

TRY-A-TRI TIPS part 3 – What to wear for a Triathlon

(The things beginners need to know about clothing/kit for a first Tri)

This is the third of our articles designed to help first-timers prepare for a triathlon. It deals with Tri Suits, alternative clothing you can use, and bits and pieces of equipment that will prove useful. Some of this has been covered partially in the other emails we've sent, so do get in touch if articles 1 & 2 didn't reach you. After this, our next Tips articles will be on the rules of Triathlon and Transitions.

What should I wear for a Triathlon?



I've had a lot of questions emailed in to me about clothing to wear on race day, and to be honest there are lots of options you could go for, but I've tried to break it down to a few simple guidelines on what to wear. A lot depends on your budget, what kit you've already got from other sports you already take part in and whether the Tri is a one-off or the start of a triathlon journey that's going to involve more races. The photo above is from the start of one of our previous Try-a-Tri events that was held at an open-air pool. There some people in tri-suits, some in swim-shorts, others in 2-piece or one-piece swimsuits. All will be fine for the swim leg of a Triathlon, and in the Transition that comes after a swim you can add layers of kit ready for the bike/run if required (but the No Nudity rule means you can't take your swim kit off – it has to stay on underneath your bike/run gear).

1. THE TRI SUIT

As you'd expect, the tri suit is the tailor-made costume that triathletes wear for all their events and they may also wear it for some of their training. It can be either one-piece or two-piece but the rules of triathlon internationally (which also apply here in the UK) state that you can't show bare skin between the top and shorts of a two-piece suit when cycling/running, so tip 1 is don't buy a 2-piece tri suit that doesn't comply with the rules.

The beauty of a tri suit is that it can be worn as a swimming costume (because it is tight-fitting, sleek and doesn't soak up loads of water), a cycling outfit (it has padding to protect you from saddle soreness & it will dry quickly while you are riding) and as running kit (it will breathe and "wick-away" sweat like proper running clothes do, and the seat padding is very narrow so shouldn't cause any leg chafing).



It's quite normal to wear a tri suit for your first event. It won't make you look pretentious or "too serious" so if you are planning to do triathlons long term, you may as well get one before your first race. As with any kit, you need to wear it in training to make sure it is comfortable and fits well (you don't want to encounter a problem with it on race day!). The photos above are of me in my first ever triathlon, the Dorset Try-a-Tri, and a couple of the finishers at one of our previous events. My tri-suit in that photo is a separate top and shorts, the others are one-piece suits.

When buying a tri suit, it's good to go somewhere you can try it on and check the fit and also get some specialist advice. Bristol has a number of running shops, some of which offer triathlon kit, while probably the largest triathlon retailer in the UK is Tri UK down at Yeovil. Our event sponsors, Run and Become, have an excellent website for running kit and stock a range of Tri Suits by Zone 3 which look good and start at 75 pounds. Although we don't have one locally, the sports retail chain Decathlon now have a partnership with British Triathlon / SwimBikeRun and are retailing some very good value tri kit.

BTF Rules on Clothing

The rules of Triathlon are very specific when it comes to clothing. You can see the current rulebook for UK events online:

<https://www.britishtriathlon.org/competitionrules>

There are rules about bare skin as previously mentioned (these do not apply to the swim, where trunks/costume only is fine) and also regulations about when you can/can't partially unzip your suit to cool off – it's all very specific! Most of these rules are enforced in a relaxed way in a Try-a-Tri event, so you would not get disqualified for undoing your zip too much, we'd just ask you to zip it up a bit and carry on. Part of the reason for SwimBikeRun / Try-a-Tri events is to learn the ins and outs of the sport though, so we will observe all these rules without letting them detract from the fun of race day.

2. WHAT IF I'M NOT THAT SERIOUS AND WON'T BE BUYING A TRI SUIT!?

OK then, there are other options. Any kit that you can swim, cycle and run in comfortably will do the job and ensure a speedy transition from one sport to the next (with no need to change your clothes).

You can use kit that is very similar to a tri suit – for example some lycra shorts and a tight-fitting (vest or short-sleeve) running or cycling top that you can swim in would also work for a short Triathlon. It really would have to be skin-tight though, so if you think you have something suitable try it in the pool and see if it works OK in the water. I have a short-sleeve Rash Vest designed for surfing that is fine for swimming, cycling and running in, so combining that with running shorts would give me a kind of budget tri suit. If you have a “compression” vest/tee that might also work OK. With lycra shorts that are not designed for triathlon, there will either be no seat-padding (running shorts) or a lot of seat padding (cycling shorts) so you may be better off with the running shorts – the padding in cycling shorts is often too bulky for them to be comfortable on a run.

If you don't have kit that will serve for all three sports, you can wear your regular swimming costume (swimsuit or trunks/shorts) for the swim. Then, after exiting the pool you can put on shorts and a tee shirt over the top. You have to be fully covered when leaving the transition area with your bike, and no nudity is allowed in the transition area as it is very public (and it's the rules). So, while you can put layers on, you can't take your swimming stuff off. This strategy will only work if you are confident that you can cycle and run comfortably enough with the wet swimming kit still on underneath your other clothes. Here are some shots of athletes at one of our Portishead races – these give you an idea of how you can start the event in shorts / trunks / costume and finish it having pulled on an extra layer or two.





Women/girls may need a sport bra on the run (unless they have a running/tri top with sufficient support built-in) and as there is nowhere private to change between the swim and the cycle/run, you'll want to have the bra on from the start, worn under your swimming costume or other race kit.

WILL I GET TOO COLD / TOO HOT?

Before taking part in triathlon, I imagined that getting on a bike in soaking wet clothes that I had just been swimming in would be a cold, unpleasant experience. In practice, I have only had to pull on extra layers on a couple of occasions, as normally it's warm enough in a lycra outfit like a Tri Suit as soon as you get pedalling. If you think you might need extra layers after exiting the swim, have these stashed in the transition area so you can put them on in T1 (the transition from swim to bike). Things you might want here include a windproof jacket or gilet (gilet = sleeveless jacket, much easier to put on when you're wet), hat/cycling gloves, baggy shorts (if you don't like the lycra look) or a tee shirt / top.

Once warmed up on the bike, you should start to dry out nicely in the sunshine. If the weather forecast looks dodgy, a jacket that is at least showerproof would be a good piece of kit to have with you. If it's raining but still mild, you will probably be fine without a jacket – see how you feel in training and try riding in the rain without one to see if you get really cold or not. Everyone has a different metabolism and responds differently to the conditions – I am often wrapped up with extra layers in races while others around me are wearing hardly anything, so there is no point copying what everyone else wears. Training for the event should include trying out your kit options and seeing what you are comfortable in when training in various different weathers and temperatures.

If you wear glasses/shades when running or cycling you might find a peaked cap under the bike helmet really useful. Shades are particularly useful in classic mixed English summer weather, where bright sunshine glares off the wet road after rain. They can also make you look cooler in your race photos 😊.

FOOTWEAR

As with clothing, there are several different options for triathlon when it comes to shoes and socks. In the article about transitions, I will go into a little more detail about shoes & pedals. If you have specialist bike shoes, it is worth using them. If not, just wear running trainers for both the bike and run sections.

Having shoes that suit you well is important for running – specialist shops can help you get the right thing. Our sponsors Run and Become as well as Up and Running, Easy Runner or Moti in Bristol are good examples, or the triathlon shop mentioned in the clothing section. Run and Become have been doing shoe-fitting remotely by video through the last couple of years so if you don't live near a running shop they are worth checking out.

If you do go for specialist bike shoes, you can either put them on then push your bike out of transition to the mount line (although it can be awkward walking/jogging with bike shoes on, as you'll know if you own a pair!) or you can do what the experienced triathletes do and have them clipped in to your pedals already and jog out of transition, pushing your bike, in bare feet. When the transition area / bike racks are on grass, as they are for our Tockington events, getting your bike shoes on before you push the bike out to the mount line is no bother – it's really only when the transition is on tarmac that this becomes awkward (and noisy).

SOCKS

Not that crucial for summer cycling for most of us, but they can be needed when running, to prevent blistering. Trouble is, they are hard to put on over wet feet – you can end up hopping around, getting frustrated, wrestling with a sock while everyone else merrily heads out of transition with their bike. So, have a go at cycling and running without socks and see if it works ok for you. If it does, you can simplify your transition experience by keeping socks out of the picture. If you find your feet get sore in certain spots when running/cycling sockless, try applying Vaseline or bodyglide (water-based anti-chafe stuff; highly recommended) to the parts of the shoe that caused irritation. If this works, you can have the shoes primed with this greasy stuff in the relevant spots on race day, so that when you slip your feet in to them, the vulnerable parts of your feet will be protected. When putting your shoes on, talc or vaseline/bodyglide will make it much easier to get those wet feet down into the shoes. That's something else you should practise when we get close to race day.

If you just can't get the hang of sockless running or cycling, then have socks ready in T1 but try rolling them up into a "doughnut" shape so you can unroll them on to your wet feet instead of pulling them on in the normal way. Try it next time you get out of the shower – rolling the socks on is much quicker than pulling them up.

ELASTIC LACES



These are a cheap extra you can buy which will make transition quicker and easier. With these stretchy laces in your shoes, you can slip your shoes on and they will fit snugly enough around your feet for you to run comfortably – you'll have saved time and hassle by not having to tie your laces (which can take a surprisingly long time after the effort of swimming or cycling). Triathlon laces come in various types and when you fit them you need to make sure you have got the length and tightness right, both for easy slipping-on and comfortable running. This may need some trial and-error and adjustment.

NUMBERS & NUMBER BELTS

You have to have a whole load of race numbers on you in a triathlon. There are number stickers that have to be attached to bike and helmet. Also, you have large race numbers that need to be worn on your back (for the cycle) and front (for the run). In addition to that, you may have numbers written

on you (transfer or permanent marker pen) before the start – on shoulder and leg – so you can be identified in the swim & first transition. For the large paper numbers - well, actually made



waterproof stuff called Tyvek – you can either pin them on to your top, one on the front one on the back, or attach them to a number belt (see pic). The advantage of a number belt is that you can keep your number visible even if you change your kit. For example, if you have numbers pinned to a tee then you put on a jacket, you have to unpin the numbers and pin them to the jacket – your race number has to be visible throughout the bike & run sections. If the numbers are on a belt, you can slip the belt down, pop on the jacket and slip the belt back up over

the top. Number belts cost a few quid (Triathlon shop, running shop, or google "triathlon number belt") and are just a thin piece of elastic with a buckle and some clips attached. Most triathletes have one. This is one piece of specialist kit that I would recommend everyone gets for the Try-a-Tri, as it is very cheap and can help you avoid complicated delays re-pinning your number.

SWIM GOGGLES

Not much need be said about goggles really except to make sure they fit securely and aren't going to slip off in the race or leak water into your eyes. In open water swimming, it's quite possible you'll take a knock in the face at the crowded start, but in a Try-a-Tri (or any pool-based triathlon) that shouldn't happen as swimmers all start separately at 10 second intervals and the lanes aren't crowded. I used to get problems with goggles misting up making it difficult to see, so now I use anti-fog spray (from a sports shop or specialist Triathlon / swimming shop) which works a treat. Apart from that, there's nothing technical you really need to know about goggles. If you're short sighted you might want to try getting optical goggles. Mine cost £30 and have roughly the same prescription as my regular glasses have, so I can see clearly when I swim and also when I'm looking for my bike in transition.

EATING & DRINKING – BOTTLES ETC.

You are going to need a drink during the Try-a-Tri but you are unlikely to need snacks like energy gels or jelly beans the way you might on a half marathon or marathon. The short distances involved mean most people will get round without needing to replenish their internal stores of carbs. If you are someone who does need an energy boost on a short event (you may discover this in training – we all break down our food into energy differently) you need to sort this out yourself either by having something in transition or carrying something with you on the bike/run. Energy gels can be carried on a belt as shown in the photo of a Number Belt above, but the easiest thing is to have one or two in the transition area and have them between sports. Be careful with wrappers – littering on a triathlon course leads to disqualification, so that's another reason why snacking in transition is easier than out on the course.

We will provide drinks on the run route and at the finish. If the weather is exceptionally hot, we will have small bottles of water available about half way round the bike route in a layby. Any other drinks will have to be provided by you – so that means having a bottle in transition or you can have a drink bottle attached to your bike frame and sip from this while riding. Make sure you practise this, and don't drink on bumpy/bendy sections unless you're confident of your one-handed bike skills. You'll also need to make sure your "cage" that holds the bottle is not too loose, or your bottle may end up in the road. Usually, you can just bend the cage so it's tight around the bottle and therefore secure.

Well, I think that's more than enough information on clothing and equipment! Hope I haven't overloaded you. The important thing is to sit down and have a think about what kit you want to use on the day which will be comfortable for each of the three sports and not too tricky to deal with in transition. Then have a practice using that kit to make sure it's OK.

Remember: don't try any new equipment on the day of the race that you haven't tested in advance.

GOOD LUCK WITH YOUR TRAINING!!

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