

Give Triathlons a Try

Sport becoming more popular with average athletes

By **CLAIRE MARTIN**
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DENVER — Triathlons, a sport that once belonged exclusively to elite athletes, are going from Ironman to everyman, threatening to replace fun runs as a popular citizen event.

"I have really fallen in love with the sport," said Jen Szabo, of Arvada, Colo.

Szabo is among more than 1 million people who will compete in a triathlon somewhere in the U.S. this year, according to the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association. Most of those will be "sprint triathlons" a fraction the size of the Ironman, as little as a quarter-mile swim, a 10-mile bike ride and a 5-kilometer run. Some triathletes find it even more manageable to sign up in teams of three, with each individual taking one leg of the event.

"Only a few years ago, you could sign up for our sprint triathlons the day before the event," said Scott Fliegelman, a Boulder, Colo., personal coach who specializes in training triathletes.

"But today, our June event, the 5430 triathlon, with 1,000 participants, is basically filled by March. Triathlons are less intimidating to the average athlete than they used to be."

Elite runner Ellen Hart-Peqa is among the growing number of triathlon converts.

"I think most people, myself included, evolve into triathlons because the sport allows you to train six or seven days a week, with far less chance of injury than if you

were just running," Hart-Peqa said.

"A sprint tri is doable for surprisingly many people, and that first one gives you such a feeling of accomplishment."

Szabo concurs, although just four years ago she never would have predicted that she'd describe a triathlon as "doable." In 2004, she weighed 250 pounds when her brother persuaded her to attend a Boulder triathlon training session.

Surrounded by slimmer runners, Szabo listened awhile and then gathered her asthma inhaler and other things.

Training Resources

beginnertriathlete.com:

Training and nutrition log, video tutoring, online coaching, newsgroup forum, gear advice.

trijuice.com: Triathlon news, blog, podcasts, training links, gear reviews, race results and upcoming races.

triathlon.org: Training tips, listings of triathlons throughout the world, video previews and reviews of races.

triatheanewbie.com: Tips for

novice triathlon participants, including advice on gear (do tri-bars really help during the cycling phase?), swimming outdoors, nutrition and transition tips.

davescottinc.com: Six-time Ironman winner and Boulder resident Dave Scott's professional advice, and custom fitness consultations and workouts.

Training Tips

- Invest in coaching sessions (\$80 and up per month) and workshops to become proficient in your weakest sport
- Swim, cycle and run on the race course before race day.
- Match your training environments as closely as

possible to the race course distance and conditions.

- Run for 10 minutes immediately following your cycling workout. This reduces the "wobble" factor in the race-day transition from cycling to running.

"I get exhausted just running to the phone, much less a 10K," she thought.

Tears in her eyes, she began heading for the door when Fliegelman, one of the workshop presenters, tossed his arm over her shoulder as if he already were her coach.

"You're just the kind of athlete I want to work with!" he said heartily, converting Szabo on the spot.

"An athlete — he called me an athlete when I weighed 250 pounds," she says today, still incredulous.

She started to walk every day,

working her way up to 13.1 miles — a half-marathon distance — within two years, gradually switching from walking to running. The weight melted off. The third year, she decided to enter a triathlon. When she finished, Szabo was elated.

"And now, I feel like triathlons are my home, and that I belong," she said, an old hand at triathlons with seven competitions under her belt.

"Even though I carry an inhaler in case I need to take a puff. And sometimes I wear socks," she added.

That's a wry reference to the distinction Szabo draws between recreational triathletes like herself and hard-core competitors so focused on trimming seconds from their overall time that they bike and run sockless to avoid wasting 15 precious seconds pulling on a pair of socks.

Szabo and her training partner, novice triathlete Jenn Downey of Boulder, work out between 90 minutes and two hours a day, following a customized training program. A typical workout combines two of the three triathlon events.

"Every day is different," Downey said.

"Training for a triathlon gives you more confidence in yourself. You have to set up goals, break down ways to accomplish them, and overcome obstacles. It's influenced me at work: I'll think about how my running goals can translate into a project that my team has to do. You get more confidence in yourself."