

A Guide to Ultra-Triathlons

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Training

Swim:

Basically an economical slow stroke always with a wetsuit, a full one being quicker and a short sleeve, much cooler and more comfortable.

Training very basic with no speed required i.e. kilometre reps with 30 second intervals. For a double-Ironman, 2 or 3 5km sessions a week and for a triple or further, 2 x 8km sessions and every other week 3 or 4, 2km fun/speed sessions. Practise feeding on the long reps. You sweat a lot with a wetsuit on so preferably liquids i.e. electrolytes, energy drinks every 30 minutes. This also breaks up the monotony

Bike:

Speed is not important. Time in the saddle is, so get used to dealing with back, neck and bum pain and making adjustments is what is required. A neoprene seat cover is brilliant. Extreme positions are out. I eventually ended up with my tri bars much higher so my forearms were level with my saddle. Basic gear shifting units are all that is needed as the courses are pretty flat and you're probably going to use at the max 3 or 4 gears. Your heartrate should never be higher than upper level 2 ideally staying in high level 1, occasionally level 2. Do not be tempted by anyone else, you have in a double around 12-14 hours and in a triple 18 to 24 hours of cycling – do your own thing, just keep going at an even pace. Heartrate monitors come into their own here.

So, you need in training to build up your ability to stay on the bike for hours on end. A maximum of 300 miles/500 km a week is plenty. I have never done more. So this would equate to around 15-18 hours a week though you should not be doing this kind of mileage any more than one week in three.

The main points to concentrate on in order of importance are; comfort, pacing, time spent in the saddle and then feeding and hydration. Ignore: other people, speed, and radical equipment. For ultras I used a basic aluminium 700c GT bike with Campag group set and Mavic CXP 30 wheels. Very reliable and comfortable with me being 2nd off the bike in the Dutch Double and first off the bike in the German Triple – no trick gear required.

Run:

Go out on your favourite flat 10 km run – you know it well – what 34 minutes, 33 minutes? That's flat out yeah? So, comfortable should be what around 40 minutes? A steady run after a ride around 45 minutes and a very easy recovery run probably around 50 minutes? Now we're getting slow. You probably think you can't run any slower, but for your long training runs you want to be around 55 minutes for 10 km i.e. 4 hour marathon pace. Initially this seems far too slow but on a 5-6 hour training run it seems very good indeed and in the race after 8-10 hours seems impossible to continue.

There is no real skill or technique in the run training. The main points to consider; buy the best-cushioned shoes you can afford, go long and slow and eat and drink continuously. You really need to build up no with more than 15-20% increase weekly to be happy with running 5-8 hours. Any more is not necessary as after this time it becomes a mental rather than a physical battle. Legs that can cope with 8 hours running being fed with food and water can carry on for twice this easily.

Twice I suffered from not drinking enough. You need to sip water constantly and actually drink every 15 minutes. If you haven't been to the toilet for the last 3 to 4 hours you need to slow down enough to drink a litre of water. Walk if necessary, but do it, you're probably already borderline dehydrated. Body maintenance is essential.

Body maintenance

Swim:

Food – mainly liquid foods i.e. drinks, mashed bananas, or yoghurt every 20-30 minutes. Aches and pains, just deal with them. Stop to stretch shoulders if necessary but basically just get it over with as its all legs from now on. Vaseline is essential under arms and around the neck.

Transition 1:

Drink at least a pint of electrolyte. Eat – sandwiches are very good and things like vegetable soup are great. Forget energy bars, sports drinks etc. Proper food is what is needed. Take a multi-vitamin and a magnesium tablet, good for slowing down muscle soreness. DRINK AGAIN.

Bike:

Alternate your drinks as much for variety as for anything else. Every 2-3 hours a protein drink is a good idea. Every 4 hours or so stop for 2-3 minutes and eat some proper food. Various foods I used: cereals, yoghurt, vegetable soup and overcooked pasta (easy to digest).

Most bike routes are loop affairs of anything from 2-10 km. A good idea is to pick a certain point and each time you pass, stand up and stretch your back, neck, calves etc...and then keep going. This really helps to offset neck and back soreness.

Two hours before you think you are going to finish increase your liquid intake. You should ideally be coming off the bike needing a pee.

Transition 2:

Drink – sip all the time you are changing. If offered a massage do not have one for now, go out on the run for at least a few laps, this is better for your legs than lying down and stiffening up. Remember to Vaseline toes, armpits etc, and if necessary plasters over nipples and plenty of sunscreen. Been to the toilet? No? Drink...Yes? Well done, for now you're safe.

Run:

This is a very low effort run and most foods will not give you any problems. Your taste buds go very weird, lots of small different snacks are good. Ports bars and drinks are not good, they are much too sweet and too much effort to chew. Mentally you cannot really think about your food right now and just need to be able to grab a small selection and swallow it. Some items which are good: liquorice allsorts, coca cola, small chunks of fruit, yoghurt, cereals, soup etc. Practice in training is essential, learn to recognise what tastes good and what doesn't. Have some different things which maybe you haven't used in case you go completely weird and decide you hate everything you brought. Drink little and often and check the colour of your urine when you go to the toilet and increase your fluid intake if necessary. Don't do this and you'll discover what a drip is like – not very nice. If you go more than twice in an hour, ease back on the fluids as drinking too much can also become a problem.

Extra Points

Support crew:

They are 50% responsible for getting you over the finish line and also if you fail. When things are good they are there to feed and refresh you, sort your clothes out and supply anything you need and it all works well. But when it's bad, it's 3am, it's pissing it down, you're knackered and exhausted, you've got a puncture, you need to change your running shoes etc...and they're also knackered, you're too tired to sort it out...they have to take over no matter how tired they are. They are there to get you to the finish line in one shape or another; they are not there to be nice to you...that can come later. You must convey to them your race plan, what you want to eat and drink, what clothes you want to wear...everything you have thought about they've got to know about. It is their job to monitor you if you are too spaced to sort it out yourself, so if you decide you're not thirsty and haven't been for the last 3 hours, they've got to make sure you've been drinking. This is a partnership and success very much depends on communication and understanding.

Ideally one person at least for a double and anything up to 3-4 people for a triple and beyond is necessary. Some teams had around 6-7 people helping which must be very nice. Throughout the bike on a triple at least 2 people will be needed to follow you in a vehicle during the night and ideally, both able to drive, otherwise everyone is going to be wasted the next day.

In Germany my partner and a friend of hers were the support crew but only her friend could drive. Consequently she drove throughout the night, Michelle fed me throughout the night. The result was three knackered people the next day. So, on the run, they were really tired and I was really tired and my breakdown began due to nobody noticing I hadn't drunk much for 3-4 hours and hadn't been to the toilet for the last 5 hours. This result was everybody's responsibility and nobody's fault!

Summary:

The whole ultra thing is a major undertaking requiring a lot of sacrifice to train, a lot of planning, a lot of equipment, a lot of food and it's not cheap. You have to consider travel and accommodation for probably around 4-5 people and you need to find people willing to give up their time and to watch you suffer and be abused! But it really is worth it.

I don't want all this to sound daunting, because it isn't. This is just a big long list of my thoughts and experiences that I think would have helped me had I known all this beforehand. There are definitely no hard and fast rules and even now, after one double and two triples, on my next one various things will be done differently and more lessons learned. It's a very long learning curve.

All the best,

Jules Taylor