spectacular location. These demand a lot from the athlete. But unlike Ironman or Challenge hosted triathlons, there are typically no race organised aid stations or volunteers on the course offering you food or hydration. Each athlete needs one or two supporters to help them get through the race. Not just at the main transition points (swim start, swim to bike stop, and bike to run stop) but also along the route. Plus, many races require a supporter to actually run with the athlete on the more technical section, typically mountainous. But don't worry, most athletes will be too tired to actually run by then!



Sounds daunting, but in reality it is not. It is a fantastic experience that all will enjoy. To bring some sense to everything we'll break this guide down into simple chunks. Firstly, know your athlete, yourself and the role. Then we'll explain the key steps: before, during and after.

And if you can help us improve this guide, then please share your ideas, we are a community.

Know your athlete (and yourself)

They're the reason you're there. You'll probably know them well. You definitely will by the end.

Have a good sit down with them at the start. Understand their strengths and weaknesses, aspirations & fears, and also how to motivate them when it gets tough. Allow them to get specific with their goals, e.g. is it just to finish, or is it to make t-shirt cut-offs? Try to meet up regularly, not just for planning, but also keeping that bond strong.

Do not take a book. Being a Supporter is incredible fun, but it is hard physically, mentally & emotionally. Don't underestimate this, and make sure you consider yourself too when it comes to fitness, nutrition and hydration. But the more you plan for it, the better it will be for you and your friend or loved one.

Your personal motivations and experiences will all be different. This shapes how you approach the day. You may be new to this whole triathlon scene and doing this as a one-off to help them. Or you may be a triathlete yourself there to gain Xtri experience and you can help as trainer/coach. But most Supporters are inexperienced and do a brilliant job.

But your friend or loved one will have been training for nearly a year, so let's get you prepared ...

The Role Itself ... or should we say 'roles'!

Don't panic, it will all make sense. Yes, it can be done by one Supporter, but two is easier. The Support Role can be broken down into key aspects, with suggested groupings here if two supporters.

1. The Driver - Yep, the person who knows the route and car stops intimately. They have the car fully fuelled and serviced, and also packed correctly (more later).
2. Race Planner/Tracker - The athlete will take the lead role in planning the race, knowing their own capabilities, training progress and aspirations. But on the day, the Supporter will be keeping an eye on this, and trying to keep everything on track.
3. Social Media - The one capturing the day through photos and videos, and keeping other friends and family updated on progress.
4. Transition Helper - The person helping the athlete have the right kit in the right transition at the right time, and getting it all out again. They'll work under pressure to strip and cloth the athlete to get them on their way. And, under penalty of death, DO NOT lose the dibber.
5. Nutrition & Hydration - Absolutely vital. The person who knows how often the athlete has to fuel, and has the fuel ready for them for a quick handover (often running as they cycle by), and remove litter and empty bottles to avoid disqualification.
6. The Runner - Crucial, and in most races mandatory. The person actually running with the athlete for 10km or more on the technical part of the run course. The athlete will be tired, but they can startle you with strong bursts, so be fit.
7. Chief - Work as a team, even if it's just you and the athlete. During the planning, the athlete will most likely be the Chief. But during the race, they'll be in the zone on the route. Even with two Supporters, people get tired and miss things. So, don't be afraid to keep an eye on each other's tasks, and call out issues. You don't need to nominate a Chief, sometimes they just emerge, and sometimes it's the people you don't expect.



Planning The Race

Get together with your athlete (and Co-Supporter if you have one) early on, but do a little homework first. You'll need a plan for the day. And you'll also need a plan to get to the day and get home.

Print the race manual. Read it. Read it again, and scribble on it. Repeat. Keep it nearby, scribble on it again. The Race Website or Facebook Group can also help if needed, but for the Supporter, the Race Manual is God.

Meeting monthly to catch up on training and planning progress can be useful. Even doing a shared run can be useful to get you into the mindset.

The Plan for the Day

Plan the route and the stops. Build a timeline from the athlete guide. Write down a race plan. Scribbles on the race manual are fine, or Excel if that's your thing. If you fire up MS Project, you've gone too far. This timeline will include:

- In chronological order meeting points like T1, T2, allowed supporter areas, and points where the athlete likes to have additional support. Factor in expected timings for swim, bike, run and transitions.
- Use Google Maps to zoom in and identify good parking spots at likely intervals, e.g. every hour (25-30km) on the bike. Slight uphill are best (athletes never brake on a downhill) as bottles and food can be passed whilst running alongside them.
- Decide on how the support will move from point to point. Some drive straight there to wait, others hang back for a period of time so they can overtake the athlete on the way to the next checkpoint and arrive just before them. This ensures they are never too far ahead to help in case of an issue. This is a good option if you are worried about a bike mechanical for example.
- Every Supporter will be doing similarly, so accept it that sometimes won't work, e.g. parking stop was busy, so be aware where next stop is. Try and do a course drive recce too, so everyone can visualise it.
- Be aware of Red zones where no support is allowed, and Green zone where you are allowed to provide extra support and run together.

Plan the nutrition & hydration, and race kit. Also tools & spares, mostly for the bike. Your athlete will take the lead on this, but get an idea of what will be needed where and when on the day. Typically a minimum of 500ml per hour fluids, and a gel/bar every 30mins. And ideally have it in bags or boxes, neatly stored and easily accessible in the car. And keep it tidy at/after each stop. Trust us, gremlins come out on race day and throw it around and a lost article is extremely stressful. And you won't believe the fear when looking into the scary eyes of an approaching triathlete and you can't find their gels.

In simple terms, every minute counts. Cut-offs determine which colour t-shirt they get. We all say this doesn't matter (we lie). But some cut-offs finish your race there and then, and one or two mechanicals (e.g. punctures) can make these very real. Key thing is to keep them moving, and be (over) prepared to make that happen. But have fun doing it.

The Overall Plan

The day itself is intense but you all also need to get there, stay there, and get home.



The athlete will focus on their training plan to get there. This is usually several months of daily/weekly training, building in intensity to a final 'taper' of 2 weeks into the race. You don't need to worry about this, but be aware of it, and ask how they're getting on. It may influence timings or focus on the day.



Most races will involve travel and accommodation, and often hire cars (big ones!). Book these as early as you can, as all athletes and crews will be doing the same. Use your race plan and start & finish locations to think about accommodation, and also meals & car fuelling as the races start & end outside typical opening hours in remote locations.

The manual can also mention any travel or accommodation recommendations, and permits/restrictions. But do this travel research yourself. And do think about race or travel insurance as training, travel or races don't always go to plan, as we all know from Covid19, but also from many other events - work, sickness, injury and even pregnancy! Think about adding named drivers on car insurances. Some details are key.

Plan to get there in plenty of time, i.e. at least 2 days in advance. This gives a buffer of time to assemble the bike, do course recce's and training runs, attend race briefings and manage race jitters. Some athletes will get there up to a week in advance if altitude acclimatisation is needed or travel is unpredictable. Don't worry if you have to turn up the day before though, just ensure your preparation is done at home so you minimise stress the night before. Also plan time to chill and laugh as a Crew Team before the start, it'll help enormously.

The athlete will be responsible for purchasing their nutrition, hydration, kit, tools & spares. But you will be responsible for them on the day. Kit checks are essential, from the point of purchase through every step of movement (travel and race day), and then consumption & usage.

And by the way, we all miss something. Don't panic, you'll deal with it. Other athletes and crews will always help.

The Days Before

And now into the detail and the reality. Remember, it's a full on adventure, so soak it ALL up.



No daft risks such as mountain biking or shellfish extravaganzas beforehand, months of hard work has gone into this event.

Get plenty of sleep beforehand, and ideally try and shift your sleep cycle for race week to suit an early start. Set multiple alarms. Most don't sleep, or sleep well, but it happens.

As mentioned, get there a few days beforehand. Do a course recce. Join the social swim. Do some short training sets. Attend the briefing. Meet with friends, and make new ones. These races are usually multi-national, and you will meet athletes

and support from all over the entire world

Make sure the car is fuelled, and you've got all the food and drink you need for a very long day.

And lastly, kit checks, kit checks, kit checks. Actual checklists, bags, boxes, photos of pre-packed kit are all good tricks. There's several steps of buying, packing, moving and moving again to be had.

Get everything laid out, eat, get to bed early, it's going to get very real.

The Day Itself

Today is all about your athlete. But trust us, you're going to have an incredible experience too. Although it will feel scary at times.

First off, the athlete is in charge. You are there to support and listen to their signals for help, verbal and non-verbal. You have agreed where and when to support, but be ready to use your creativity to improvise and adapt to the conditions of race day.

Second, the race is important but not as important as the athlete's life. Be mindful of signals to stop for a brief moment and re-assess, . Talk to the athlete, make sure he/she is alert, make eye contact, or agree beforehand on check questions. For example, after the swim or after a fall. And be prepared to stop the race entirely. Not a fun topic to put into a supporter guide, but it's the most important part of your job during the day. And if the athlete decides to stop, notify the race director immediately.



Third, be sure to be the reporter of this amazing journey. For the home front during the day, or for later. Make as many photos and videos as you can. People at home and the athlete will be thankful for the rest of your life.

You have a plan. It is your friend. But it will feel so incredibly real (and surreal) on the day, so here are some more detailed tips ...



First Thing & T1 Swim Prep

That 2am or 3am alarm is an enormous reality call. Smile. Deep breaths. It's going to be fun.

Make sure everyone has eaten and drunk fluids early to get a good base for the day. And that means everyone. All too often a Supporter will be several hours into a 20hr day and not realise they're running on empty until they've made a poor decision. Everyone's adrenalin will be high. Eat & drink regularly, your athlete needs you healthy and alert.

Getting to, and setting up T1, and getting your athlete ready for the swim is intense. Many teams actually practice it. Ensure the athlete has applied the necessary skincare. Trust us, they should know what this is, and if they don't then suggest they use a lube, lots of it.

It's a busy day, but there's also time to appreciate what makes extreme triathlons exceptional, it'll get you through the day. Your quietest time all day is waiting for your athlete to swim back. Check T1 is well laid out, and kit is ready. Eat, find coffee. Make friends. Look at the scenery. Soak it up.

T1 - Swim Exit

Be ready, get to the water's edge, it's all about to kick off. The athlete is likely to be cold and need help removing their wetsuit and putting on bike clothing. They may even be disoriented. Heat them up with warm fluids, a dryrobe or similar, and some brisk movement or rubdowns if needed. This may also avoid cramps on the bike start as hillstarts are not uncommon. A good trick is to have a plastic bottle of warm water ready to pour down their wetsuit as they exit the water, it gives a physical and mental boost. Basins of warm water to stand in are also quite common, the feet can be numb. Yep, add them to your kit lists.



Keep an eye on that dibber (timing device) at all times whilst neoprene and lycra flies everywhere. It is the race. And make sure they put on their race number facing back, and depending on the weather (check weather forecast diligently) appropriate clothing. And off they go.

Now tidy up your T1, bag the wet clothes, and any bike stuff they didn't need, and carefully pack it away in the car. Pick up your rubbish, pick up any other rubbish that has ended up in your area. These are remote scenic locations, the respect of locals are vital. Also do your first real social media post as the swim is what most friends and family worry about. Deep breaths, here we go.

The Bike

The plan is active, use it. Where's your next stop? Get some great music on, drive there, cheer your athlete as you pass them. Cheer every other athlete you pass also, and smile at and say 'Hi' other Supporters around you, you will see a lot of them today. They're likely to become friends for life.



Learn to 'read' your athlete from the start. It's an emotional rollercoaster. Mostly highs and lots of smiles. But sometimes they'll be in a dark place and need some space to do the hard work. Get a thick skin, you might get some grumps. But be VERY alert to make sure it isn't a nutrition or hydration issue. They should be drinking every 15 minutes (500m+/hr) and eating

every 30mins (gel or bar), and sometimes they'll have slowed without realising. Shout at THEM if needs be, they'll thank you later.

T2 - Bike to Run Transition

Make sure your athlete is well hydrated and fed at your last bike stop and get to T2 in good time. Have the run kit ready, and guide them from the dismount line to there. Assess their mood and their time, and discuss run timings. Make sure they've got all in their rucksack they need.

For the technical run section be VERY careful with your kit planning and packing. Without emergency equipment such as whistle and emergency blanket your race is over.

Many races allow runners at various points during the run. E.g. Celtman has three run sections, and Supporter(s) can join any or all of them despite only being mandatory for the middle (mountains) section. This is great fun for all, but obviously complicates the transitions and car drop-offs



(and bike transportation). Work within your support group to fix the logistics, but don't be afraid to reach out to other groups too during an after the race

The Run



The athlete will typically be carrying their own hydration and nutrition now. Plus, you as a Supporter may actually be with them. But there may still be fuelling stops along the way to stay on top of.

This can be the most stunning and most challenging sections. The Runner needs to read the athlete carefully here, and judge cut-off motivation and capability, e.g. tricky rock sections where fuzzy minded stumbles can be dangerous. Or, alternatively, the athlete may have lots of energy left (or cut-off fever), so the

runner needs to be fit and ready for that!

The Finish

A very special moment. The Supporter(s) obviously needs to be ready to share the glory, but also capture this special moment on film and let friends and family know. And if the athlete doesn't quite make it, it will still have been an adventure, and a great learning, so make them realise that.

After The Race

Be careful driving away from the event, legs will be sore and minds drained.

The next day is the time to relax, go to the post race event and share stories, team photos etc. Plaster Facebook and Instagram with the heroic accomplishment of you and the athlete. Stay a few days. Have a good meal together, drink a few beers or local wine. Soak up the local atmosphere. Most likely you were not in the mood before the race so now is the time to meet locals and enjoy nature. Go hiking (yes, very common) and team up with fellow athletes. You've made friends for life. Now start dreaming about doing an extreme triathlon yourself!

Closing

An extreme triathlon is an adventure, an experience, for you and the athlete. One that will change your life forever. Enjoy it, live it, promote it, and share it with others in our forum.

You, our Supporters, are the magic makers. We could never finish without you. And I'm sure you're athletes will make you know that.

If it is not already clear there is a huge amount of information, knowledge and experience available in the forum, for both supporters and athletes. Make use of this, do not be afraid to reach out and ask questions.

I hope this guide will give you the confidence to start preparing for the race. Stay hungry, Stay Foolish. Good luck!



Resources

- Race Manual and Race Specific Forums
- Our Global Forum
- <https://www.220triathlon.com/training/how-to-prepare-for-an-extreme-triathlon/>
- [XTRI Supporters Video 1](#)
- [XTRI Supporters Video 2](#)

Suggested Checklists

For the Supporter

- Race Manual, and Support Plan if different, folder recommended!
- Charged phone, plus charged battery packs. Plus charger, ideally solar. It pays to be neurotic. :)
- Water, plenty of it
- Snacks and food to get you through the day
- Running gear and rucksack to run with the athlete
- Separate camera if you want zoom shots, or even a drone if allowed for aerial shots
- Charged sports watch (to save your run on Strava)
- Emergency numbers in your phone (race organisers, family)
- Some actually have binoculars to spot the athlete coming, or on the hill

Ready for the Athlete

- Change of clothing for transitions or weather changes
- Nutrition & hydration, some 'treats' also
- Bags/boxes for T1, T2, T2A's and the Finish
- Towel & Dry robe for T1, and some use talcum powder (helps get gloves or tight clothing on)
- Skincare - Lubricant, Suncream, etc.
- Plenty of bottles, continually refilled and ready
- Cool box / Thermos for cold & warm water
- Plastic bottle and basin for warm water
- Some take a camping chair for shoe changes, etc., e.g. soggy field comfort
- First Aid Pack
- Beers and pain killers for the finish

Technical Kit & Spares

- The athlete will have the basics on the bike and in their rucksack, but be ready for anything
- Spares: Tubes, tires, chain (or links), CO2 cannisters. Practice fitting these beforehand if you can.
- Stand pump
- Plastic gloves for when to replace the chain
- Full toolkit for a bike
- Tie wraps and duct-tape for emergencies
- You may have to plan to get these at your location, factor that in