



DUATHLON: WHAT A COMEBACK!

Talking Triathlon with Steve Jonas

Just a few years ago, we were hearing about the demise of the duathlon, at least in this country. Yes, there were still the long-distance “Powerman” races and world championships overseas, but the short, entry-level, triathlon-sprint-equivalent races were disappearing.

But then, starting about three years ago, USA Triathlon, led in particular by a board member and my good friend Celeste Callahan, decided to give it one more push. And so, there I was at the Duathlon National Championships in Richmond, Va., run as part of the National Duathlon Festival this spring — along with about 1,800 people of all ages, competing in a variety of run-bike-run events. Along with a large Team USA contingent, I will be competing at the ITU Duathlon Worlds (my first) in Edinburgh, Scotland, on Sept. 5. So duathlon is back, and hopefully it’s here to stay this time around. But what of the first time around?

I’m a 73-year-old native New Yorker, fortunate enough to have lived in the city or close by for most of my life. My city is one of constant change that also somehow manages to stay the same in so many important ways. As I move around it I often think, or say to friends and visitors about one of its features or another, “when I was a boy.” My time in multisport doesn’t go back quite that many years, but I have been in the sport for 28 seasons and thus did get my start in it when it was young. And so for it, I can say too, in relative terms, “when I was a boy.”

Yes, when I was a boy in multisport terms I actually competed in what was the first Triathlon Federation USA official Biathlon National Championship, held in New York City’s Central Park in November 1986. A second was held in November 1987. Big names, like Mark Allen and Ken Souza, came in for those races. (If I remember correctly, Mark won the first one, in just about half the time it took me to go around the then-standard 3-mile run/18-mile bike/3-mile run course.) These officially sanctioned races were run by the Big Apple Triathlon Club (now the New York Triathlon Club), under the direction of its president, my good friend Dan Honig.

Dan had organized the BATC back in 1983, running triathlons for a four-month summer season. Looking to extend the race calendar in our region, he was one of the first to come up with the idea of the run-bike-run biathlon. (The event became the “duathlon” when application was first made for inclusion of triathlon in the Olympics. There is a long-standing winter Olympic sport called “biathlon,”

which combines cross-country skiing and target shooting. So we simply changed over from the Greek to the Latin prefix for “two.”) While the popularity of the event declined in many parts of the country over the years, Dan kept it going in our region with the New York City Biathlon Series: three races in Central Park, three to four in the outer boroughs and several more in the region. Dan, who is quite the iconoclast, still adheres to the name “biathlon.”

The usual distances now are 2-3 miles for each of the two run segments and 12-18 miles on the bike. There is now a move to more “Olympic-tri” (or close to it) equivalent duathlons. The 2010 Duathlon National Championship consisted of two 5k runs surrounding a 38k bike.

REASONS TO DO THE DU

- If you’re thinking about getting started in multisport racing but don’t want to train in three sports
- If you’re looking for a shorter event that is not as demanding as a sprint triathlon but is still a challenge
- If you’re weak in or not thrilled with swimming
- If you’re desirous of doing a multisport event that is logistically simpler than a triathlon
- If you’re most comfortable on the bike and perfectly happy to do the bulk of training on it
- Or any combination of the above

Duathlon is easier for most people to contemplate and do than triathlon. The format also appeals to race directors; duathlons are obviously significantly easier and cheaper to set up and manage than triathlons.

And now, certainly with a big push from USAT, duathlon is indeed coming back around the country. This proliferation of duathlons (as well as of sprint-distance triathlons) has made it much easier for first-timers to get into the sport and for recreational, relatively light training multisport athletes to stay in it. So encourage that friend or family-member to think about “doin’ the du.” They will likely be glad they did.

Dr. Steve Jonas has been a multisport athlete for 27 years, is the author of “Triathloning for Ordinary Mortals,” currently in its 23rd year of publication (2nd ed. new in 2006) and is a professor of preventive medicine at Stony Brook University in New York. Visit his website at www.ordinarymortals.info.