

Talking with Patients About Doing that First Long-Distance Race

by Steven Jonas, MD, MPH, MS

Many readers of the *AMAA Journal* are themselves experienced distance-athletes. And many are marathoners. I have done ten marathons myself, three at the end of iron-man-distance triathlons, but my primary distance racing sport is of the multi-sport variety (100th triathlon completed on July 17 and 160th multi-sport overall, including duathlon, scheduled for August 14). Others do other sports. But whether or not you are a distance athlete yourself, if you do any kind of sports medicine, patients will sometimes ask you for practical advice about doing distance-sport racing. Here are some suggestions for talking with patients about this subject. I focus here on the type I know the best, multi-sport; however, you will find that the principles apply to all distance-sport racing.

Presumably, your patient is intrigued with the idea; otherwise, they would not be asking you about it. This is not a matter of selling (not a good idea in my view for something as demanding as distance-sports racing); it is a matter of facilitating. Your patient has seen one or more distance races on television, read about one or another type in the sports pages, perhaps seen a race in person, or heard about doing one from a friend or family member. They are curious about its mystery, and ready to take up the challenge of its mastery.

Before getting into some of the details that I detail below, I would talk about what it is like to be going to that very first distance-race. Oh what a feeling it is! Apprehension, anticipation, anxiety and wondering “Am I crazy?” “Is **it** too hard for me?” Can I really do this?” occasionally interspersed with “Yes, I can really do this!” And yes, indeed they can. They need to train, of course. In triathlon and duathlon there are the logistics to deal with, as well. But the most important thing—and most of you who do distance racing yourselves do not need to be told this—is the mental stuff. If one puts one’s mind to **it**, assuming no major physical limitations, it can be done.

For me, the most important element of distance-race preparation is goal-setting.



This is a topic that I have written about before in these pages in a variety of context, because I think that it is so central. Why is the person doing what they are doing? What do they expect to get out of it? For whom are they doing it? What are the sacrifices necessary for achieving the goal and are they really worth it to the person? For that very first distance-race, I suggest that the goal be simply to finish, happily and healthily. If at all possible, they should actually be having fun out there. The biggest concern should be how to get across the finish line comfortably, if at all possible. They should not try to go too fast either in the race or, for that matter, in their training, if they like the sport, they will do more races. If they are naturally fast and/or can train up to speed, they will have plenty of opportunity to show their stuff in the future.

Because multi-sport racing, triathlon and duathlon, is the type of distance-racing I am most familiar with, I am devoting the rest of this column primarily to it. Both triathlon and duathlon are complex sports, especially when one is new to them. In addition to

the race itself, there are many details of logistics and equipment to which attention must be paid. I suggest thinking of the first one (or even the first several) as a learning experience. The “gruelathon” experience is to be avoided at all costs. Thus the first race should be chosen with some care. I suggest finding one that is reasonably close to home, hopefully close enough so that one can sleep in one’s own bed the night before the race. There’s no need to add the complication and expense of getting accommodations if that is not necessary.

As for distance, I suggest nothing more than the “Olympic” distance triathlon (1.5k swim, 40k bike, 10k run) for the first race. Actually, for most people I feel that it is better to ease into it with either a “sprint” triathlon (1/4 to 1/2 mile swim, 8 to 15 mile bike, 3 to 4 mile run) or a short-distance duathlon (2 to 3 mile run, 8 to 18 mile bike, 2 to 3 mile run). Although there are longer distance duathlons, they are not common. Of course, there are folks who have done a long race the first time out but if one likes the sport, there will be plenty of opportunity to do long races in the future (with less risk of injury).

I think it is important to stress that in multi-sport racing, at whatever distance one starts out, one is doing a “real” triathlon or duathlon. In some of the reaches of our sport, there is an “ironman ethic,” conveying the notion that only the ironman distance (2.4-mile swim, 112-mile bike, then the marathon) constitutes a “real” triathlon. After many years of experience in the sport and having finished three iron-man-distance races myself (and getting to halfway on the marathon before running out of time on another two), I think that this approach is very destructive and can be discouraging for the first-timer. Any triathlon or duathlon, regardless of length, is “real” and a real experience for those who do it.

If at all possible, the date of one’s first race should be chosen so that they will not have to begin their training in poor weather. At the same time, one

would likely want to choose a race for which the chances are good that that the day of the race will not be an overwhelmingly hot one. If you are talking to a patient who is already a regular aerobic athlete and is comfortable with their skill level on the bike and swim, they could contemplate doing a short triathlon or duathlon before the summer is over in most parts of the country. For those who are just starting out, the rest of the summer and fall season is a good time to start building an aerobic base. Then next spring they will be ready to get into a race-specific training program, enabling them to complete an event before the end of June. (There is plenty of advice on multi-sport training in the two major triathlon magazines, *Inside Triathlon* and *Triathlete*, and on the Internet. There is also a wide range of books on the subject, which can be most easily found by searching under “triathlon” at your favorite book website.)

I suggest choosing a race that will have a water temperature above 70° F, which will allow one to be comfortable without having to worry about borrowing or buying a wet-suit. One should try to find a race in which the courses for the bike and run are reasonably flat and smooth, and have some shade. It will make things somewhat easier if that first race has only one “transition area” (the place where bikes

are racked and one changes clothing and equipment between the race segments). There are not too many left, but some races have two which does increase the level of logistical complication. It is an advantage if there is plenty of parking close to the transition area. Morning of the race check-in is an advantage so that one doesn't have to go over to the race the day before. (However, virtually all of the USA-Triathlon sanctioned races, which require either annual or one-day USATF membership for participation, require day-before the race check-in.)

It will help if one can be certain in advance that the race is well-organized from check-in to after-race food and the awards ceremony (hey, you never know, especially if one is a member of an older age-group). It is also important to be sure that there are plenty of aid stations on the course, traffic control is good and safety, on the water and the roads, is a top priority for the race organizers. The best way to get this information is to talk with someone who has done the race before.

Finally, where to find races? First, there are race calendars in the two national triathlon publications mentioned above (*Inside Triathlon* and *Triathlete*). There is usually a calendar in every issue, plus they have their own websites (www.insidetri.com and www.triathletemag.com) which have readily accessible calendars. Second, race notices can be found at the “pro”

bike and running shoe stores. Third, there are a number of local/regional triathlon clubs or organizations around the country that put on races. Mine, the New York Triathlon Club, has a very busy race calendar (found at www.nytc.org). There is an extensive list of local triathlon clubs, listed by state and city, at the USA-Triathlon website (under www.usatriathlon.org/clubs). Fourth, also on the Internet, there are a number of organizations that have race calendars and/or provide online race registration services for race organizers who have signed up with them. The American Triathlon Calendar (www.trifind.com) has a comprehensive list which has links to many of the listed races' own websites. Among the organizations that provide very convenient means of registering for races online are, in the Northeast: Lin-Mark Computer Sports (www.lin-mark.com) and nationally: Active.com (www.active.com/triathlon).

As many of you know, there are very good times to be had in distance-sport racing, if one goes about it the right way. You can certainly help your patients get off to a good start. And for those of you distance-sports athletes who have never tried multi-sport racing, maybe this little introduction will have whetted your own appetite!