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Failure to plan amounts to planning to fail.

The recovery area, post race, is usually a relaxed and enjoyable place to be. By the time you have reached it you have generally completed the race and you are now enjoying a "no-pressure" environment in which stories and analysis of the race takes place. Amongst the stories of strange things that occurred during the race there is always someone with an "if only…" story, a story about how much better they would have performed "if only… they had not had a flat tire" or "if only … they hadn't lost their goggles in the swim". The beauty of a triathlon is that there are so many possibilities come race day and so many things that are beyond the athlete's control, making every race different and challenging. At the same time there is more that is under an athlete's control than they often think. To perform your best in a race, you need to spend time thinking about all the possible outcomes in an event and have various contingency plans in place to allow you to cope with the unexpected. A number of times I have seen athletes let their races be adversely affected by things beyond their control. For example, if you get a flat tyre in a race, there is little to be gained getting angry about the fact. Once the situation has occurred, getting on with changing the tyre is the most efficient use of time and will result in having the least effect on your race.

As mentioned, there are so many things that can affect your performance in a race apart from your physical fitness. Let's work our way through a triathlon and think about things that can and do go wrong. Before a big race the most important step is to check that all your equipment is in good working order. There is nothing worse than a malfunction in your equipment causing an important race to be compromised. Things to check for:

- Swimming goggles in good working order. It is important to check that the straps have not perished – there is not a great deal you can do if the straps snap as you pull the goggles over your head at the start of the race.
- Wetsuit ok. Particularly if you haven't swum in your wetsuit for a while, you should check that the material is ok and the zipper is working correctly.
- Bike tyres in good condition and pumped up to optimum pressure.
- Cleats/blocks on your cycling shoes in good repair. Particularly if you have plastic sections on your cleats, check that they have not worn too much. Some cleats will pull out of the pedal if certain sections have worn down, making it difficult to ride up hills.
- All bolts tight on your bike. If bolts are loose on your bike, Murphy's Law states that they will come undone during a race. Prime offenders in this department are bolts on your seat, bolts on your aero bars and bolts on your biddon cages. It does not take much to just check these are tight a few days before the race so that they do not cause you unnecessary grief on race day. One word of advice: if you are checking the bolts on your bike the night before race day, be VERY CAREFUL. There have been quite a few stories of athletes striping bolts in their enthusiasm to have their bikes secure and have then been running around race morning in an attempt to locate a replacement.
- Shoe laces in your running shoes in good condition. Obviously you want your shoes to stay on your feet during the run portion of the triathlon.
- Hat in good condition.

Once your equipment is checked you can prepare for the race.

A useful practice for the swim leg is to wear your goggles under your swimming cap. The first time you try this, it may feel a little unusual; however, the chance of losing your goggles is greatly reduced. In congested swim legs it is not unusual to get clipped over the back of the

head by the athlete swimming next to you. Generally, the other swimmers in the water are not out to get you and are simply trying to get to the end of the swim leg as best they can. There is little point in getting upset with the swimmer next to you because they keep hitting you. The best idea is to move away from the swimmer. That said, it only takes one good whack on the back of your head to dislodge your goggles and that can be the last that you see of them. Having them under your cap is a good way of ensuring that you have them when you exit the swim.

What about swimming in the open water? In preparation for a triathlon we spend a large amount of time in the pool trying to get from one end to the other as fast as we can. It is interesting to note that, often, the good pool swimmers are often not as far ahead out of an open water swim as they are in a pool race. Why is this the case? A couple of reasons: one, good pool swimmers are usually good at turning – a skill rarely employed in the open water and two, open water swimming requires some navigation skill as the black line on the bottom of the pool is not very visible in the open water. If you want to perform well in an open water swim then you need to practise swimming in open water. To navigate in open water you should check out the swim course before the race starts and then spend some time deciding what large landmarks would be best to use when navigating. Usually variations in the skyline (mountains, large trees, distinctive buildings) are the best to use as navigation points. These are easily spotted when lifting your head quickly out of the water. Buoys are often harder to navigate to as they are on the water level and require you to lift your head further out of the water to spot them. Obviously, as you near a turning buoy they become the target that you are aiming for; however, initially you should key off something that is more easily spotted. When swimming, to get your head out of the water so that you can see where you are going, lift your head as you turn back from taking a breath. As you turn back, push down with your leading hand to allow your head to stay above the water for a little longer.

Another useful skill to practise for the swim is the art of drafting another swimmer. It is legal to draft in the swim and well worth the effort. Unfortunately, a lot of triathletes are not very good at drafting in the swim and end up just frustrating the athlete that they are drafting off. The best advice is, once you are behind an athlete who is swimming at the pace that you want to swim at, slow your stroke down. If you keep swimming at the same pace that you were to get behind another swimmer, you will end up swimming up their legs, which only serves to annoy them. Slowing your stroke down allows you to maintain your swim speed and conserve energy.

Wetsuits are a great swimming aid. If you have never used a wetsuit, then generally, the first swim in a wetsuit feels inordinately fast. As a rule of thumb, the worse you are as a swimmer, the more a wetsuit helps. The biggest advantage in wearing a wetsuit is the improved body position. The wetsuit tends to float your legs up in the water so that there is less frontal drag. This is usually the one aspect of swimming that poor swimmers find challenging to overcome. For good swimmers, however, a wetsuit can feel like a hindrance. Good swimmers usually have good reach at the front end of the stroke and a wetsuit can make the reach and glide portions of the stroke more difficult. Often the best way to exploit the wetsuit is to shorten your stroke and swim in the wetsuit a bit like you would paddle a surfboard.

The bike is usually the longest section of a triathlon, both in distance and the time taken to complete it. It is also the section of the race that relies the most on equipment. Mechanical failures on the bike can ruin your race and so you should make sure your machine is in good working order come race day. Generally, the most frequent problem on the bike is a flat tire. I have witnessed athlete’s allowing a flat tire to totally ruin their race. This does not have to be the case. If you have practised changing a flat tire then, with the fast fill equipment now available, you can be back on the bike in well under 5 minutes. In a longer race, this can have a negligible affect on your overall result. A flat tire becomes a problem if you let it become a problem. If, once you notice you have a flat tire, you waste nervous energy cursing the situation and thinking about the time that you will lose, the whole process becomes more painful. Better to get straight off the bike and go about changing the tire, and you will change the tire more efficiently if you are practised at the art. I know of coaches who will let their athlete’s tires down during a brick session to see how quickly they can change their tire in a training session.

When riding the bike some good advice is to vary your position on the bike during the cycle leg. If you stay in the one position for the entire cycle leg you will fatigue one group of muscles (particularly if you do not pedal in circles but tend to “stomp” the bike). Consequently, getting out of the saddle now and then or even moving yourself around on the seat or changing your grip on the handlebars will all help in you using your body more effectively to get along the road and will reduce the likelihood of cramping on the bike or when you start the run.

If you have a big race on a course that is a little different from the terrain that you are used to training on, it is a wise move to practise on the style of course that you will be racing on. So, if the race is hilly, train on some hills. If the course is a technical course, practise riding in and out of corners. If it is a flat course, practise remaining aerodynamic for longer blocks of time.

When starting the run leg of a triathlon the key word is rhythm. If you can get into a good rhythm then the amount of mental energy required to keep you going is significantly reduced and the run leg becomes a more enjoyable part of the race. To maintain your rhythm over varying terrain you need to have practised running on the flat, on uphills and on downhills. Running uphills, the idea is to lean forward slightly, shorten your stride somewhat and maintain your cadence or turnover. It can also be useful to focus on driving with your arms to emphasise the rhythm.

Running downhill is an art that many athletes neglect. To run downhill well you need to maintain your cadence, increase your stride length slightly and run over your feet. Some athletes need to force themselves to run on their toes downhill so that they do not “stab” the ground with their feet. This causes more aggressive eccentric contractions of the muscles that can result in much sorer legs after the event.

All-in-all, to ensure that the race you have is the race you want, make sure that you have thought about every aspect of the race and have a plan to deal with whatever situation a race may throw at you. If you have a plan, you have a far greater chance of getting past unexpected situations relatively unscathed. If you have no plan and your race starts to go “pear-shaped” then salvaging a reasonable result is far more unlikely.