

talking triathlon
with Steve Jonas

GETTING STARTED LATER IN LIFE

Is there some magic age for getting started in multisport racing? From the outside, our sport looks so demanding. Surely, unless you get started young, you can't, or at least ought not to, get started at all. You've got to be a life-long athlete, don't you? Well, I did my first triathlon when I was 46, and except for skiing, I was not an athlete before that.

The sport of triathlon came into existence in the mid-1970s. Only in the early 1980s did a significant number of races start appearing around our country. There are many men and women now in their 60s, 70s, and even 80s who are competing in tri's and du's. Since the sport has been around for less than 30 years, that means that there are many people who got into it at ages ranging from their 40s to their 60s and possibly older.

So how do we do it? From several directions. I originally got into running, as a personal health promotion activity. Never fast, but having more fun than I thought I would when I first started. After about a year and a half I did my first race, a 5-miler. One thing led to another and about a year and a half after that I started training for my first marathon. On the way to doing the 1983 Dallas White Rock, I heard about the Mighty Hamptons Triathlon in Sag Harbor, N.Y.

"Now that really sounds like fun," I said to myself.

And was it ever. About 190 multisport races, three books, and countless columns, triathlons still are fun. Other people have come from one of the other sports, both with and without racing experience, aiming for multisport and some, like me, sort of slide into triathlon.

And so, if you've got a, shall we say, "somewhat older" friend or family member who is thinking about it, here are a few Q and A's for them to consider as they make their way, over time, to that first starting line.

Am I too old?

Tried and true is the answer that you are only as old as you think and feel. There are no maximum ages for our events. In fact, in some regions like mine in the Northeast, the older age-cohorts are fairly sparsely populated so

folks 60 and up can think about even possibly medaling, even if they are not fast. (As any who know me know, I am truly not fast. But because of the small age-cohort thing, I've got a wall covered with age-group plaques.) Thus, if your friend or relative is reasonably healthy and has the right attitude, regardless of their age, they are candidates for our sport, and might even start off finishing in the top three in their age-group, regardless of speed.

Do I have to be in shape, now, to even think about it?

Not at all. There are plenty of training programs around, in the books for beginners, at the many local triathlon clubs, and in the hands of our certified coaches, that can get people from "scratch" to be ready to undertake their first race-specific training program in 3-6 months. As for race-specific training, once someone is in reasonable shape, there are available programs that can get them across the finish line of an Olympic-distance event happy and healthy, training a total of 5-6 hours a week, all three sports, over a 13 week period (3.5 to 4 hours a week for a sprint or an entry-level duathlon). I have been on such a schedule (except for my half-iron and iron-races) for my 26 years in the sport. If you want to go fast, you are going to have to have more training than that, for sure, but if you just want to have fun, and stay within yourself, that will do it.

What about equipment?

Many readers of this magazine know that you can spend many dollars on it. But to get into our sport, any bike that will get you around the course will do. Then you need, at a minimum, a bike helmet, swimwear, shorts, a top, running shoes and socks, and, if you are going to do a tri and the water is expected to be cold, a wetsuit, which can be borrowed or rented.

Why do this?

This is the most important question of all. The answer varies. To try something new. To do an endurance sport in which 90 percent of your weight is supported by water for about a fifth of the time and you are sitting down for about 40 percent of it. To explore your limits, just as long as you recognize your limitations (or come to recognize them fairly quickly, as I did very early in relation to speed and the lack thereof). It is central to the whole experience to be sure to set goals that suit you, that are suitable for you. They can always be adjusted. But for starters I recommend finishing, happily and healthily. It happens to have been my primary goal ever since I did that very first race so many years ago, at the age of 46.

Finally, do tell your new multisporter to be sure to remember that first race, for as many as they do, they will never again be doing one for the very first time. ■

