

Trial by Triathlon

A 24-Year Lapse Between Triathlons Provides More Fuel for Pre-Race Jitters

By Susan Dawson-Cook



The author receives assistance exiting the water after completing the 825-yard swim.

He thinks I've lost it completely – all this paranoia about getting lost, disqualified or a flat tire, my terror over having to run without Irene Cara's voice to motivate me through my headset.

"Just go out there and have fun," he says.

It could have been fun, I say, if I could have listened to my music. Then when it was 90 degrees and I was starting to get a stomach ache, my songs would take me somewhere else, so I wouldn't have to hear my labored breathing, the sound of my feet clomping on the

pavement.

The last time I competed in a triathlon, 24 years ago in upstate South Carolina, all these rules were apparently non-existent. My roommate helped me through each transition, handed me Gatorade and water along the way.

Today's USAT rules state it is illegal to obstruct individuals from making forward progress. In that muddy lake in Greenville back in 1983, people attempted to climb my body to pass me. Devoid of aspirations for victory, I had only a burning desire to avoid becoming a permanent bottom dweller. I've been known to be downright proficient in the water when I don't have 6 or 8 people clinging to my flesh.

At 5:30 a.m., I'm standing outside Hillenbrand Aquatic Center at the University of Arizona. I pick up my race packet and stand in line to get numbers inked all over my body so I can appear like an escaped convict for days to come. I ask the woman in front of me about the swimming waves. She's not sure what is going on either, she says. A tall lean man with a head of white swimmer's hair

points to a large poster nearby, helps me find my name on the list.

"Oh, you're one of the fast swimmers," he says, finding my name listed in the 7th wave. In wave 7 out of 10, I won't be swimming until 8:30 or so, almost 2 hours after the start of the race, he says. The pool will be divided into eighteen lanes, with two people swimming in each. It will take almost three hours to get all 350 athletes through their swims.

I'm a good swimmer, but a terrible cyclist I tell him. Not to mention that my bike is heavy and clunky. He reassures me, saying it's the athlete that matters most, not the bicycle. Perhaps he is right, I think, decide I'll work harder to discipline my mind against all the negative chatter that is zooming around like subatomic particles inside my brain.

Once I have 218 plastered on each arm and leg, I return to the transition area. A woman beside me, clad in a baby blue trisuit notices my confusion, eagerly offers suggestions on how to rack my bike and organize my belongings for a quick transition.

I sit in the bleachers with my husband, Chris, and watch the first few waves complete their 825 yard swims. Ten minutes before my slated start time, I warm up in the dive tank. The water feels soothing at 90 degrees, and since the tank is just feet away from lane one, my assigned lane, I wait until the countdown for the start begins, hop out of the water and into my lane, and begin racing just seconds later.

I'm elated to be one of the leaders in my heat; frustrated to be sharing a lane with a guy whose sloppy strokes make me feel like I'm swimming in the Pacific, rather than the Hillenbrand pool. I lap him three times, struggle not to choke on his sudden waves. When I see my counter waving the red flag beneath the water, I know I have only one more length to go.

I don't even ponder how difficult it will be to exit the high walled pool until I touch and see a large male hand reaching for my

arm. I grasp his hand and he somehow manages to haul my dripping body up on the deck in an upright position. I jog toward the exit on the south side of the building, which leads toward the transition area, amidst a corridor of cheering onlookers.

Once I begin the biking segment, I struggle to clip in, realize my number tag is coming loose from my bike frame. I pull off to the side to try to fix the tag, realize the twisty has torn through the hole. Frustrated, I rip it off and toss it away so it is no longer flapping against my thighs. So much for a quick transition. Most of my competitors are dripping along as they ride, still clad in swimsuits, while I took the time to towel off, slip on padded shorts, shoes and socks.

The three loops from Campbell to Broadway to Euclid to Speedway pass quickly and after awhile, I drift into my daydream zone. With 10 heats of 36 people, riders are so spread out I don't have to worry about collisions and congestion, the way I did in El Tour de Tucson. Each time I encounter a rider, I try to eyeball whether I'm 7 meters away, count under my breath to make sure I'm passing within 15 seconds.

When I begin my third lap, a woman

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Riders head south on Campbell avenue during the 12 mile biking segment.

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with a pink bathing suit and lean muscular legs whizzes by. Then there are more of them; men and women from wave eight beginning their first loop. Their bicycles with skinny tires seem to fly by like they don't even touch the ground; their legs pedaling so smoothly like it is no effort at all. I wonder how they can sit on those narrow seats without padding beneath their buttocks. The guys are all clad in mid-thigh style suits, while the women seem content to bear it all out there on the pavement. Have they no shame, exposing their upper thighs and back ends on Sunday, amidst the Broadway traffic?

I suppose when I was young and foolish, I might have done the same. The year I competed in my first triathlon was the same year I strutted across a stage half naked before a crowd in the Miss Rock 101 bikini contest. I didn't take home a prize, but I had more dates for the next six months than I did at any other time during my collegiate career.

Married and 44, I'm quite content to have my upper thighs and gluteus maximus well protected from the morning breeze.

Seated comfortably on my gel seat, wearing gray cotton padded

shorts, I'm downright comfy and before I know it, the ride is over, I'm making my right turn onto Enke Avenue. Back in the familiar transition area, I prepare for the 3-mile run.

My most poignant memory of my previous two triathlons is the agonizing transition from biking to running. I'm



The author and another competitor near the end of the three-mile run.

trying not to think about it as I rack my bike and begin running, barely feeling sensation in my legs. How are these tree trunks of spaghetti going to carry me for three long miles, I wonder. And why did I have to drink so much Gatorade during the transition? A few steps and already, I feel a cramp coming on.


I slowly plod onward, passing the familiar Gould-Simpson building, where I once studied geology. The young people cheering me on give me some inspiration to push through the discomfort. By the one mile mark, the cramp dissipates, so I increase my pace.

As I circumvent Old Main, the mid-morning sun beats down on my head and shoulders and even though my legs now feel more like muscle than pasta noodles, I'm a bit light headed from the heat and exertion. A woman draws a red mark across my shoulder at the 1.5 mile mark before I head east on 2nd Street. By the time I reach the east end of the mall, I know I've almost made it. Once I'm turning left on Cherry and see the looming darkness of the stadium in front of me I realize that not only will I finish, but that I will do this again.

This mid-life crisis of race mania is just beginning, and will likely never end.

As I cross the finish line, Chris is waiting with a bottle of cold water. I guzzle the water in no time before leading him to a cool patch of grass where I collapse in a supine position.

Once my dizziness dissipates, we watch the final athletes finish. Amidst all the excitement, Chris, a proficient runner and cyclist, who doesn't take much to the water, says he's going to work on his stroke over the summer, wants to do the Tinfoilman Triathlon with me in the fall.

"Great," I say. I offer to help him with his stroke, say that in the meantime, I'm considering the Sahuarita Lake Triathlon in May. I know it will differ from that race in South Carolina so long ago. Thanks to the USAT, I'll dare those animals to swim over me, feeling confident that anyone who tries to claw their way up my body will receive an even steeper penalty than the innocent newbie who inadvertently wears her MP3 player. 

Chris Lieto was the fastest man to finish the Holualoa Tucson Triathlon, finishing the 825 yard swim, 12 mile bike and 3 mile run in 50:42, while Christine Jeffrey led the women with a time of 57:30. Course records were set by Katie Ellis (15-17 women), Mary Jo Ford (45-49 women), Terry Latham (50-54 women), Diane Dedek (55-59 women), Chris Lieto (elite men), Ted Pierce (65-69 men) and John Le Roy (70-74 men).