

After taking the position of Race Director for the [Seahorse Triathlon](#) in Kalamazoo in 1998, I began receiving requests to provide some basic guidance for people getting started in the sport. I started by running through some elemental stuff off the top of my head for them in a short fax or email. The requests grew as more triathletes became aware of the information I had to offer. At that point I figured it was time to do a little more extensive piece that could be posted on a website and used by anyone interested. My last year as RD for the Seahorse was 2002. This piece was originally written from the combination viewpoint of a race director and participant. Through 2007, I've completed over 170 races, through 1/2 IM distance. I've been around the block a few times but there are a lot of people who know a lot more.

First, a little about how I got started, which can point out how anyone can get going in this sport. Without lots of detail, I experienced a couple of major life events in 1989, a nasty divorce complete with hellish child custody battle, and lung surgery. I was pretty beat up mentally and physically. I had been smoking up to three packs a day before this and was the poster boy for the All-American sedentary lifestyle. When I lost the major portion of a lung in the surgery, I thought I was pretty much done for. I became very familiar with Milky Way candy bars, beer, and all things bad for me. I went from a wasted 135 pounds when I left the hospital, to 205 in a matter of about 6 months. My previous average weight had been around 150, so coupled with a height of 6' 1" I had always been fairly slim. I got a bit more control of my emotions and grasp on the future around the year end holidays and gave myself a membership to the local Y. A year and a half of staying with things and I had the weight back down to 150. I started walking, jogging, and then what I could actually call running in that first year.

I developed a plan, which evolved around Jim's equation... "Do more...eat less". I had a goal and stayed on course. I started doing some local 5K road races and had a lot of fun, and in '91 got the idea of doing a triathlon. The Coldwater Mini Ironman sprint distance event seemed like a good place to start.

The following week was the Gull Lake Triathlon when it was still an Olympic distance event. I did both. Coldwater was fun, and it remains so. I've enjoyed that race over the years, especially now I'm a little faster. Gull Lake was tough. I took about 3:15 to finish, but I didn't stop. I think I scared a few people living around the Gull Lake Bible Conference area when I literally screamed a few times to keep something going inside to finish. The feeling at the point of crossing the finish line is something that will stay with me forever. After that I did a few races each year until '95 when I felt more comfortable at races, and the schedule allowed doing more events.

This sport is a great tool for overcoming adversity. There are hundreds if not thousands of similar stories across the country where people have come from little to no athletic background, previous desire, or demonstrated capability, and with the goal of simply finishing in mind, have used multisport events to help change their lives. It certainly worked for me. I now participate in at least ten triathlons and a bunch of road races annually, always with the finish in mind, not the time. I'm maybe a little more competitive now, but I smile often while at races because of where I came from to get to this point. And if I don't have a great finish time in a race it really doesn't affect me because of where I started. I believe there is no such thing as a bad or poor finish time. I will never beat myself up after a race based on my time.

Sure there are lots of dedicated athletes who live, eat, and breathe for races and there are times when I feel like that. But for most of the people racing, it is a way of enhancing their lives and feeling good about themselves. Triathlon is a much about a lifestyle as it is doing a race.

I've presented the following viewpoint about participating in races lots of times and I enjoy the smiles that it brings each and every time. Imagine how many people live within an easy drive time of the race, let's say two hours. For most of our events in southern Michigan that is easily a million or two. Then come up with a rough guess how many of that figure is in your age/gender bracket. There are a couple hundred thousand anyway. Think about this now. There are on average 300 to 600 people at the race, and maybe 20 to 50 in your age group in the race. Where does that put you percentage wise for simply being there? Give yourself your due just for being a part of it all and going the distance. It is a great feeling to see people reaching new levels and doing something that no one can take away from them. A multisport race or road race is your race, period.

Okay, enough of all that. But I don't apologize, this sport really can be habit forming but it is legal. I'm often threatened at races with having my license plate stolen since mine proclaims... I TRI. I plan on continuing for a long time.

How about the equipment list?

This one is by no means exhaustive but covers the basics.

-Carry bag with a good shoulder strap.

You may need to carry your equipment for up to 1/2 mile from the parking area to the transition/registration area at some races so a bag, which is easily shouldered, is big help.

- swim/racing suit
- goggles
- towels
- wetsuit
- ear/nose plugs
- spare swim cap
- bike
- helmet
- glasses
- water bottle or handlebar mounted
- water bottle(s)
- aspirin/pain killer
- bike tools
- dry clothes for after the race
- air pump
- spare tube/tire
- bike shoes
- bike computer
- running shoes
- top/shirt/singlet
- number belt
- safety pins
- hat

Basic issue. Is the event you have entered a [USAT](#) sanctioned race? This used to be a huge issue and for a number of years I would never support, promote, or participate in a non-sanctioned race. USAT has run into a few issues of late and there are now many races outside the USAT umbrella which are first rate. I continue to support USAT and I will continue purchasing an annual membership. I also race at select non-sanctioned events. Please feel free to contact me directly at jim -at- jimnishler.com should you have specific questions about the related issues. They are far too complex to cover in this piece.

Pre-race preparations. Be prepared. Practice setting up your transition area before getting to the race. You will be going back and forth to this spot during the race so set out your gear accordingly. Lean your bike against a tree or a post if that is all that is handy and set down a small towel next to it to place your gear. Bike stuff can be set up on your handlebars or hung from the bike if you want. You will be more comfortable on race day if you practice transitioning from each discipline a number of times. Go through the motions a few times and set up a routine. More on practice/training ideas later.

Race day. Arrive early, earlier than your most liberal estimate. You'll see why after your first time. Just trust me. At USAT sanctioned races, and for good measure at all others, make sure you have your valid picture identification, and your USAT membership card before you head to the registration area. Get checked in at registration, and grab a spot on the rack for your bike if they are not assigned. Some races assign a rack spot and others don't. Some events allow you to get a rack spot before registering but many are tightening up on that and will not allow anyone but registered/numbered participants into the

transition area. Many races will also not allow you into transition if you do not have your body marking or numbering taken care of also.

Race items supplied in your packet may include a swim cap, bike frame number, bike helmet number, bib or run course number, safety pins, and an increasing number of events use chips for computer based sensor timing.

Most races use wide point marking pens to mark your body with your race number. This is usually done on both arms and legs, or one side. Many also mark a leg with your age and/or a category indicator for Open, Team, or Clydesdale/Athena divisions. Marking helps identify you at all times for various reasons, including a quick ID if you are injured. Age and division markings let you know who you are passing or catching up to on the bike and the run courses.

Back to the racks and transition. Trying to crowd in on others who arrived and got set up before you is not the best way to make friends. On the other hand, do your best to help someone who does arrive late since you can't be certain when it might happen to you. Do not move someone else's gear unless it is blatantly in your way. Ask the offender to tighten up their equipment placement so you have a little room. Don't assume you are dealing with someone who does not care, they simply may not be aware they are in your way. When you arrive at the racks and you find a spot that is clearly marked with either equipment or a towel or something on the rack you may safely assume that person is out warming up and expects to return to that spot with his or her bike. Don't move someone else's gear to make room for yourself. Find another spot to rack.

Course maps are posted at most races for you to review. Familiarize yourself with any tricky parts of the course. While the race organizers have the responsibility of maintaining course directional support, it is your responsibility to be reasonably sure what is happening. Ask if there is any confusion.

Knowing the entrance and exit points from the water and transition is your responsibility. Most races are clearly marked. Take a few minutes to familiarize yourself with the layout. Pay attention. Set your gear out in transition and make sure everything is ready so when you come out of the water you don't have to search for stuff. Then try to set your bag where it is out of the way of everyone else. Rehearse finding your rack spot. Go out of transition and then come back in and find a landmark of some sort to guide you to the spot. Or as you come into transition, count how many racks over and in to your spot. Some people use chalk marks to help get them to the rack if the transition is in a paved area. Some even bring a collapsing pole with a colored flag which they lash to the rack to guide the way. This might sound silly until that first race. Imagine for a moment. You are all geeked coming out of the water, and in the excitement of maybe an announcer yelling out names, the spectator noise, and adrenaline, and you forget what color your bike is, let alone where it is racked. Or try to find your bike out of thousands at a race like the Chicago Triathlon where the transition area is the size of a football field.

A swim cap is normally supplied as part of your event package. Use it. Only use your backup if necessary, and ask a race official if that would be allowed if color-coding is not being used. Some races use color-coded caps to help people remember their designated heat. Others do not. Best way to make sure you are doing the right thing is use the one

that is supplied. Swim caps help with visibility. I recommend if you have not used one before, practice with one so it does not take you by surprise at the race. Some are quite tight and can be a bit difficult to swim with if you aren't ready for that. The feeling can be more than a little awkward at first so get used to a cap. Even something as basic as do you want the cap covering your ears or not can make a big difference with your race comfort.

Take advantage of the opportunity to warm up in the water before the start. Cooperate with the waterfront director and course marshals. The best races in terms of safety allow warm-up time, and then you must come out, and then everyone is counted before going back into the water immediately before the start as a safety measure. A participant count before entering the water at the start of the race and then as everyone exits the water allows for what should be matching figures. If the counts do not match then there is an obvious problem. I can't imagine how a race can assure safety or be able to institute a lost swimmer search without having a count.

At the start of the race or your heat, position yourself in the pack according to your capability. If you are a strong swimmer and are able to lead the pack then by all means move up front and lead the way. If you are uneasy about swimming in a pack then you might stay to one side or the other. Or stay in the back and then move around anyone in the water if you catch up. Count on being elbowed, kicked, slapped, or any combination when you are in the pack. I don't say this to scare you, and it does not happen every time to everyone, but it does happen.

It is not intentional, but when you get a hundred or more going off at the same time logistics turn out that way. Pre-race practice should include putting your goggles on while treading water. Many racers have had goggles knocked out of place on the swim course and it is a lot different rinsing and putting them back on while treading water than while on shore. Being ready for the unexpected means greater race comfort. If you need to stop or significantly slow down, move out of the way if you can since others coming up behind you will run into you and that hurts you both. Bring your head up often to keep sighted on the course markers in the water. At the exit point from the water you may need to go through a chute for the count. If you are wearing a wetsuit, you can begin to strip it off while running or walking to the transition area. Some races now feature wetsuit strippers to assist. Since you have practiced finding your rack spot you won't get lost right? Once there you can finish taking off what you need to and get your biking gear on, especially the helmet. Clip your helmet strap to secure your helmet before you move away from your rack spot. Run or walk as directed out of transition to the area designated to mount your bike and then take off.

Radios/headphones. Unless there is some medical reason for their use, they are not recommended. They are simply not allowed at [USAT sanctioned events](#). Any distraction like that takes your focus off the race. Yes you want to have fun, but these things also keep you from hearing what is going on around you. This may include a warning, or guidance shouted out to you by a course marshal, or another participant, or emergency sirens, or something as subtle as the sound of a rider coming up from behind. You should be in full control of your faculties. Impaired hearing will jeopardize your safety and that of others around you.

Watch the course and other riders carefully. Drafting, or riding close enough behind the rider ahead of you to take advantage of the wind break, is illegal in [USAT sanctioned](#) races. There are lots of rules to follow on the bike course and you can review them at the [USAT](#) website www.usatriathlon.org. Passing, drafting, and helmet use are the big three issues. Common sense gets you through 95% of the bike safety questions.

Coming back off the bike into transition, follow directions from course and transition area marshals. When they point out the area for you to dismount, that is what they mean, not 30 or 40 feet ahead of their marked area. Simply follow their directions and you will be okay. Do not unbuckle your helmet until you have the bike back on the rack. Then switch over to your running gear and again, pay attention to the exit point from the transition and you are off .

You need to make sure that if a bib or run course number is required to finish, you have that on when leaving transition. You can pin it to the front of your shirt or top, or shorts, or use a number belt. An elastic number belt has a simple clasp and you can grab it and clip it on quickly. The number must be seen going into the finish chute for accurate counting and registration of your identification and time. Don't leave without your number. If you plan to wear the same shirt or top for both biking and running make sure the number is pinned at all four corners and is relatively tight against the fabric when you have the shirt or top on. Otherwise it may flap with gusto while biking and along with being a noisy distraction, could rip off and leave you as a rider/runner without required ID.

I stress the attention factor a lot but it can save you lots of problems. While running on a road course, you may have vehicles, and other participants either running or still on their bikes going in either direction. Stay alert and you will be okay and so will they.

Take advantage of water stations at every chance. It is a lot easier to get rid of extra than suffer the effects of being in an endurance event and dry up. It is not a pleasant feeling and can be very dangerous. Some races also offer a sports drink in addition to water at the aid stations. I recommend staying away from those unless you train or practice using the same stuff offered at the race. Halfway out on the run course is a bad time to find out your system reacts unfavorably to a particular sports drink during exertion. If you train wearing a hat for running, wear it during the race. If you prefer sunglasses, same thing. Keep your race routine as close to your training habits and you will have a lot more fun.

As you come up to the finish line, smile and enjoy the noise and excitement. You have earned every decibel.

Back into a few ideas for training.

Simply train for the race. If there is any way possible, go through the entire race distance ahead of time in practice. Using a local park is great. It also helps to have someone with you who can keep an eye on you and your stuff. Plan to start out with shorter distances in each discipline. Set up your transition area and head for the water. Then go through the race routine by swimming, getting back to your transition and gearing up for the bike. Do a few miles on the bike and then return to transition and gear up for the run and take off.

Work at transitioning from the bike to run with greater emphasis than swim to bike. The bike to run switch presents the greatest challenge. Do a bunch of training days working on the transition which appears to be most difficult for you. Practicing the full race distance at least three or four times would be excellent combined with many other shorter distance days. The idea being that once you are in the race, it really is nothing new in terms of the distances you are going. What will be new is the race environment. You will never be able to set up race day conditions in training, but the more you do, the easier the race will be for you.

There are tons of pre-determined training schedules available from lots of different sources. If you can benefit from a schedule someone else has developed, use it. Some people have a hard time with these schedules since they quite often don't take into account career or school requirements, spouses/significants, kids, pets, and life in general. If the prepared training plans don't fit your life, make the adjustments and after reviewing the schedules you'll get the basic idea. You will get out of your training what you put into it. You make the choice. Set up reasonable goals and your own plan and go. Plan your work and then work your plan.

Many health and fitness clubs now offer "indoor" triathlons, especially during the fall and winter months. These are normally set up with 15 to 20 minute segments for each discipline, with a 5 minute or so transition allowed between swim-to-bike, and bike-to-run. The scoring is generally based on how far you travel within the time frame, as opposed to a normal event where the goal is to complete the distance in the shortest time

possible. But this is a great way to get started...particularly if you are hesitant about the swim since you normally get your own lane and it is in a very controlled environment.

Wetsuits. Jim's rule is if you want to wear one then do it. Some people, who unfortunately also include some race directors, falsely indicate at times that wetsuits are not allowed. This is not always accurate. The only exception is a posted/published race specific exclusion, or when the water temperature is too high to safely allow use of wetsuits. The terminology is the problem. Wetsuits are allowed at sanctioned races for triathletes who want to earn points for their race up to and including a water temperature reading of 78 degrees. With a temperature "above" 78 degrees, but "less than" 84 degrees a participant who wears a wetsuit is technically disqualified from points or event age group ranking, or placement in the event. The wetsuit may still be worn if desired, and points and placement are of no concern. There is also a higher temperature reading, "over 84 degrees, whereby no wetsuits are allowed due to health concerns. That is the only point where you are absolutely not allowed to wear a wetsuit. The Race Director should be fully informed and aware of the thresholds. So if you are just getting started and don't give a hoot about points or placement and just want to do the distance then wear that wetsuit and the heck with everyone else.

Remember, whose race is it? Your safety and comfort is paramount. Do not let the USAT wetsuit regulation prevent you from wearing one, even if you are the only one in the race doing so. Conversely, do not feel out of place if you are the only participant not wearing

a wetsuit. Wetsuits allow for faster times due to their buoyancy and insulating capabilities. You are not required to have one. On the other hand, some races take place in either a location or time of year where you really should have one. Many inland lakes in the upper Midwest are not above 60 degrees in early June depending on the seasonal weather conditions. 60 degree water is not pleasant. It is uncomfortable. Some would say it hurts. One year at the former Shu's Triathlon, Lake Michigan experienced a thermal turnover and the water temperature in August at St. Joseph was 48 degrees. That was worse than hurt level. That was brutal. With less than gentle prodding from the pro triathletes there, the Race Director and Medical Director established a well received on the spot rule significantly shortening the swim course, and set it up as a point to point along the shoreline. A wetsuit was also required for anyone entering the water. That was a very smart move on their part. Another year at that same race we faced 5 to 7 foot swells. While the water temp was in the low 70's that day, the buoyancy provided by a wetsuit was the saving grace for many of us out there. Think of a wetsuit as a safety and comfort item first, and a speed item second. There are many manufacturers offering lots of great suits. I have a full season now with a [Quintana Roo Superfull](#) and it is awesome for colder water and/or longer distances, and then use a Quintana Roo short suit, (cut at the shoulders and knees) for warmer water or shorter distances. I don't use a wetsuit for very short sprints in warm water, since the minimal advantage of time cut in the water does not favorably stack up against time getting it off in transition.

What do I wear while racing? The answer again is based on your comfort. Don't expect a changing area. You might add or subtract from what you start with based on what works best for you. For a while, most men only wore swim briefs for the entire event. Today

we have a range of options and suit styles that you may choose from which include one piece race suits with pockets for stuff. Women are generally split between one and two piece race suits. Most multisport specific briefs or bottoms are fitted with a small bike pad, which dries out quickly. Racers put on their shoes, and wear a helmet and sometimes glasses for the bike leg, then dump the helmet and maybe the glasses, switch shoes, and grab their hat and number belt and clip that on while running out of transition and they are gone. You do not have to do that. You may wear a regular swimsuit for the water course, and then add whatever you want on top of that for the bike, and add or subtract appropriate and comfortable clothing as desired for the run. Just because some people race wearing next to nothing does not mean you must also. Keep in mind however that some of the current style men's swimsuits with longer leg cuts may be tough to ride in when wet and also present a bit of a challenge to run in.

Train in what you plan to wear at the race. Then there is no question. If you need a top or a hat for sun protection, don't hesitate. If you want a sweatshirt for that matter, or gloves, because the air temperature might only be 50 degrees when exiting the water, then by all means do that. Bring appropriate clothing for the conditions you might encounter.

Socks. If you train wearing socks for either biking or running, then don't change that on race day. I prefer no socks and I'm comfortable running up to half marathon distance without, due to the type of shoe I wear, and that I like it that way. Here is the main reason. Putting on socks while just finishing the swim course was always a pain for me, especially after running through sand, mowed grass, twigs, rocks, crawly critters, and whatever between the swim exit and transition. It is easier and now a lot quicker for me

to wipe off my feet and throw on the shoes and go. Not everyone is comfortable without socks, and some shoes will tear your feet apart without them. Find out ahead of time what works best for you.

Bike shoes. Clipless shoes make you faster. They also simply make you a better biker. If you are not using them on your bike, give it strong consideration when you decide it is time to upgrade your equipment. Toe clips are fine and will easily get you through a season or two before you know you want to spend the coin to get faster. Check out all the options and pedal/shoe combinations available before you spend the money. A separate shoe item involves the use of platform pedals for duathlons and sprint distance triathlons. Platform pedals clip into the clipless pedal on your bike. The platform allows you to only wear your running shoes. When you get ready to mount your bike, you put on the running shoes, and they slip into the platform and tighten down with a velcro strap. Not as strong as clipless, but fine for a short distance once you are used to them. The advantage is when you finish the bike, you simply slip out of the platforms and take off, no changing shoes. This is a down the road item for you as you are starting out in the sport but now you know what those gizmos are for.

Water/Fluids. Drink more than you think you need, and then some, and then a little more. Be a sponge. Start drinking once you get up in the morning. Drink on the way to the race. Drink while you are standing in line for registration. Drink again before the race. Drink during the race. Drink after the race. Hydration is critical to your health as well as your performance, and recovery. Now. Yes you can actually drink too much but the chances of

that happening are quite slim. You actually begin the process of dehydration while swimming so get soaked. I mentioned sports drinks earlier. Use them based on what you are accustomed to. Carry a water bottle on your bike, and have another one at transition. Sometimes it is easier to grab a drink from your own bottle at transition, compared to grabbing a cup while exiting transition. You may also choose one of several water systems for your bike, other than using the standard down tube cage mount. Excluding longer distance and ultra events, back bottles with shoulder straps are used infrequently by racers, mainly because of the time involved to get them on and off, but if that is what you like and don't care about the time, then use one. You are more likely to see cages mounted off the saddle, or seat post, or just as often, a cage and special bottle that mounts on the handlebars. These have a plastic straw allowing you to drink while in the aero position.

Bike. The bike which you are familiar with is the best bike to begin using at events. And don't let anyone tell you that you may not ride a mountain bike in your first triathlon. Know that you will be in the minority in most cases but so what. Mountain bikes are fine. With a mountain bike, you might consider some low end multi purpose tires to replace the originals which may have serious tread. This will help quite a bit. Remember, you can end up spending a lot of money down the road if you enjoy the sport but initial enjoyment is the key. Don't spend money for a high end road or triathlon bike until you are certain the investment will pay off. Regardless of your bike design or configuration, get it checked out at a local shop. It is a good idea to do this every year at a minimum. Let the tech know what you are going to be doing. Ask for a tune-up, and fitting assistance to make sure it is set up right. Seat post height is very important. If you are using a

borrowed bike, get this done well ahead of time and get familiar with the feel of the bike. Please don't ride a bike the first time at a race. This is only asking for frustration.

Aero bars. Helpful but not required. These handlebars mount forward of your bike's standard handlebar. They let you stretch out in a more aerodynamic position on the bike. Aero bars certainly help with speed and comfort once you are used to them, but don't spend the money for the upgrade until you are sure you want and need them. Getting used to them takes some time and bike handling will be affected. Again, don't get these set up the day before a race. You should be well practices with aero bars before riding with them in an event. The very most important part of the bike is you, the engine. A strong motor can help overcome lots of other component issues.

Bike computer. Optional for beginners but certainly offers the advantage of pacing assistance. These are pretty inexpensive now, starting around \$20.

Bike pump/ tools, and spare tube are essential. Don't leave home without them. Then, know how to use them. That includes using a chain tool to remove a busted link. You might not need to do it on your bike but you can be a hero helping someone who has no clue. Practice changing a tube. Don't bother trying to patch a tube while at a race, just change it. Any reputable bike shop can help you with some basic instructions. Get to know the people at your local shops and let them know what you are interested in and that you will be doing a multisport race. They can't help you and give you tips and equipment guidance unless they know. Someone who takes interest in their business and their expertise is likely to get more personalized service and attention down the road.

Then, don't hesitate to offer referrals to friends or family to the shop. This is a two way street. They help you, you help them.

Running shoes. Absolutely essential. I don't mean that compared to running barefoot. I'm talking about good, fitted running shoes. Do not train or race in old shoes. I believe your shoes are more important than the bike from the standpoint of having a direct impact on your physical comfort and keeping you injury free. Go to a store that specializes in running shoes. Check them out to see if they are experienced with helping to fit shoes to both feet and purpose. Don't guess that a shoe will work for you because you know someone else who wears that model. Don't pick a shoe based on the sale price in the catalog. Don't go to the discount athletic shop and pick out a shoe because of the way it looks. Go to a dedicated athletic shoe store. Ask for some guidance. Once you find a shoe that works well you can always use a catalog to get a deal on the next pair of the same model, but always use a shop to get started or until you understand your foot structure and how different shoes and manufacturers fit in with your needs. You might also consider buying several pair of the same shoe so when the first one begins to wear down, you can start breaking in the next pair and know what you are going to end up with. But remember that your local shoe store is just as important as your local bike store. The owners and employees are often great sources of information and assistance as long as you make them aware of what you are doing and what kind of stuff you are interested in. And your personal referrals of friends, family and co-workers to the store can reap untold benefits to you down the road. Become a part of the big picture.

In every aspect of the race, preparation will make the difference and help to ensure you will have fun because you know what you are doing. Most of all...take pride in what you are doing for yourself.