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Summer Sports

Triathlons: Going the distance

Lake Placid event is upstate mecca



Two years ago, Aubrey Duquin went to Lake Placid in late July to watch a friend compete in the annual Ironman race. She was hooked. The next day, she stood in the registration line to sign up for the next year's event.

From left, Tri Spot owner **Kevin Patterson**, along with Stevie Lyn Smith and Dave Schutte, do some triathlon training at **TriSpot in Williamsville**. Photo by Mark Mulville / Buffalo News

"I didn't even own a bike at the time," Duquin said. "It was crazy. At that point in my life I had been

running for two years and had done two marathons. It was overwhelming but Ironman Lake Placid turned out to be the best day of my life."

This Sunday, more than 2,000 athletes will compete in Ironman Lake Placid, drawing a hefty number of Western New Yorkers. While triathlons of all distances occur throughout the region, Lake Placid has become one of the most popular for local triathletes who aspire to the holy grail distance of their sport.

Duquin is sitting out the Ironman this season. After her year-long inauguration into the sport in 2010, she's focusing on shorter distances and having tons of success. The 34-year old from Buffalo was the overall female champion at two regional races this summer -- Keuka and A Tri in the Buff. At Ironman 70.3 Rhode Island two weeks ago, she placed fifth in her age group, missing a qualifying spot for the world championships by about three minutes.

She admits to being surprised and a bit humbled by her times and wins this year, but Duquin fell in love with the sport the minute she crossed that finish line in Lake Placid last year.

"You have so many doubts, so many hard training days and so many moments where your character is challenged," she said. "Then on that day, everything just unfolds. It just happens. I feel a lot of us in triathlon are searching for something. Some may have an idea what that is and some of us don't. But when you get on that day, it's nothing tangible but it's so fulfilling.

"I want people to know that anybody can do this. I was never an athlete growing up. I wasn't on sports teams in high school or college. I got a pair of running sneakers for Christmas in 2007 and decided to start running. It's just so possible."

Duquin's story is one of many that pique the interest of friends, family and even strangers who want to investigate the world of triathlon. And while Duquin jumped into training for an Ironman, there's something experts want you to know: Not all triathlons are the Ironman version.

"One of the main misconceptions we hear all the time is that people think triathlon is the same thing as Ironman," said Mike Mullane, the administrator for BeginnerTriathlete.com who lives in Fairport. "People hear about Lake Placid or they see the Ironman Kona special on NBC and they think that's what triathlon is about, doing these insane distances. They don't realize there are other distances."

A triathlon is three sports done back-to-back-to-back. Typically, one consists of an open water swim followed by a bike ride and capped with a run, though there are versions of triathlon which involve canoes or kayaks in place of the swim along with winter triathlons which consist of running, mountain biking and cross-country skiing.

An Ironman race (also known as an Iron Distance race if the event is not run by the World Triathlon Corporation, which has a trademark on the term "Ironman") is a 2.4-mile swim, 112-mile bike ride and 26.2-mile run.

Sound daunting? The good news is that it is not the only distance available in triathlons. Most people start at local and regional races doing a sprint distance or a "try-a-tri" race. These races don't have standard distances: They range from a 200- to a 750-meter swim, a 7- to 12-mile ride and a 2- to 4-mile run. The intermediate distance (also known as the "Olympic" distance because it's the distance used in the Olympic Games) is standard at a 1,500-meter swim, a 40K (25-mile) bike ride and a 10K (6.2-mile) run.

Add to that super sprints and kids races and the sport is accessible to a number of people.

"My first piece of advice is to do it to have fun. That's essential because if you're not having fun, you're not going to continue to do it," said 36-year old Karl Kozlowski of Buffalo, who will line up at Lake Placid on Sunday morning for his third Ironman. "Take small steps forward. Start with watching one then [do] a try-a-tri or a sprint. Just get out there if you're a first-timer and be part of the community. One of the reasons I love triathlon is the community. People are always willing to give advice. It's not competitive -- you're competing against yourself. Everybody is more than willing to talk to you."

Here are some tips to get you started in the sport.

* The training: You will need to swim, bike and run, but you don't necessarily need to put in crazy hours.

"I think the biggest obstacle is that people think they need to train 20 hours a week starting a year in advance," said coach Doug Bush of Endurance Factor in Ellicottville. "The biggest mistake I see people make is doing too much too soon and not taking enough recovery. They will go out for a 20-mile bike ride for the first time and be exhausted for four days. For beginner athletes, they can manage three to four hours a week to start, training every other day to allow their body to recover."

Of course, you are training in three different sports and for that, a good training plan is key. Training plans can be acquired in a variety of ways -- by hiring a personal coach, by buying a traditional triathlon training book or by going online for both free and fee-based training plans.

"A training plan is key because most people tend to spend the most time on what they're good at and ignore what they need to work on," Mullane said. "Come race day, they pay for it. A training plan helps you be consistent about it."

Another resource for training is local clubs. The Buffalo Triathlon Club has more than 300 members and hosts weekly open water and brick workouts (combination of events).

* The fear: In the eight years since BeginnerTriathlete was launched, it has grown into the most popular triathlon destination on the Web. And over those eight years, the main fear of most beginner triathletes has been the same, according to Mullane: the swim.

"Everybody thinks they can run and everyone knows how to ride a bike," Mullane said. "But swimming open water in long distances is intimidating unless you were a competitive swimmer. It takes some time, but you can do it. Most people are capable of more than they believe when it comes to the swim."

And the swim, Bush said, is the part of the triathlon which relies more on technique than on fitness. You don't have to be super fit in order to swim well. Good technique carries you a long way which is why he recommends taking a few swim lessons.

"It can be hard in this area to find good swim lessons for adults," Bush said. "There are some great masters groups, but they don't give lessons. Qualified instruction with a swim coach can really help not just with the technique but in putting you at ease. Mentally, the swim is often the toughest part to get through."

Also, be sure to swim a few times in open water before your triathlon. Pool swimming is different from open water and you will want to understand the sensations before race day.

* The gear: Troll around the Internet or hang out with triathletes and the amount of gear, and its cost, can become more overwhelming than the thought of the Ironman distances. Sticker shock can be daunting, but dropping lots of money on the sport is not necessary.

"Triathlon is a sport heavily influenced by marketing," Bush said. "But you don't need a \$5,000 triathlon bike or \$175 running shoes. You just need a decent bike that fits you and a comfortable pair of shoes from a good running shop that can put you in the proper shoes to prevent injury."

"I did my first triathlon at 40 and I used a 15-year-old hybrid bike," Mullane said. "Some races even have a "fat tire" division for mountain bikes and hybrid bikes. You don't need a high-end bike. You just need a bike that is safe and a helmet."

* The race: As triathlon increases in popularity, races begin to close out. If you're thinking of doing a triathlon, it's key to register early to assure your spot.

In Western New York, race companies Score-This!!! and Eclipse Multi-Sport have several events remaining on their summer schedule including the Wet & Wild Triathlon (Wilson, Aug. 6), Summer Sizzler (Grand Island, Aug. 13), Tri Dunkirk (Dunkirk, Aug. 27) and Nickel City Triathlon (Buffalo, Sept. 24-25).

Entry fees range from \$60 to \$100 depending on distance.

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