

# A training guide to Extreme Triathlon

*The growth of Extreme Triathlon (Xtri) continues apace with Forum membership and actual races increasing all the time. To maintain and drive our Forums ambition to embrace that demand, grow the sport, and compliment our already published First Timers Guide, **Sean McFarlane** has also pulled together this Training Guide with input from our Advisory Group. Sean is a seasoned athlete himself but also a sports journalist, presenter and coach, so he does know his stuff.*



*Key message: our races are tough, but totally achievable, and totally magical. An experience that will stay with you for life. Enjoy the adventure.*

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

## **When to start**

The chances are that you'll have started a long time ago. If you're reading this, it's more than likely that triathlon and/or outdoor activity will already form a decent part of your life. The volume will most likely need to increase as will some specifics in terms of terrain, etc but you're not starting



from scratch so remember that. This is all about he or she who slows down the least and to that end the key training point is time on feet. You already have a decent amount of that and that's the best starting point.

Selecting a date for your race is vital – you'll know what works best for you – but there are some key factors to remember.

Training fully over any winter is challenging to say the least and any race prior to say mid-May has that clear issue. Then again it can make for a very welcome motivated winter. Most of us tend to ramp up activity in early spring and build from there so late May and June races can work well. Getting in shape early season and maintaining it over summer can be tough for some but again go with what works for you.

So how do you start “proper” training. Frankly that's an impossible question to give a general answer on as it's so very personal, i.e. dependent on your own sports background and fitness base. However, I would want to see all competitors doing a decent chunk of specific training from at least three months out. Many training plans talk about a 30 week plan of progressive increments (time and intensity, with recovery days each week (not always total rest, e.g. swim only), and recovery weeks (typically every 4th week eases back a bit). Do remember to factor in your taper – usually around three weeks to 10 days – so it may well be that for say Celtman in the second half June you need to be at the peak of your powers by late May and that will come round quick. For most of us the key issue here is practicalities – normal life does always get in the way and that's fine but make sure you don't plan training around a life schedule that doesn't allow that. That's a sure-fire way to disappointment and frustration. Always consider the bigger picture here – you'll get to the finish line quicker.

When it comes to specific training, clearly the course of your chosen race and your own particular strengths & background will largely dictate that but here's some key advice on each discipline:

1. **Swim** – get used to at least half the distance in very similar conditions to race day. If it's cold water, ideally train in less neoprene than race day so you can benefit from the boost. So for example for Celtman get in the open water with just a wetsuit from early May. Build up to distance gradually though in those conditions and acclimatise. Many race swims start in the dark, so practicing that can help, at least psychologically, but do please stay safe and take a swim buddy.
2. **Bike** – the most important thing here is to choose your race bike as early as possible. TT, road or whatever decide that, stick with it and get used to riding that set up for a decent distance.
3. **Run** – get some distance in your legs and also terrain that mirrors race day. Use that also to decide your shoe choice and other race day kit e.g. rucksack and train on occasion with that. Flapping bits on rucksacks become a real nuisance.



Strength & conditioning is a vital 4th training discipline, even more so for Xtri. Weekly gym work on legs and core pays dividends, due to the climbing involved. Yoga and regular stretching (and some say foam rollers) also helps keep you supple and ideally injury free.

Doing one of our many Extreme Half races, including the new XTRI SOLO POINT FIVE's, can be a good training step or an initial goal in its own right.

### Stitching it all together

To really give an xtri race a decent go, I feel there's no escaping some decent bike run sessions.



Embrace and enjoy these. And plan them properly. Use them to practise both nutrition and the mental approach – see topic later. I do try and do two forms of these. The first one is just running after a bike until I feel that initial discomfort settling down to some extent. Often it's only a couple of k. Finding that point (however slight it may be), getting used to it and knowing it will come is very valuable. Then I try and do a few bigger bike run sessions usually in race bike and run set up. I can't physically or mental

manage too many of these especially as I get older but just one or two before I start my taper does make a big difference. They need planning and commitment but embrace them and find time to consider that you're able to do them – you're well on the way.

Wrapped around all of this is the need to ensure you do at least a decent chunk of training that you really enjoy whilst still working towards the goal – that's the key to sustaining things. It should be tough, but not make you miserable. There will be sessions and days that make you doubt yourself, but be assured that every step makes you stronger. But if that dark feeling does persist for several days, that can indicate true fatigue (aka genuine over-training), so do pause and consider more

recovery. Recovery (and good sleep) is a KEY training discipline. And any physical niggles should be tackled sooner rather than later, see earlier strength & conditioning notes.

### **Training Tools and Assistance (Dave C contribution, Sean played editor on this one!)**

There are many things that can help you with your training. You could use Ironman oriented training guides such as Fink 'be IronFit', and simply add in a lot of hill work and strength & core for Xtri's particular demands. And there are many tools to help with the precision of training, e.g. Apps (Strava, Training Peaks, etc.), Power meters, and also 'turbos'!



There's a LOT of debate within Xtri circles about Turbos. They can certainly help with precise power drills, which is vital for building climbing strength. Plus they may simply be convenient when outdoors training is (truly) difficult. But we cannot stress enough how important outdoors training is, as technical bike handling is essential to exploit well earned downhills and deal with tricky road surfaces and cornering. And training in foul weather is vital for that mental strength if you face it on the day, which is very likely to happen. Besides, being in nature is what Xtri is all about. Go on, get out there.

The use of knowledgeable coaches can also help. Either for technical advice, tracking, training plans, and feedback. Or simply to help keep you focussed. You can find good coaches in the [XTRI World Tour Coaching page](#). You can also ask for athlete recommendations in the forum for your own location.

All of these things can help. But we have many Xtri athletes who also quite simply do their own thing, and comfortably finish their races. It's personal choice.

### **Nutrition & Hydration**

Use your bigger training days to test nutrition & hydration and work out what is best for you. Ideally don't do coffee stops on your bigger days (sorry!) unless you're planning on doing that come race day! You need to get training close to race day. A consistent problem competitors in xtri races have is coping with the sheer volume and regularity of intake. Your bigger training days don't need to mirror race day in terms of duration but the volume and regularity of nutrition pro rata should. Taste is vital too especially as the race goes on so experiment with real food. Slow and steady grazing always wins the day. Practise how best to access it – the more difficult it is to access nutrition the less chance you'll take it and that all helps with the grazing.

### **Mental approach**

You'll no doubt be thinking about race day a lot but try to crystallise those thoughts into at least some form of reality and use training to assimilate that. A crucial aspect to any xtri race is to break the event up into manageable chunks and courses tend to lend themselves well to that approach. Again use that approach to your bigger days of training. I often tape small notes to my



top tube of my bike to remind me where I'm getting support. It all helps to break things up. And also prepare yourself for hardship and difficulties. Get out in the bad weather, even if just to test your waterproofs. And think about what can go wrong, and how you'll deal with them, that reduces those final day worries.

### **Logistics**

Plan your logistics well in advance. The key decision is your Support so choose wisely and it's never a bad shout to have backups. Many supporters have one eye on doing the race one day and that vested interest tends to help in terms of them not letting you down last minute. Supporters guide due shortly. Accommodation can play a big factor – long drives to start lines are always best avoided and knowing your finish line arrangements are smooth very much helps with getting there.

### **Course recce**

If you can recce decent parts of the course then do but always try to avoid falling into the trap of being intimidated by the course as you do so. Pulling it apart and doing so with others, most of whom say "f\*\*\* that!" or words to that affect can have a negative effect - all the more kudos to you.

### **Kit choice**

The golden rule here is don't try anything for the first time on race day! The bike choice tends to be very personal but for run courses I do find speaking to others who have done the race is very useful. And don't worry about fashion, price or brand – use what has been proven to work for you and you won't go wrong.

### **Fitting it all in**

The biggest challenge for most of us with an xtri race is fitting in the training. Sure, it's tough training to do but having enough time to at least give it a decent go is never easy. Firstly, accept



that none of us ever feels we do the perfect amount or type of training. That's a given for everyone, even pros. The reality is that you'll do far more than others. Then try as much as you can to wrap your normal life around training. Commuting by running or cycling helps. If you're on a car journey get dropped off short of your destination and make your own way there. It's likely you'll need to adjust your body clock a bit – getting up and out early works well as does

getting to bed earlier – one usually flows from the other. But be very cautious of sacrificing too much – that's not sustainable and glib as it may sound this really should be a journey and not a destination.

I've not met many people who do an xtri and say never again and the sport's all the better for that. Enjoy and relish the whole process – huge amounts of others would dearly love to undertake what you are but for a whole host of reasons can't. Lucky, lucky you.