

A first timer's guide to Extreme Triathlon

*The rise of Extreme Triathlon (Xtri) continues apace with around 50 races worldwide in 30 countries, but we still hold true to the original principles of Norseman in 2002. Our Forum was founded in Dec 2019 to create a global community, and be a hub of advice and race info. So we're delighted **Sean McFarlane** gave his time to provide this guide to help create many more incredible experiences. Sean is an Xtri veteran (with several podiums), consults on races, and is a sports writer and coach. Yep, Sean knows his stuff. Enjoy the adventure, it's life changing.*
- Dave Caldwell, Co-Founder of Global Extreme Triathlon Forum



So you want to do an extreme triathlon but are put off doing so for a variety of reasons? They do certainly have a bit of a fear factor but therein lies their appeal. What a dilemma! To be honest, a lot of that fear is over hyped. Sure, they are tough, very tough but they are also firmly within the reach of most if not all of us. If you are reading this article, your inquisitiveness is a great start to a journey that could and frankly should lead to the start line of an extreme triathlon sometime soon. To encourage you along the way, here are ten key tips to ease that fear factor.

1. Race choice

There is a huge and fast-growing number of races out there so choose wisely. They're worldwide now so consider travel, costs and climates. Look at the forum and Wiki for races and also post up for advice from previous competitors. Practical advice is always the best here. You may want to build a race around a family holiday. That can work well but consider the bigger picture – is your priority the race or the family holiday? My advice would always be to do the race at the start of such a trip rather than the end.



Cold water swims are common but not compulsory. Some are inland and some are in the sea. Look around and especially for your first race I would err on the side of choosing an easier swim course, unless you're particularly strong in the water. Bike courses vary widely particular in terms of ascent and the nature of those ascents. Some undulate whilst still managing 2000m plus of ascent with others have proper Alpine climbs and push well past the 4000m mark. For me I'm far comfier on my TT bike in triathlon than my road bike but in saying that those 4000m plus courses are road biking heaven. Come to think of it, all extreme bike courses are! As you'd

expect, run courses vary enormously so do your research. When choosing your race also have a look at my advice further down here on support and logistics.

2. Training required

This is the most common question I get asked, usually by people who assume there's a gargantuan amount of training involved on a near daily basis for months beforehand. That's simply not true and don't let that myth fester with you here. The starting point for any extreme triathlon training plan is your level of general fitness. If you've alternated almost entirely between sofa and desk for most of your life, maybe think twice about this. So have a think about your general activity background to date. There will be something there to build on. The key to training here (big statement!) is time on your feet. And get into the hills when you can. If you're used to a few big days out walking and the like, that's great. If not, try to start. Even seemingly irrelevant things like playing a full round rather than 9 holes of golf make a difference. From there and with that in mind, dive into whatever training plan you fancy if need be but just get out, enjoy and embrace.



In terms of specific training required, we'll do some follow up features on that so stay tuned!

3. Lifestyle required

Another question I get asked a lot is can I do this with a “normal” lifestyle ie long (ish) work hours, family commitments, etc. The clear answer is yes but you have to both be mindful and respectful of your other time commitments and set expectations accordingly. I often get told by people who either do or more often support at extreme triathlons that many competitors don't seem to have “real” jobs. I very much understand the observation here but don't be fooled into thinking that people who don't have conventional job titles and working hours don't have real jobs. And to that end flexibility with time commitments is undoubtedly very helpful. Try as much as you can to fit a decent part of your training into other parts of your lifestyle. So for example if you're going somewhere in the car with the family, look to get dropped off on the way home and cycle the rest of the way back. Or run. You get the script. Active commuting is another great idea. Remember that pushing and straining domestic relationships is usually best avoided. One of the few benefits of Covid is what appears to be a much greater acceptance of flexible working styles – perfect!



4. Nutrition out with the race

Do you need to really watch what you eat and drink in the months before? I'd say no but be mindful of what you're putting in. You can read all the dietary information you like but your body is the best gauge. You will know intrinsically what is right for you and as you up the training, that gut feel (pardon the pun) will get even better. Abstinence from food and drink that we fundamentally enjoy places a lot of importance on the race itself which I don't think helps here. Be sensible and have confidence that you know what that means.

5. Race day nutrition

I'm not going to prescribe here what you should have during the race – it's so personal and we'll also do a follow up piece on suggested race day nutrition. For now my key piece of advice is to make sure you practise beforehand with both the type of nutrition you plan on taking and even more importantly the volume of it. For so many competitors, they try to put more nutrition in their system than they ever had in one day before and that creates a big problem.



6. Equipment

Depending on the race, you may want to get used to swimming with more layers than usual underneath. I once did a feature for a triathlon magazine on how to swim in cold water. I interviewed 10 Celtman finishers and 8 of them said



the same thing – drink plenty water beforehand and pee as much as possible! I'll leave that there although I would say that that like so many other things this requires practise!

For the bike leg, get a bike you are first and foremost comfortable on and may sure you decide on that well before race day. Don't try a fancy TT bike a week before. It won't help. Clip on bars for your road bike are a great idea if you're reluctant on a full TT set up. Consider gearing – avoid grinding up the climbs as much as you can.

On the run, make sure you understand what the compulsory kit is and that you have sufficient means to carry it when it is needed – get used to using modern lightweight rucksacks. Consider changing shoes if the terrain fits that approach but only if you are comfortable doing so. Practise running with a headtorch – you may well need to here. Poles are increasingly

popular but make sure you've had plenty of practise with them before race day. I have used them but tend to prefer to keep it simple – I like as clear a runway as possible.

7. Support



Get your support team right. This a huge part of the race. Get people that are very much self-sufficient decision makers. You can't help them on race day. Use the forum if you need help. The support needed can range from pretty straightforward or complicated and challenging. Speak to others who have done the race you are considering. Look carefully at the race website and manual. Split transitions are very often a feature and they need extra planning. Ideally pick someone that you think to overly competent for what is required. Many of us like the idea of having our partners as supporters but tread with caution there. It can work as I have personally discovered but not always. Support

might also not be a one-person job so consider that. And also think about your costs here. There is an increasing awareness in extreme triathlons that support can be a barrier to entry so some races don't require it and I can see more of them in future. For the Arctic Triple race in Lofoten, Norway support is not allowed to keep carbon footprints to a minimum.

8. Mental approach

Don't look at the event as a single race. It's been said before for endurance events but worth saying again; like trying to eat an elephant, cut it up into manageable chunks. This is really important. It's usually pretty easy to mentally break up various parts of the courses involved in extreme triathlons. Run stages tend to have road and off-road parts as well as often mountain stages. The changing terrain makes for a perfect way to split things up in your head – remembering it as much about managing the mental as well as physical load here. On the bike leg use points where you are seeing your support to break things up and give you a focus.

9. Pre and post-race logistics

Make sure you sort out the logistics of the race well in advance – it makes for a much better race experience. So things like how are you getting to the start line, what you need to do the day before (there's more than you think), how are you taking care of your meals in day(s) before all needed considered and organised. There's a lot to think about here and the sheer magnitude of the event increases what's involved. Read the race manual very thoroughly and check the weather forecast carefully, always remembering that these races tend to be held in areas where the weather can change quickly. If you're racing overseas, look at travel logistics. If I can I like to drive at least part of the bike course on my way from the airport to the race venue. Think about flight times too especially on the outward leg.

10. Key tip

So what's my one key tip above all others to do an extreme triathlon? Learn to recover as you race. Every single one of us will have plenty of dips during the day and it's how we recover from them that ultimately decides if and where we finish. When you have a dip, check your nutrition, find your breathing, relax and recover. Take as long as you like. You can recover whilst moving forward and it could be argued that for a very sizeable chunk of the race you'll be actively recovering going forward. Extreme triathlons are really all about he or she who slows down the least.



I would say good luck, but with the right preparation, luck should have very little to do with it. Well not much!

Photos courtesy of Sean & family, Andy McCandlish, and Pirene Xtreme.