

The History of Triathlon

Early triathlons were held as offbeat training exercises for runners. The first known swim/bike/run triathlons were held at San Diego's (Calif.) Mission Bay in 1974. Organized by members of the San Diego Track Club, the events were held on summer evenings and were intended as no more than light-hearted breaks in the normal grind of training for marathons and 10ks. One athlete who raced at the first Mission Bay Triathlon, John Collins, was very influential in the further development of the sport. Collins, a U.S. Naval Officer, took the triathlon concept to Hawaii and used it several years later to combine three of Oahu's endurance events — the Waikiki Rough Water Swim, the Around-Oahu Bike Ride and the Honolulu Marathon — into one race: the Ironman.

Only 12 men completed the first race held in January 1978. In 1979, 13 men and one woman crossed the finish line. But a Sports Illustrated article by Barry McDermott in May 1979 increased the 1980 field into the hundreds and brought ABC's "Wide World of Sports" to Hawaii for the first of an unbroken string of annual network broadcasts. In 1982, the last year no qualifying was needed to compete at Ironman, the dramatic footage of Julie Moss crawling on her hands and knees to a second-place finish at Ironman, triggered an explosion of interest. The same year also witnessed the birth of Triathlon Magazine, the sport's first national publication; the founding of the U.S. Triathlon Association (later named USA Triathlon), triathlon's National Governing Body; and the U.S. Triathlon Series, the first national racing series.

The decade that saw phenomenal growth in triathlon, the 1980s, ended with a step toward the future. In 1989, after several failed attempts, triathlon formed an international governing body. Twenty-five nations were represented at the founding congress of the International Triathlon Union in April in Avignon, France. The focus of the International Triathlon Union (ITU) was to gain acceptance by the International Olympic Committee and have triathlon accepted on the Olympic program. The first step in that process would be to create a triathlon world championship. The race took place four months later in Avignon with Mark Allen of the United States and Erin Baker of New Zealand winning the inaugural world championship.

The Ironman World Championship in Hawaii may be triathlon's most recognizable event, but the international distance is the sport's most popular. The 1.5k swim, 40k bike and 10k run is triathlon's international standard and the format used at the triathlon world championship and eventually the Olympics. The 1980s also saw the development of the "sprint distance" triathlon, which is about half the distance of an international distance race.

In 1991, the IOC recognized the ITU as the sole governing body for the sport of triathlon at its 97th session in Birmingham, England. In 1993, the Pan American Games approved triathlon for competition at the 1995 Pan Am Games in Mar del Plata, Argentina. The first Goodwill Games Triathlon was held in St. Petersburg, Russia on July 23, 1994. In September 1994, triathlon was named to the Olympic program as a medal sport at the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney, Australia.

The first Olympic triathlons were held Sept. 16-17, 2000, in Sydney, Australia. Switzerland's Brigitte McMahon won the women's race and Canada's Simon Whitfield won the men's race.

The United States won its first Olympic triathlon medal on Aug. 25, 2004, when Susan Williams of Littleton, Colo., placed third in the women's event in Athens, Greece. Kate Allen of Austria won the women's race and Hamish Carter of New Zealand won the men's race the next day.

The sport continued to grow across the U.S. as more companies began to sponsor events. The LifeTime Fitness Series was introduced in 2006, offering a total prize purse of more than \$1 million for the five-race series. The Hy-Vee grocery chain got on board by offering the largest prize purse for a single-day event in the history of triathlon. American Laura Bennett and Austrian Rasmus Henning each took home \$200,000 (of a \$700,000 prize purse) for winning the inaugural Hy-Vee World Cup in Des Moines, Iowa, in June 2007. The 2010 Hy-Vee prize purse was the first-ever \$1 million total purse for a single-day event.

At the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, China, Hunter Kemper became a three-time Olympian and placed seventh for the top finish among U.S. men August 19, 2008. One day earlier, Bennett just missed out on the American's second Olympic triathlon medal with a fourth-place finish. Jan Frodeno of Germany captured the men's gold medal, while Australia's Emma Snowsill was the women's Olympic champion in Beijing.

In 2009, the International Triathlon Union launched the seven- or eight-race World Championship Series (renamed the ITU World Triathlon Series in 2012) to determine the annual world champion. The U.S. has recorded four single-event podium finishes in the series had has hosted events in Washington, D.C., in 2009 and in San Diego in 2012.

USA Triathlon History

Triathlon in the United States has its roots set firmly in Southern California. The early races were held in San Diego's Mission Bay. It was only natural that the initial interest for a National Governing Body came from the same area.

In 1982, two independent groups were formed, both with the purpose of providing government for the rapidly developing sport. On Feb. 16, 1982, James Gayton and John Disterdick founded the U.S. Triathlon Association. On March 15, 1982, Jarold Johnson, Michael Gilmore and Penny Little founded the American Triathlon Association. On April 9, 1982, the two organizations held a joint meeting in Sacramento, Calif. The two existing organizations merged under one unified national governing body called the U.S. Triathlon Association. By the end of 1982, USTA membership had reached approximately 1,500.

In 1983, an insurance and risk-management coverage agreement was signed and USTA turned much of its attention to sanctioning events nationwide. In August 1983, the name of the organization was changed to Triathlon Federation USA. The organization quickly picked up a colloquial name by members and athletes nationwide

— Tri Fed. During 1984, Tri Fed sanctioned more than 1,000 events.

In June 1985, the first National Board of Governors meeting was held in Springfield, Ill., to chart the direction of the young sport and its younger National Governing Body. Clear goals and objectives were set forth in several areas: creating a uniform set of competitive rules, enforcing those rules, continuing to increase the number of sanctioned events, improving the federation's credibility as a voice for the sport, providing a clearinghouse for members' questions on training and technical information, promoting event safety and sponsoring championships.

On Nov. 1, 1986, Federation representatives met with the U. S. Olympic Committee in Dallas. In this meeting the USOC explained the minor changes needed in the Tri Fed bylaws before the Federation's application to the USOC could be accepted. At the end of 1986, membership had grown to 5,589 annual members.

In 1987, Tri Fed mandated that any athlete competing in a sanctioned event had to obtain an annual membership. Membership skyrocketed to more than 34,000. This mandate only lasted one year because the Federation recognized the policy, although fiscally positive in the interim, was detrimental to the long-term growth of the sport because it discouraged the novice triathlete from competing. In 1988, Tri Fed planned a move to its current home of Colorado Springs, Colo., a move that was consistent with the long-term Olympic goal of the sport and the federation, as the USOC is based in Colorado Springs.

In 1989, the International Triathlon Union and the Triathlon World Championship (at the Olympic distance of a 1.5k swim, 40k bike, 10k run) was created. The Federation now had 24,729 members. In August 1990, the United States hosted the second ITU Triathlon World Championship in Orlando, Fla. More than 1,200 athletes from 40 countries competed. The International Olympic Committee officially recognized triathlon as an Olympic sport and the ITU as the sole international governing body in 1991. In 1993, the Pan American Games approved triathlon for competition at the 1995 Pan Am Games in Mar De Plata, Argentina.

The IOC's recognition of triathlon as an Olympic sport allowed the federation to be eligible for up to \$250,000 in grants from the USOC. The first Goodwill Games Triathlon was held in St. Petersburg, Russia, on July 23, 1994. The sport finally reached its ultimate goal of being included on the Olympic program at the 2000 Games in Sydney, Australia.

In February 1996, Triathlon Federation USA changed its name to the present USA Triathlon, a move that further identified the federation with other USOC-recognized National Governing Bodies. USA Triathlon supports national teams on several different levels and many developmental programs for athletes, coaches, race directors and officials.

In 2000, USA Triathlon selected its first Olympic team. Jennifer Gutierrez, Sheila Taormina and Joanna Zeiger were on the women's team; and Ryan Bolton, Hunter Kemper and Nick Radkewich were on the men's team. Zeiger went on to finish fourth at the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney, Australia. Kemper had the best men's finish in 17th.

In 2004, USA Triathlon had 53,000 annual members. The organization sanctioned more than 1,000 races around the country. The United States also won its first Olympic medal in triathlon when Susan Williams took the bronze at the Summer Games in Athens, Greece. Hunter Kemper had the best U.S. men's finish in ninth. Kemper finished the 2005 World Cup season ranked No. 1 in the world. He would go on to receive the Jim Thorpe All-Around Award and the United States Olympic Committee's SportsMan of the Year Award, the first such honor for a triathlete.

At the end of 2006, membership had exceeded 80,000 and the number of sanctioned races had reached more than 2,000.

Kemper became a three-time Olympian in 2008, placing seventh at the Beijing Olympic Games. Laura Bennett narrowly missed the podium with a fourth-place finish.

After eclipsing the 100,000-member mark in 2007, USA Triathlon

continued its rapid growth in 2009 with more than 130,000 members and more than 3,100 sanctioned events. Those totals reached 150,000 members and 4,300 sanctioned events in 2011. Also, the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association estimated that 2.3 million unique individuals completed a triathlon in the United States in 2010.

In May 2012, Kemper clinched a spot on his unprecedented fourth U.S. Olympic Triathlon Team at the ITU World Triathlon San Diego.

Triathlon Timeline

1904 – An event in the Olympic Games was called triathlon, consisting of the long jump, shot put and 100-yard dash.

Sept. 4, 1921 – The Petit Perillon swim club in Marseilles, France, held an event called Course Des Trois Sports: The Race of Three Sports. The race consisted of a bicycle leg of about 7k, a run of 5k, and finished with a 200-meter out-and-back swim, and was won by Lulu Helmet.

1972 – David Pain, celebrating his 50th birthday, held a run-bike biathlon in San Diego, Calif., the first known multisport event in the United States.

Sept. 25, 1974 – While advertising its new race, the San Diego Track Club Newsletter headline read, "Run, Cycle, Swim – Triathlon set for 25th," using the word "triathlon" for the first time in the modern sense.

January 1977 – John Collins challenged those gathered at the Oahu Perimeter Relay Run awards ceremony to compete in the first Iron Man Triathlon, a 2.4-mile swim, 112-mile bike and 26.2-mile run.

Feb. 18, 1978 – Fifteen men started and 12 men finished the first Ironman Triathlon, won by Gordon Haller in 11 hours, 46 minutes and 58 seconds.

May 1979 – A Sports Illustrated article by Barry McDermott featured the Hawaii Ironman Triathlon. Entries increased to 108 the following year.

Feb. 6, 1982 – The unforgettable crawl to the Ironman finish line by second-place finisher Julie Moss shown on ABC's "Wide World of Sports" inspired many to take up triathlon.

April 9, 1982 – The United States Triathlon Association and the American Triathlon Association, both founded earlier that year, decided to merge into one unified National Governing Body called the United States Triathlon Association.

Sept. 12, 1982 – The first triathlon offering prize money, the Torrey Pines Triathlon, is also the first United States Triathlon Series event, won by Dave Scott.

1983 – The word "triathlon" was added to the Ninth Edition of Webster's New Collegiate dictionary.

1983 – A spin-off of the San Diego Track Club News called Triathlon, as well as Tri-Athlete founded by William Katovsky, were the first triathlon publications.

August 1983 – The United States Triathlon Association changed its name to Triathlon Federation/USA.

1985 – Triathlon sparked the cross-training fitness boom. Nike featured pro triathlete Joann Ernst in national ad campaigns, which later featured Bo Jackson and Deion Sanders.

March 31-April 1, 1989 – The International Triathlon Union was founded at its initial Congress in Avignon, France. Les McDonald was elected president.

Aug. 6, 1989 – The first triathlon world championship was held in Avignon, France, using the intermediate or international distance of 1.5k swim, 40k bike and a 10k run.

June 13-16, 1991 – The International Olympic Committee recognized the ITU as the sole international governing body for the sport of triathlon at its 97th session in Birmingham, England.

1993 – The Pan American Games approved triathlon for competition at the 1995 Pan Am Games in Mar del Plata, Argentina.

September 1993 – Actor Tom Cruise completed an 18-mile bicycle leg as part of a relay team in the Malibu Triathlon. A growing number of celebrities have embraced the sport of triathlon in recent years.

July 23, 1994 – The first Goodwill Games triathlon was held in St. Petersburg, Russia.

Sept. 4-5, 1994 – At the IOC's 103rd session in Paris, France, triathlon was named to the Olympic Programme as a medal sport at the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney, Australia.

March 26, 1995 – The first Pan American Games triathlon is held in Mar del Plata, Argentina. Karen Smyers of the United States wins the women's gold medal.

Feb. 26, 1996 – Triathlon Federation/USA changed its name to the present USA Triathlon.

Nov. 1, 1997 – The USOC officially recognized USA Triathlon as an Olympic Sport Organization.

April 1, 1999 – The International Triathlon Union celebrated its 10th anniversary.

July 23, 1999 – Triathlete Karen Smyers was Team USA's flag bearer for the opening ceremonies at the 1999 Pan American Games, voted by captains from every sport to lead the U.S. delegation of 704 into Winnipeg Stadium.

Sept. 25, 1999 – USA Triathlon celebrated the 25th anniversary of the first triathlon.

May 27-28, 2000 – The first U.S. Olympic Triathlon Team Trials took place in Dallas, Texas, selecting the team that will compete at the Sydney Olympics.

Sept. 16-17, 2000 – Triathlon debuted as an Olympic sport. The women's event, on Sept. 16, is the first medal event of the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney, Australia.

Aug. 10, 2003 – Hunter Kemper won the first gold medal for the U.S. men at the Pan American Games in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic.

Aug. 13, 2004 – Susan Williams became the first U.S. triathlete to win an Olympic medal when she finishes third at the Summer Games in Athens, Greece.

April 5, 2006 – Hunter Kemper receives the 2005 United States Olympic Committee SportsMan of the Year Award, becoming the first male or female triathlete to be selected as the SportsMan or SportsWoman of the Year in the history of the award.

2006 – USA Triathlon annual membership surpasses 80,000.

2007 – Hunter Kemper became the first elite triathlete to appear on the front of the Wheaties cereal box.

2007 – USA Triathlon annual membership eclipses 100,000.

Aug. 18, 2008 – American Laura Bennett finishes fourth in the women's triathlon at the Beijing Olympic Games.

Aug. 19, 2008 – Three-time Olympian Hunter Kemper places seventh in the men's triathlon at the Beijing Olympic Games.

2009 – USA Triathlon annual membership grows to more than 130,000, and the organization sanctions more than 3,100 events. The International Triathlon Union launches the seven-race World Championship Series, which will determine the annual world champion.

2010 – The Hy-Vee Triathlon ups its combined prize purse to \$1 million, making it the largest single-day prize purse offered in the history of the sport. USA Triathlon annual membership reaches 140,000, and the organization sanctions 3,500 events.

August 2010 – Americans Kevin McDowell and Kelly Whitley combine for three medals (individual and mixed team relay) at the inaugural Youth Olympic Games in Singapore.

Dec. 11, 2010 – The sport of paratriathlon was officially added to the Paralympic program for the 2016 Paralympic Games in Rio de Janeiro.

Sept. 11, 2011 – Standout prep runner Lukas Verzbicas makes national headlines when he wins the ITU Junior World Championships title in Beijing to honor friend and teammate Kevin McDowell, who had been diagnosed with Hodgkin's lymphoma earlier in 2011.

2011 – USA Triathlon reaches an all-time high of 450,000 members, including annual and one-day memberships.

May 11-12, 2012 – The sport returns to its roots with the inaugural ITU World Triathlon San Diego, held in close proximity to the first-ever triathlon in Mission Beach. Thousands watch as Laura Bennett, Hunter Kemper and Manuel Huerta qualify for the 2012 U.S. Olympic Team, and more than 2,100 age-groupers compete in the same iconic venue.



PAUL PHILLIPS/COMPETITIVE IMAGE

Triathlon returned to its roots with the inaugural ITU World Triathlon San Diego on May 11-12, 2012.

Triathlon Glossary

1.5k swim – 0.9 miles, the distance of the swimming portion of an Olympic-distance triathlon.

40k bike – 24.8 miles, the distance of the cycling portion of an Olympic-distance triathlon.

10k run – 6.2 miles, the distance of the running portion of an Olympic-distance triathlon.

Age group – Amateur multisport athletes are called age-groupers. They compete against each other in age groups of five-year increments. Age-groupers never compete in draft-legal races and cannot accept monetary prizes of more than \$5,000.

Aquabike – A multisport event consisting of a swim and a bike.

Aquathlon – A multisport event consisting of a swim and a run.

Breakaway – Similar to a surge in running, when one or more athletes increase their speed significantly in an attempt to create distance between themselves and the rest of the competitors.

Draft legal – In draft-legal events, athletes may cycle directly behind another competitor, allowing them to work together against the wind. Many elite events, including the Olympic Games, are draft legal, creating large packs of athletes and very close, exciting finishes.

Duathlon – A multisport event similar to triathlon, usually in a run-bike-run format. The common world championship distance is a 10k run, followed by a 40k bike and a 5k run.

Elite – Another word for “pro.” Multisport athletes must qualify to become “elite” or “pro.” Once they do, usually they can compete for prize money over \$5,000. Only elite or pro triathletes can try to qualify for the Olympic Team and compete in draft-legal events.

ITU – International Triathlon Union. The international federation for the sport of triathlon. USA Triathlon is a member of ITU.

Non-drafting – Almost all amateur age group events are non-drafting, meaning athletes must maintain a staggered position on the bike relative to the cyclist directly ahead to avoid any advantage gained from drafting. Non-drafting triathlon is a true test of an athlete against the course and the clock.

Off-road triathlon – A triathlon consisting of a swim, followed by a mountain bike ride and a trail run.

Olympic-format – The style of the triathlon that will be contested in the Olympic Games and all international games. It usually consists of a multi-lap course in all three disciplines and a draft-legal format during the swimming and cycling portions. This style of racing is generally recognized by athletes grouped together during all three disciplines. Generally the finishing times are much closer in Olympic-format triathlon.

Pack riding – While cycling, two or more participants work together to improve performance, efficiency or position by teamwork or other joint conduct.

Paratriathlon – Triathlon for physically challenged athletes who compete in six different categories. Paratriathlon was added to the program for the 2016 Paralympic Games in 2010.

Pro – See “elite.”



PAUL PHILLIPS/COMPETITIVE IMAGE

Draft-legal races, like the Olympic Games, generally produce large bike packs and exciting finishes.

Triathlon Distances Explained

Short:
0.25 to 0.62-mile swim,
5 to 18.6-mile bike,
1 to 3.9-mile run
(commonly referred to as
“Sprint Distance”)

Intermediate:
0.63 to 1.25-mile swim,
18.7 to 31-mile bike,
4 to 8-mile run
(includes “Olympic
Distance” events)

Long:
1.26 to 1.9-mile swim,
31.1 to 62-mile bike,
8.1 to 18.5-mile run
(includes “Half Ironman
Distance” events)

Ultra:
2-plus mile swim,
62-plus mile bike,
18.6-plus mile run
(includes “Ironman
Distance” events)

Surge – Similar to a breakaway in cycling, when one or more athletes increase their speed significantly in an attempt to create distance between themselves and the rest of the competitors.

Transition area – The hub of the triathlon course, the place in which the athletes transform from swimmer to cyclist to runner. Races can be won or lost in the time it takes for athletes to change from one discipline to another.

Triathlon – A sport combining any three different athletic disciplines in continuum, such as swimming, cycling and running.

T1 – The swim-to-bike transition.

T2 – The bike-to-run transition.

Triathlon: A Viewer's Guide

There are thousands of triathlons staged worldwide every year. One of the unique things about the sport is that all races differ. In each, talent in the form of speed, strength and endurance plays vital roles, but strategy becomes an all-important factor with so many variables in play.

Once the initial gun sounds, the clock is continually ticking — no timeouts, no delay. In the 1.5k (0.9 mile) swim of an international distance race, the best swimmers usually take the front quickly, trying to avoid flailing arms and legs. A weaker swimmer will try to stay on the toes of a stronger swimmer; this drafting saves energy and allows a weaker swimmer to stay with a faster swimmer.

Since the clock never stops, triathletes not only have to be fast swimmers, bikers and runners, but also quick change artists. Upon exiting the water, swimmers will remove their swim caps and goggles and run to their bicycles racked in the transition area. They will then put on their helmets and mount their bicycles upon exiting the transition. Most will already have their cycling shoes attached to their pedals and put their shoes on as they generate speed on the cycling course.

When legal, drafting is very crucial during the 40k (24.8 mile) bike. Drafting another cyclist on the bike portion saves energy and allows weaker cyclists to keep up with faster cyclists. Many times breakaway groups will form, usually weaker runners who are trying to develop an advantage going onto the run course. The stronger runners are usually content to sit in the pack and allow for the race to be won or lost in the final leg. An Olympic-format triathlon is draft-legal, that is, cycling directly behind another competitor is allowed. But all amateur racing and most other race formats are held in draft-illegal or non-drafting format.

The bike-to-run transition (T2) is as fast as the swim-to-bike transition (T1). Cyclists will dismount, leaving cycling shoes attached to their pedals and remove their helmets. After sliding into running shoes, which are usually modified with elastic laces or lace-locks to maximize time, the runners begin the 10k (6.2 mile) run. Many times, runners will be seen carrying hats, sponges and water bottles out of the transition area. During the run, similar to breakaway attempts in cycling, athletes will often surge. The surge is an attempt to create distance between competitors.

The following are hints for viewing the race from traditionally the best points on the course:

The Swim Start: The first staging area in a triathlon is the swim start, the area in which athletes congregate and prepare for the start of the race. In most large triathlons, the swim start is a popular photographer's spot. Athletes churning through the water to get to the front of the pack is often a very powerful image.

The Transition Area: The transition area is the hub of race activity, an area of controlled chaos. Transition features an event's bike racks and is the staging area where triathletes transfer from one segment of the event to the next. The seconds won or lost in transition can amount to the difference in the outcome of the race.

The Finish Line: After the transition area, the finish line is the best place for spectator viewing as it is the most important part of the race. In most major triathlons, the media tent used for distributing notes, quotes, results and the mixed zone for meeting athletes for post-race interviews is adjacent to the finish line.

Photographers note: Many races offer media vehicles, but once you are on the vehicle it may not stop until the race is over. Other recommended viewing areas are the swim start, swim finish, transition area and finish line. Photographers may wish to wade into shallow water to shoot the swim start. It can often be difficult to determine the best place from which to photograph the transition, though it's usually near the entrance or exit. Find out in advance where the entrance and exit will be and set up outside the fencing. Often the swim entrance and the run exit are the best places for quality photographs, because the athletes are moving slower and are upright (many times cyclists are bent over adjusting their shoes). Please be careful near the transition area. Stay outside of the fencing and out of the flow of traffic.

Medical Note: The medical tent or building is usually located near the finish line and is always closed to media. As with all sports, the safety of the athletes is paramount — please respect the wishes of all medical personnel attending to athletes.



DELLY CARR/ITU

The transition area is one of the most exciting spots to watch a triathlon.



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