

Triathlon on an Economic Budget

by: Liz Newbery



As a grad student, I've had years of practice cutting economic corners. I'm long past the days of living with milk crate and cardboard box furniture, and friends and family are frankly astonished on how well I live on how little. It simply requires some ingenuity, well honed scrounging skills, and a decent sized network of people willing to give you hand-me-downs. A central goal of the Ontario Women's Triathlon Committee is to make triathlon accessible to more women, and our hope is that economic constraints will not bar women from participating. It's occurred to me that I may have some expertise to share in this department.

If you are new to triathlon and don't want to make a big economic commitment at this point, or if you'd like to participate in triathlon, but, like many of us, simply *can't* make a big economic commitment, then some of the following tips may help. If you don't need to cut economic corners, I've always found independently owned bike, running and triathlon stores preferable in terms of service, product, and knowledge. But then you never know - we may see a revolution of home-made running gear and "unique" bicycles hitting the roads this spring...

Sparing No Expense

First off, the two things I never skimp on are a good bike helmet and a good, proper fitting pair of running shoes. If you've never bought a quality pair of shoes, you might want to go to a running store and ask for an experienced employee to fit you. (It is not a matter of simply getting a "good brand" of shoe, but the right shoe for your body). Sometimes running stores discount their previous year's stock in the new year, so check around. I've typically found running specific stores no more expensive than department sports stores. If you know exactly the size and shoe that you want, there may be cheaper ways to buy shoes, perhaps on the internet, but this is not something I have tried out personally. If you are not planning to run long distances, or if you walk/run more than run, *and* have knees, feet, and hips that don't complain, then you may be able to get away with cheaper or older shoes. Pain is a good indicator of when to do something immediately about your shoes. For those of us cursed with genetically unhappy joints, wearing proper fitting, good quality, frequently replaced shoes is paramount to our running happiness.

Bike stores will be able to fit you to a helmet. Quite often stores don't mark up their helmets very much as a way to encourage people to actually wear the things, so it's possible to find some helmets within the \$15 - \$35 range.

Clothing

It's important to remember that running in warm spring and summer temperatures doesn't require specialized clothing. An old t-shirt and a pair of non-chafing shorts will do. Cotton is fine. Works for desert dwellers - should work for runners. Running in the winter requires more thought on how to keep your body warm, dry, and not overheated. (See winter training article). Finding technical clothing that is inexpensive is tricky but doable. The large second hand store chains are hit and miss in this regard, but I have found \$1 fashion fleeces in such stores which a pair of scissors have rendered into practical outdoor athletic wear. You may also find the occasional pair of lowish quality nylon wind pants or nylon wind jackets. I have had excellent luck at a twice a year outdoor gear swap; this is a sort of organized garage sale sponsored by an outdoor store in Toronto, Vancouver and Ottawa. A few years ago, I came away with a high quality \$5 running/biking jacket and \$10 winter camping wind jacket. If you decide to go these swaps, get there early and wait in line - it will be worth it.

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My sewing skills are fairly minimal and haphazard, but with a sewing machine and a half a metre of fleece, I once somehow created mittens, and a couple of neck gaiters and head bands for just a few dollars. If I can do it, anyone can.

If you decide to buy some new running/biking gear, again, stores often have sales early in the new year. Some large outdoor stores have outdoor athletic lines that are more affordable than athletic clothing you might find elsewhere -check their internet catalogues. I once found a great pair of running tights at a discount department store, although such finds are rare. Some of the major manufacturers also have factory outlets. If you are into outdoor activities (paddling, winter camping etc.), keep in mind that there is a lot of cross over between the clothing required for these activities and winter running.

Bikes

Last year a friend of mine donated her 16 year old 10 speed bike to me which made an enormous difference in speed; I had been riding my 16 year old commuter mountain bike. Quite likely someone you know has an old 10 speed they are not using which, with a tune up, can become a trusty triathlon steed. And sometimes an uncomfortable bike can become a comfortable one simply by changing the seat. There are some great women specific seats on the market. Changing knobby mountain bike tires to more slick tires will make a bike faster as well.

But then again, one of the wonderful things about the women's tri series is seeing the range of bicycles people ride. I particularly enjoy seeing the banana seats, and the bikes with baskets and streamers out on the course - while not very speedy, they have everything in style and attitude. There is something kind of celebratory about a bike dressed up for the occasion, sporting fringes and spokey dokes. And the point of triathlon, after all, is not necessarily to be wickedly fast, but to just get out and do it - to be active and enjoy yourself.

However, if you are interested in getting a much speedier more technical bike, some triathlon and bike stores sell good second hand bikes on consignment or sell off their old rental bicycles (and wetsuits). If you are buying new, many of the independently owned stores are good about passing on manufacturer deals to their customers. Ensure that any bike you buy fits you properly.

Winter Training

Running outside in the winter is, for the most part, wonderful and pleasant. But there are days, as we all know, that seem too miserable for long runs, or when the roads are too slippery for running. Indoor training in a gym is a great alternative and allows for a mixture of running, biking, and weights. Gym memberships can, however, be onerously expensive (although some offer reasonable one to two month passes). I substitute a gym membership with frequent cross country skiing (which is free for me), pilates at home (I took one course and then bought a book), outdoor running, and the occasional one day visit to the local recreation centre. This nicely rounds out a winter training schedule and costs almost nothing.

Nutrition

There are lots and lots of sports drinks, recovery drinks, sports gels, and sports bars on the market. I tend to drink plain water for short training sessions. For longer runs or bike rides (more than an hour), especially in hot weather, I sometimes bring along sports drink. Sports drink that comes in powdered

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form tends to be less expensive than buying bottles of already mixed drink. I have a high metabolism and am always hungry, so when I am training or racing for more than 1 ½ or two hours, I sometimes bring along a sports gel. I have also found that pretzels and bananas can nicely substitute for commercial gels, and sometimes real food goes down more easily when the body is stressed by exercise.

I usually follow long workouts with a blender full of yoghurt, banana, fruit, and soft tofu or soya milk.

Other Details

The one cost that it is impossible to get around in this sport is the race entry fee. One suggestion is to search around for different races - some are more expensive than others. A strategy that I have used is to choose one race per season to enter. Having a race goal means that I will train better and stay active, which is the point, really. Entering just one race means that I am basically only spending \$50-\$60 per season. If you can afford it, though, registering in more than one race allows for practice and improvement in racing over the season as well as better ongoing motivation.

Local libraries can be excellent sources of training information - from running, biking, and triathlon books, to some of the more popular magazines in the sport. Most magazine back issues can be checked out. The internet is also a prolific source of technique advice, pace charts, and training schedules.

Final Thoughts

Many of us have all too many excuses and reasons for not doing things for ourselves and for not getting outside and being active. Triathlon doesn't have to be an expensive sport and my hope is that money doesn't become another reason not to participate. Personally, I've been working instead on developing excuses *to* play: "It's so nice out, I have to run..."; "I have to walk the dog anyway..."; "An hour of biking will just give me more energy and motivation for my work..." I wish you all a 100 excuses to find yourselves happily biking, running, swimming, hiking, walking, skiing, and playing in the snow this winter, spring and summer. Cheers.