

Plan Your Race, Race Your Plan

Jason Gootman, MS, CSCS & Will Kirousis, BS, CSCS

Tri-Hard Endurance Sports Coaching

USA Triathlon & USA Cycling Certified Coaches

Certified Strength & Conditioning Coaches

For More Information: www.Tri-Hard.com

This article was originally published in the April 2003 issue of *Inside Triathlon*.

Triathlon is a tremendous endurance challenge. You put months and years of thought, effort and training into improving your athletic abilities. Yet despite your well organized training, a haphazard approach on race day could well ruin your plans for peak performance. So how can you make sure this does not happen? With a simple plan!

By taking a well planned and focused approach to your key events, you avoid problems on race day. This helps you meet the goals you have worked so hard for.

So what exactly is a race plan? A race plan is a concrete method for approaching the various physical, mental and nutritional aspects of your peak triathlons. There are many successful ways to create a race plan. In this article, we will describe the key components of a race plan, show you how to construct a race plan, and offer you a sample race plan as an example to help you create your own race plan for your next big race.

Key components of a race plan

Goals. Reviewing your personal goals for your race is the first step in formulating your race plan. First, you should have a very specific time goal for your peak event (I.e. I will complete IM USA in 12:30). Experiential goals such as “I will enjoy the experience from start to finish” or “I will remain mentally strong throughout the race” are equally important. The goals you set for your peak race should be in line with your overall athletic goals and vision.

Goal split times & pacing strategy. With your overall race time goal established, you can now establish your time goals for each segment of the race. You will want to set a time goal for the swim, T1, the bike, T2, and the run. Your goal times for each segment of the race should be determined based on a number of factors: times achieved in recent races, results of recent performance testing (I.e. Aerobic Speed Tests, and Maximal Sustainable Speed Tests), and estimations of the impact of the course’s terrain. Simultaneous to developing goal times for each segment of the race, you should determine your goal pace. As an example, if you know from your recent races, performance tests, and overall

response in training that you can sustain a running pace of 8 minutes per mile in a 10K, while you sustained 9:30/mile pace in your recent Running Aerobic Speed Test, and just ran 7:30 pace for a 5K in a sprint triathlon, then you may set a goal of running at 8:15-8:30 pace for the run segment of your upcoming Olympic distance triathlon. You and/or your coach should work to create realistic yet challenging race pace goals.

Nutrition strategy. Next in creating your race plan, you need to develop your personal race day nutrition strategy. This means deciding what you will eat and drink at each of these stages in your race day: race morning breakfast, pre-race, T1, bike segment, T2, run segment, post-race. This plan needs to be formulated based both on science and practice. You can use scientific formulas to help you determine the average caloric and fluid needs for someone of your body size. A good coach or sports nutritionist can help you with this. Using this science, you then need to refine your nutrition strategy based on what you have experienced in your training and racing. Use your experience to help determine for yourself the right amounts, the right timing, and the right foods/fluids that work well for you. Race fuel is a highly individual matter. As a result, it is vital that you create a plan that works for you and practice it.

Mental strategy. Finally, you need to plan out the mental approach and specific strategies that you want to have with you during this race. A good place to start in formulating your mental approach is to scan back in your memory a bit. Think back to your best performances in your life. What focus did you have? What attitude did you have? What were you thinking about or not thinking about that freed you up to have these great performances? After some reflection, you should be able to generate a list of mental traits that have been successful for you before. You can use this list to create a concrete mental strategy for the various parts of your race day.

Constructing your race plan

It is very important to note that race plans need to be very individualized. They should be planned around YOUR goals, YOUR fitness, YOUR experience, and the way that YOU approach triathlon. Resist the temptation to formulate your plan based on a friend's plan.

Beginning to construct your race plan is as simple as designing a simple table (those in Microsoft Word and Excel work very well). You will need 5 columns and 9 rows. Leave some space at the top for your overall race goals. A sample of a race plan is shown below to demonstrate the format and ideas on how to formulate the specific strategies.

You should construct your plan about 12 weeks away from your peak races. Much before that and you will not know enough about your developing fitness to

realistically project paces. Much after that and you may not have enough time to thoroughly practice the components of your race plan in training.

Don't expect to create a race plan and have it set in stone. Again, you should have it constructed about 12 weeks from your peak races, but consider it a working document. In the last 12 weeks as you come to peak form, you will learn more about your fitness, how you handle various nutritional approaches, and what mental strategies help you the most. You and/or your coach should be ready to adjust and adapt this plan as needed to set the best approach for you on race day.

The race plan is not something that you simply establish on paper and then leave alone. Obviously, your training should be designed to bring about the conditioning improvements you desire to reach the performance goal you have set for yourself. But you also need to practice the various nutritional and mental approaches that you plan to use in your race in your training. For example, as part of your nutritional strategy, you have decided to drink Gatorade from your water bottle every 10 minutes during the bike ride. You should be practicing this in your training rides whenever possible. This helps to make it second nature. This is very important because it can be very easy to get carried away in the emotions of the day on race day. And when you do that, it is very easy to forget or ignore important tasks such as fueling or hydrating. If you have a great plan for the race AND HAVE PRACTICED IT WELL, then you will keep your emotions in check more easily and do what is best for you on race day.

Sample race plan

The following is a sample race plan we used successfully with an athlete preparing for IM Florida. Her goals were to complete the race in 10:45, to finish feeling good and strong, and to have a great time. She met all three. Note: the approaches taken in this sample race plan are unique to this individual and are offered simply as an example. The approaches laid out in this sample race plan are not ideal for everyone as we are all very unique. We hope that the ideas outlined here help you to create a race plan for your next big triathlon.

	Goal Time	Pacing Strategy	Nutrition Strategy	Mental Strategy
Breakfast	N.A.	N.A.	I will eat at 4:30—2.5 hours prior to the race start. I will eat my regular pre-race breakfast: 2 scrambled eggs 2 cups oatmeal with tbsps. of honey & ¼ cup of raisins.	I will relax. I will take the time to have a good meal and start my day off by loading up with some good fuel. I will remind myself of my goals and the most important reasons I am here today. I will remind myself that I am prepared for this and today all I have to do is go out and execute

				what I have prepared for. I will also remind myself of the attitude focus that I want to bring to this race—I want to have fun and enjoy my great level of health and fitness.
Pre-Race	N.A.	N.A.	At 6:00, I will start sipping Gatorade. I will continue this until I get into the water to warm-up.	I will stay relaxed. After I get body marked, I will stay off from the crowds. I will spend some time sitting quietly using the relaxation techniques I have practiced. When it is time to warm-up, I will head to the water and conduct my warm-up as I have practiced.
Swim	1H 5'	I will do my best to replicate the race pace swimming I have performed in practice many times. I will try to get in with a group of swimmers who are swimming about my pace to share the pacing.	N.A.	I will stay within myself. I will take long, strong strokes, and repeat to myself "long and strong". I will focus only on what I am doing—my breathing, and my form.
T1	3'	N.A.	None.	As I perform my transition tasks, I will look around and enjoy the great spectacle around me. I will consciously draw on the energy of all the amazing people around me. I will enjoy how amazing doing an IM triathlon is.
Bike	6H	I will ride at very near an average of 18.5-19.5 miles per hour throughout the race. In the early stages especially, I will restrain myself from the temptation of going faster.	After 15 minutes into the ride, I will start to drink my bottle of 20 oz. Metabolol. I will drink this and one 20 oz. bottle of Gatorade in the first hour. Each hour thereafter, I will drink 2 20 oz. bottles of Gatorade and eat one half of a Clif Bar.	I will focus on my pedaling. I will focus on pedaling smoothly, powerfully, and efficiently. Especially as I fatigue, I will concentrate not on the fatigue but entirely on pedaling well. I will also keep at my goal pace—I will resist the temptation to go faster.

T2	2'	N.A.	None.	As I perform my transition tasks, I will enjoy the emotion of the day. I will gather my excitement, as I know I have one marathon between me and finishing an Ironman. I will remind myself of my reasons for racing in an Ironman and I will say to myself "This is really living life to the fullest!"
Run	3H 35'	I will aim run each mile in the 8:10 to 8:30 range.	Drink something from a cup at each aid station—Gatorade, Coke, or water.	I will set my mental focus on my running form. I will focus on the elements of my running form that I have practiced thoroughly especially relaxing my body and minimizing the ground contact time of my strides. I will listen for the soft "pitter patter" of my feet when I am running my best.
Post-Race	N.A.	N.A.	As soon as I feel comfortable doing so, I'll ingest my pre-mixed recovery drink. Then I'll sip Gatorade as I walk around, talk with family, get a gentle massage, and clean up. About 2 hours after the race, I'll eat a small meal of real foods and do so each 2 hours until I go to bed.	I will have fun and share the day with my family, the volunteers, and my fellow racers.

To learn more about Jason, Will, and Tri-Hard Endurance Sports Coaching:
www.Tri-Hard.com.