

Good things come in THREES



EXPERT EYE: Coach Rob Suriano, on an early morning training ride, enjoys watching triathlon participants benefit from regular exercise.

Love to swim? Don't mind a trundle on the bike? Think you can put one foot in front of the other long enough to complete a run? Then take up the challenge and join the throngs of elite, fit and everyday folk who have discovered that triathlon delivers more than meets the eye. **text** lisa o'neill ◀ **images** tony mcdonough and troy coulthard

Before the sun has a chance to heave itself above the land, people of all sizes, ages and backgrounds gather to stare out at the ocean, tinker with their bike hanging from a steel rack and carefully place their running shoes beside their helmet. The queue for the local toilet block achieves record numbers. Welcome to triathlon.

As participant numbers steadily climb for this lung busting sport, the image of triathlon as a pursuit that attracts ruthless, single-minded fitness freaks is fading, while a more appealing sense of community and healthy living takes its place.

Over the past three years, beginners' courses have emerged that ease the transition into the daunting prospect of competing in swimming, cycling and running all in the one race.

Trievents and Challenge Stadium combine to run a women's specific course and one of WA's largest clubs, Stadium Triathlon Club, runs an increasingly successful beginner's course for men and women combined.

According to Stadium Triathlon Club coach and sports scientist Dr Rob Suriano, there are no

expectations of fitness levels in these courses and the controlled environment means a wide range of fitness levels can be included in the one group.

"The sessions are in a controlled environment which means you can go at your own pace and will never be too far from a 'base' point," says Rob. "We have had athletes who have competed at an elite level of various other sports, such as rowing or soccer, to those who have not completed any regular exercise for years."

The common misconception about the sport is that it is simply a swim, bike and run and if you dabble a little in each then a triathlon will be a walk in the park. Not so, according to Rob.

"There are a number of specific skills such as transition training – changing from one discipline to another – open water swimming techniques and even the basics of bicycle mechanics," says Rob. "People don't realise that if you're stuck on a course with a breakdown such as flat tyre, you have to be able to fix the problem without outside assistance."

Aside from the technical aspects, most courses run for eight weeks (usually culminating in a designated race) and include a session of each



DAWN PATROL: From left, Martin Smart, Justine Bolton and Peter Waddell have turned their lives around and now think nothing of getting up at the crack of dawn to cycle, swim or run with their training buddies.

discipline per week. The Stadium course also includes a weekend “brick session” that involves all three put together so participants know what they’re in for come race day.

While participants usually see an exponential increase in fitness levels, Rob also says many join “for the social aspect.”

Lawyer Peter Waddell signed up for a beginners’ course with Stadium two years ago after finding himself bogged down in a heavy workload.

“Before triathlon my lifestyle was heavily swayed towards work and stress,” says the 29-year-old. “I wasn’t unhealthy but I certainly wouldn’t have considered myself fit and there really was no balance in my life – I got to a point where I needed something outside of work to keep me sane and fit.”

Two years later, Peter has completed many triathlons including two half-ironman distances (a 1.9km swim, 90km cycle and 21.1km run) and has met an extended group of friends through the sport.

His 80-hour work weeks are mostly a thing of the past, but the new attitude Peter adopted since embarking on his triathlon journey means he fits in more.

“Apart from the positive physical aspects achieved through training and racing, triathlon has provided me with a level of mental toughness I never realised I had,” says Peter. “Completing a race also brings with it a real sense of achievement.”

As Rob witnesses the participants from his courses cross the finish line and then often go onto conquer incredible feats such as ironman distance events (a 3.8km swim, 180km cycle that finishes with a marathon – a 42.2km run), what impresses him the most is simpler.

“The biggest buzz for me is seeing those people that change their life from an unhealthy state to one where they participate in regular physical activity. In most cases this has a positive effect on all aspects of their life away from the training track,” says Rob. One of these success stories includes 35-year-old CPA, finance and human resources manager Justine Bolton. Justine had fallen into the common slump of working and socialising since finishing high school and university where she was very active.

“Just over 10 years later I was significantly overweight and wondering how I let it happen,” says

Justine. “I changed my eating habits and started to walk and get back into swimming and five months later I had lost 20kg and was determined to keep the weight off, which meant finding a way of exercising that didn’t bore me with repetition.”

Justine had come to regard triathlon as a sport as one for incredibly talented elite athletes, after growing up in Far North Queensland watching Brad Beven – who came from a neighbouring small sugar town – win international triathlon events.

“It wasn’t until I was reading a magazine at the hairdressers that had a story promoting a women’s-only beginner triathlon course, that I realised triathlon was open to every level,” says Justine. “I got in touch with a close friend and we signed up for our first short-course triathlon in March 2007.”

At the “after party” (a common triathlon occurrence, celebrating the achievement of finishing seems paramount in the sport), the organiser



How much will it cost you?

Swim
Start off with a pair of chlorine-resistant bathers (from \$59.90), cap (from \$5.95) and goggles (from \$17.90). These swim accessory prices are sourced from aquashop.com.au. Once you’re hooked, you can spend up to \$350 on a race suit (the 2XU Super Elite Endurance Tri Suit) and up to \$900 on a wetsuit (2XU Velocity - V:1).

Cycle
Bag yourself a bargain on the Triathlon WA classified page where you can pick up secondhand beginner-level bikes from \$200. Specialised triathlon bikes can cost a bomb. The Swiss BMC Time Machine is \$18,000 – and that’s just the frame, forks, seat post and stem. You still have to buy wheels and handlebars. The world’s fastest wheels, the Zipp 1080s, cost \$5645.

Run
For the run all you really need is a swift pair of joggers. As running is high impact, go to a specialist sports shop to buy the right shoes. Zoot’s M Ultra Race “flats” cost \$249.



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SPLASH 'N' DASH: Above: A mass swim start at the Pure Blonde Trievents Rockingham Triathlon. Far right: Four-time WA Triathlete of the Year Sean O'Neill demonstrates his strength in the run leg of the Pure Blonde Trievents Champions Lake Triathlon, leaving his competition behind.

asked for a show of hands from the women whose first thought when crossing the finishing line had been "if only I..."

"Apparently this would indicate you were bitten by the triathlon bug and would be back again. I contacted Stadium Tri Club and signed up for another beginners' course, this time aiming at the increased distance of a sprint triathlon," she says.

In 2009, she has overcome her dislike for running and the old mountain bike has been replaced with a new, full carbon road bike.

"I have never been happier or healthier on the inside and outside," says Justine. "I have the spring back in my step and energy to burn – although if someone had told me I would finish towards the back end of my age group in every event and love doing it I would have told them they were crazy!"

Justine's husband Anthony provided her with terrific support, getting up at 5am every race day to watch and cheer. Alas, the support now has to be shared, as he was so envious of the fun Justine had, he signed up for a triathlon membership for the 2008/09 season as well.

Oil and gas executive Martin Smart couldn't even get his doctor to provide a medical certificate when he was first encouraged by a work colleague to give triathlon a go.

"My lifestyle was completely out of control," says Martin. "I worked long hours, I was a socialite and was drinking alcohol in excess, which is what many in the oil and gas industry tend to do."

Martin fronted up for a beginners' course in October 2007 and described himself as a "truly inspirational sight" on the first evening of training



at the pool, carrying 21kg of extra weight and sporting a small pair of "budgie smugglers".

"I am a very confident person but I would be lying if I said I wasn't daunted by my first swim session," says Martin. "Not only did I turn up in my budgie smugglers on a very chilly night, I wasn't even sure I could make it to the end of the pool."

After gritting his teeth and making it through the course, Martin is swimming in the 2009 Rottnest Channel Swim as one half of a duo team, which equates to approximately 10km of swimming in one day. "I can make it to the end of the pool now although I still think of myself as a shocking swimmer, but after one year in triathlon I'm having a go at the duo for the Rottnest swim," he says. He's also lost all of the extra 21kg and is encouraging everyone in his office to adopt a healthier lifestyle.

"In my office environment I have actively encouraged health and sport in the workplace with



great success – a number of people have joined the novice course and now 25 people have signed up for the BRW corporate triathlon in March," he says. Unfortunately, Martin still sees many people struggling with the same issues he did over a year ago, on the slippery slope to poor health.

"If anyone thinks they cannot get fit or complete a triathlon, I just think get off the couch and give it a go," says Martin. "If I can do it, anyone can." **en**
Contact details: *Triathlon WA: triwa.org.au* or (08) 9387 2907 for more information.

Beginners courses

STADIUM TRI CLUB: Contact Rob Suriano 0419 107 932 or visit stadiumtriclub.com.

TRIEVENTS: Contact Dave Budge on (08) 9204 1899 or visit trievents.com.au.

WELLBEINGS: Contact Carol Hughes on (08) 9335 2511 or visit wellbeings.com.au.



Get inspired

So you want to try a triathlon, but aren't sure what you're in for? There are a few standard distances, and you can usually find a handful of each in WA between the months of November and May, the official triathlon season.

SHORT COURSE:

300m swim, 10km cycle, 3km run

SPRINT DISTANCE:

750m swim, 20km cycle, 5km run

CLASSIC DISTANCE:

1km swim, 30km cycle, 8km run

OLYMPIC DISTANCE:

1.5km swim, 40km cycle, 10km run

HALF-IRONMAN:

1.9km swim, 90km cycle, 21.1km run

IRONMAN:

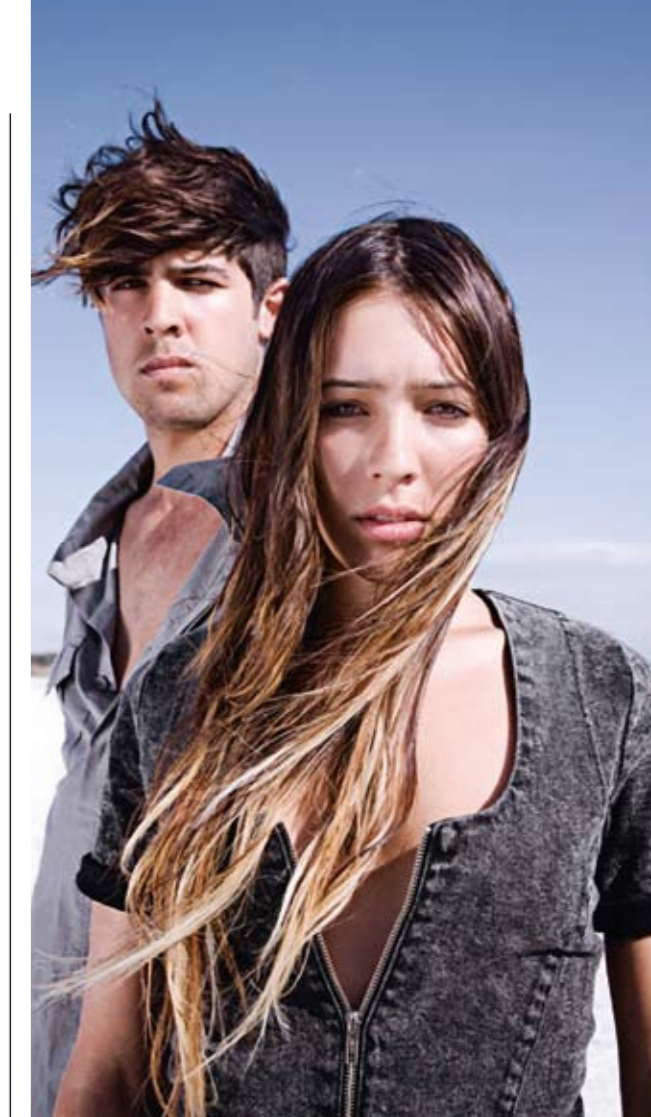
3.8km swim, 180km cycle, 42.2km run

There are numerous Perth-based triathlons or you

can make a weekend away of it and travel to Karri Valley, Busselton, Albany or even Kalgoorlie (a good choice if you're afraid of open water – the swim is in the local pool) to compete.

If you'd prefer to try before you buy and wouldn't mind seeing how the experts do it, the following races will be filled with a range of elite triathletes and age group triathletes:

- March 15, 2009: **National Olympic Distance Championships** in Perth from Langley Park starting at 7.30am (elite race begins at 11.30am).
- May 2, 2009: **Busselton Half Ironman**, from Barnard Park starting at 8am.
- October 22-25, 2009: **World Long Course Championships** in Perth from Langley Park, details to be confirmed.
- December 5, 2009: **Ironman WA** in Busselton, from Barnard Park starting at 6am.



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