

Race Day Fashion & Transitions

by: Liz Newbery



Dressing for a sport isn't so difficult, but figuring out how to dress for three very different sports all rolled into one event can be more of a challenge. What to wear for triathlon is very much a matter of personal taste, but in this article I will try to outline some common clothing combinations that seem to work for women triathletes. I'll also provide some suggestions for making transitions from one sport to the next go smoothly.

Fashion Tips

The time you spend in transition counts as part of your overall race time, so you probably don't want to wear entirely different outfits for each sport. Whatever you decide to wear, train in those clothes and practice each of the three sports in those clothes to make sure they are comfortable.

Last year I did my first triathlon, and not owning any specialized triathlon clothing, I wore a bathing suit bottom and a sports bra for the entire race. After the swim, I pulled on a running singlet, to which I had already pinned my race number. This combination worked well for me. Some women do their whole triathlon in a one piece bathing suit. Others find that pulling cycling shorts over their bathing suit before heading out on the bike portion works well. I also know women who like the support of wearing two sports bras any time they run, or who wear a sports bra underneath their bathing suit. Some women use the combination of nylon running shorts and a sports bra for the whole event. On a cool day, you may want to pull on a light shirt or cycling jersey for the bike portion of the race. If you want to invest in some more specific and possibly more comfortable clothing, there are some great one piece and two piece triathlon suits on the market. Triathlon shorts are kind of like light biking shorts; they can be worn during the swim, provide chafing protection during the bike, and feel sufficiently light during the run. As you can see, there are lots of possible combinations of clothing - the important thing, again, is to try out various combinations while you train in order to find a combination that works for you.

Many people wear wetsuits (if they own them) for the swim portion of the triathlon. These are excellent for keeping swimmers warm in cold water, although all of the OWTS triathlons typically have warm enough water so that women will not require them. Wetsuits also provide a bit of buoyancy; while I've never tested this theory, I've heard it said that wetsuits are quite helpful for people who don't swim well and do little to improve times for people who are strong swimmers. People who race in wetsuits often wear their running singlet under the wetsuit during the swim. This way they are already dressed for the rest of the race, and they don't have to fight with pulling a dry shirt over a wet body when in the transition zone. Triathlon wetsuits are built differently than wetsuits designed for paddlesports and scuba diving. Among other features, they are easy to remove quickly and have a smooth, slippery exterior. While it may just be my imagination, my paddling wetsuit (straight neoprene with no friction reducing exterior) seems to slow me down significantly when I'm swimming. If you have an old wetsuit kicking around, it's best not to assume that it will help you in a triathlon - test it out on a lake swim first. And again, a wetsuit should not be a necessary piece of equipment for participating in OWTS because our races are held in July, August, and early September in reasonably warm lakes.

There's lots of variety also in people's preference for footwear. Try running with and without socks for the same distance as your target race to see which you prefer. If running without socks doesn't bother you, then it will save time in the transition zone. Some women will tie their running shoes with elastic laces so the shoes can be slipped on quickly; laces can be bought at triathlon stores or plain elastic is available at sewing stores. It's absolutely fine to do both the run and the bike portion of the race in

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running shoes. While cycling shoes are helpful, they are not necessary, particularly for the beginning triathlete not wanting to spend a lot of money. Starting cycling with shoes already clipped into your pedals (as seen on TV) is a rather advanced skill. I'm quite sure I would crash on my first several attempts of said skill and none of the triathletes I know use this strategy. This is not to say it's not a useful, timesaving strategy, but simply to say both that it may not be a useful focus for the beginning triathlete and that it requires practice.

Transition Zones

The "transition zone" refers to the designated place that athletes lay out their bikes and other gear for easy movement from one discipline to the next. The noun "transition" tends to refer to the time spent getting ready for biking after you've finished swimming, and getting ready for running after you've completed the bike ride. I will start by saying two very important things about transitions: 1) Practice them during your training and make them part of your training. 2) Ensure that you put your bike helmet on before doing anything with your bike, and especially before taking your bike off the rack. In fact, it's not a bad habit to make your bike helmet the first thing you grab for after swimming.

Reducing your time in transition reduces your overall race time, so if you are reaching for a time goal you will want to make both of your transitions easy and smooth. (If time is not a factor for you, hey, you could even stop for a latte in the transition zone!). When setting up your transition zone choose a location with adequate space (about 1 ½ feet wide will do). Try not to take up too much space or to have your stuff too spread out as this is generally considered bad transition zone etiquette. Ensure that you have your location in the transition zone well memorized; it will look different during the race as bikes come and go. Hook your bike on the rack, either by the handlebars or by the seat. Generally bikes get hooked up on alternating sides of the rack to provide more space for other gear. Many people lay out a towel in their transition space - to put their gear on and to stand and dry their feet on after the swim. Bike helmets can be cradled on handlebars, hooked on bike seats, or laid out on the towel. I put my sunglasses in my helmet. Bike and running shoes get laid out in an easy position to put them on. If you plan to wear a shirt, it is also pre-laid out with your gear. Race numbers are pre-pinned on a race belt or on your shirt. Ensure that your water bottle is already attached to your bike, and any sport drink or gel that you might want during the race is in an accessible position. Support teams are not allowed to help with transitions. Before you leave your transition zone for the race start, it's a good idea to ensure that it is tidy (so that you don't get confused during the race), and that you have double and triple checked its location. Sometimes zones have more than one entrance - for exiting the swim and the run, and for entering and exiting the bike. Make sure that you have a sense of the flow of the race and which gates you will be running through at what points in the race. There is no biking inside transition zones.

The more details and logistics that you have thought through and taken care of before your race day, the more relaxed and able to focus on and enjoy your race you will be. And triathlons are there to be enjoyed.