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The sum of the parts doesn't always equal the whole

By Bruce Thomas

I remember reading a triathlon magazine some years ago (so my recollection may not be that accurate, however the essence of the story remains) in which an account of a marathoner's assault on the Hawaii Ironman was detailed. This marathoner was a good athlete with some sub 2hr 30min marathons to his credit. Upon seeing the Hawaii Ironman results and noting that the best marathon time was 2:40ish while few people managed to run under three hours, this athlete thought that he would have a crack at posting a fast time in Hawaii by running a quick marathon. The athlete trained for the event (I'm not sure exactly what this entailed) and made it to the start line. As I recall, the race plan was for a conservative swim and bike and a blistering run. The swim was ok; the bike turned out to be a little more challenging than anticipated and the run was only blistering in the sense that the athlete spent far too much time in the sun. The marathon time was in the vicinity of 4hrs. The athlete wrote in his account of the race that he was naïve to think that he could have run a fast marathon. Granted, this is an Ironman event in probably some of the most challenging conditions in the world; however, the fact remains that to be a good triathlete requires more than being a good runner. In fact, you can be a great swimmer, rider and runner and not perform to the level that your ability in each individual discipline would suggest come race day.

That is the beauty of the sport of triathlon: there is more to it than just swimming, riding and running. A very important part of triathlon is transitions. When you hear the word transition mentioned in the context of triathlon most people automatically think of T1: swim to bike transition and T2: bike to run transition. This, in turn conjures up a picture of a physically enclosed area with bike racks and a great display of the latest, far from cheap racing equipment. I would like to expand the idea of transition and discuss the importance of training for this portion of the triathlon if you are to maximise your racing potential.

A transition that is often neglected is that from race preparation on race morning and racing. It is important to prepare your body to race. It is unfair, and potentially cruel, to expect your body to go from a nervous pre race discussion with a mate or partner, to a flurry of thrashing arms and legs in the swim. A warm-up of something more than putting on your wetsuit and/or goggles is certainly called for and will make the transition from standing on the water's edge to racing far smoother.

The warm-up will depend upon the length of race you are doing. The shorter the race, the more vital the warm-up. The easiest way to start your warm-up is to go for an easy

jog. This will get the body functioning quickly, will get blood into the working muscles and will get the muscles functioning. The jog does not have to be overly long. It should start out very slowly and build over 10-20minutes to include a couple of short surges. This warm-up should not be enough to cause you any discomfort or fatigue. Another option for warming up is to try a dynamic warm-up in which you do some bounding and lunges at low intensity to get the muscles functioning. Having warmed-up, a swim before the gun goes is very appropriate. Obviously, you are going to start a triathlon swimming and so you should ensure that your "swimming muscles" are ready to perform. Most triathletes spend at least 300m warming up before a swim session in training, some even warm-up for 1500m before an intense session, so a warm-up of a few hundred metres would make sense. This does not have to be hard but should include a few surges to get the heart pumping and the blood in the muscles.

Over the last 100m or so of the swim leg you should start thinking about T1. The first thought should be that you have to run from the swim exit to your bike. Most triathletes (particularly in wetsuit swims) neglect to employ a serious kick. Consequently, after the swim leg there is a great deal of blood supplying the muscles of the upper body and not so much circulating through the muscles of the legs. A bit of extra kicking at the end of the swim will help the lower body to function better when you go from horizontal to vertical as you exit the swim.

Once upright the thoughts should be of getting through T1. If you do not have a specific plan or procedure that you follow, then you will most likely take longer in transition than necessary. Following is a basic procedure that you could try. As soon as you stand up from the swim, unzip your wetsuit and remove your cap and goggles. By the time you arrive at your bike your wetsuit should be down to your hips. At your bike finish removing the wetsuit (the best way to do this quickly is to forget that it cost you in the vicinity of $800). Once the wetsuit is off, sunglasses and helmet go on, shoes (if they are not on your bike) and then escort your bike to the bike exit. If you use the same routine each time, you will become efficient and get through T1 quickly. A word about putting your feet in your cycling shoes on the bike: if you get the bike up over 20km/h before you start putting your feet in, you will find the bike more stable and you will hold your position relative to the other athletes in the race.

Your bike training now comes into its own as you now go about riding the bike as best you can. I am a big fan of riding by feel in races and trusting your training experiences to enable you to ride at a sustainable level. As you come to the end of the bike leg, it is worthwhile, if you have the opportunity on some downhills, to stretch your legs out a bit and loosen them up from the ride. Hamstring stretches on the bike and even using your hands to "shake" your quadriceps can aid in the transition from riding to running. In the last couple of hundred metres before dismounting the bike, get your feet out of your cycling shoes and rest them on top of the shoes, then think about the procedure of changing from bike to running shoes. Again, you should have a set routine that you follow every time. Something along the lines of: "rack your bike, helmet off, shoes on, pick up hat and go" is a reasonably efficient way of getting through T2. An elementary mistake that even some professionals occasionally make is not being familiar with the exact route out of T2. Before the race starts a few minutes ensuring that you understand the entry and exit points for each leg of the race is time well spent. In races where seconds count, running the wrong way through transition is very costly.

As you are departing T2 there is a temptation to show the gathered crowd how fast you can run. This is not a recommended method of attaining a personal best for the run leg. The number of athletes who impress the cheering fans over the first 200m of the run only to spend the remainder of the run paying for it is legion. Let me say that the spectators note those who are particularly fast out of T2 and their return is eagerly awaited as bets are placed on how badly the noted athlete will blow!! Far better to be less conspicuous as you start the run and then build into a good, sustainable pace that brings you to the finish ahead of the flashy starters. This not only spares you from an unenviable reputation but also is a physiologically more sound approach to getting your body to change from the riding action to the running action. Once your body has "transitioned" from ride to run, you can then develop your maximal sustainable pace and make the run count.

At the end of the race there is always plenty happening and it is great to catch up with your mates and share stories of the event. In the post-race mayhem, however, it is advisable to assist your body in the final transition: from racing to not racing. If you want your body to recover quickly from the event there are a few steps that should be taken:

- Make sure that you re-hydrate. This is crucial and, depending on the distance of the race, you should be drinking at an appropriate level for you throughout the race. However, independent of how much you drink in the race, if the conditions are warm, you will have lost more fluid than you will have been able to replace during the race. Hence, after the race, getting fluids into you is important.
- Have some food. Obviously, in a strenuous event like a triathlon you will have depleted your energy stores. Your body is keen to replenish these and will eagerly process food in a 20-30min window post-exercise. Therefore, you should eat some food in that short period after you have finished the race. The food should have a high glycaemic index so that the body can absorb it quickly. Simple sugars like glucose can be good to eat in this period.
- Do some very light exercise. Keeping the blood circulating the body helps in the recovery process so, if you want to play another day, that day will be sooner if you take the time to go for a light jog, an easy spin on the bike or a short paddle in the water.

There are a lot of things to think about here apart from simply swimming, riding and running to get to the finish line. A triathlon requires more skills than the three obvious legs of which it consists. If you want to maximise your athletic potential in triathlon then spending time thinking about and practicing the various transition phases of a triathlon will assist you in achieving that goal more quickly. I well remember my first triathlon. In a small regional race I treated myself to my first experience of running off the bike. Coming from something of a running background, I spent my time training by doing each of the three disciplines independently. In the race I was wrapped to get to the run leg, thinking that I would carve it up. Sadly, my lack of experience came back to haunt me and I spent the run leg shuffling along, telling myself that soon I would feel better. In fact I only felt better once I stopped at the finish line. There are plenty of people around these days with far more experience in the sport of triathlon and, before you do your first triathlon, most debutants are educated about the necessity of practising the art of getting off the bike and running. If you have not done this, and even if you have not done it lately, it is worth doing

some short intervals on the bike and then jumping off and having a run. Your body adapts very quickly to any unusual stress that you put it under and learning to change from biking to running is no exception. The transition from swim to bike is one that a lot of people neglect; however, if you want to be as efficient as possible at it, the spend time training your body to do it.

So, if you want to improve your transitions in a race:

- Think about the process of each transition
- Know the routes in and out of the transition area
- Spend some time in training teaching your body to change disciplines.

With these skills mastered the race becomes a triathlon and not just a swim, ride and run. In fact the whole is the sum of its' parts, just so long as we recognise that transitions are components of the "parts".