

TRIATHALON TRAINING FOR RUNNERS – PART ONE: THE SWIM

By DON SIKORSKI
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With 7 time Tour de France champion Lance Armstrong's ING New York City Marathon debut advertised for this November, there's been plenty of hype and debate as to how a world class cyclist of Armstrong's caliber will fare in a contest of a different athletic discipline. While the truth is that Armstrong will toe the line in the Big Apple intent on only on finishing the 26.2 mile distance, it will be interesting to see where Armstrong's 80% effort ranks him amongst the serious marathoners.

Turning the tables around, how much success do distance runners have when venturing into multi-sport racing? Ten years ago, Oakdale's Al Lyman was an accomplished runner with a 2:39:37 marathon best (from the 1992 Boston Marathon) to his credit. With no swimming background, Lyman attempted to race his first triathlon. Finishing near the back of the pack out of the water, Lyman was encouraged by the fact he was able to pass competitors in the later bike and run stages of the race. But he realized that his swimming was clearly a weak spot. "I couldn't get across the pool without feeling like I was going to drown," recalls Lyman on those early swim efforts. So he decided to research various training methods and made triathlon training a second career, subsequently forming a company called Pursuit Fitness (pursuit-fitness.com), aimed at coaching multi-sport participants looking to compete in triathlons. Ten years later, Lyman has finished eight Ironmans, a race comprised of a 2.4 mile swim, 112 mile bike run, and a 26.2 marathon run. Not content to simply finish such a grueling event, Lyman is a serious competitor and trains to race the distance. In the 2000 Ironman race in Hawaii, Lyman completed his final marathon run leg in 3 hours and 24 minutes. Compare that to the 4 ½ hour median finish time of most major U.S. marathons. In the area, Lyman is considered a prime resource of information on the subject on triathlon training.

"The triathlon is still a runner's sport," explained Lyman. "But while running ability transfers over to the bike to some degree, swimming is a different application of fitness". When approached with coaching requests, Lyman encourages his students to set long terms goals, take their time, and enjoy the process of learning about the sport. He says the key to mastering the swim is to become comfortable in the water. "You're in water, so you need to be comfortable in that environment before leaning about technique and form," claims Lyman. "Rhythmic breathing is very important, and usually runners in water have a poor awareness of this." Because the swim is usually the shortest of the three legs in a triathlon, however, Lyman said runners should be able to get through the initial leg of the race and still be competitive. He also recommends wearing a wetsuit to help float the body and offer the runner a sense of confidence. "Swimming is probably the only sport that requires aerobic upper body workouts, so strength and flexibility become hugely important and are essential in swimming."

One of Lyman's current students is Chris Hansen of Hope Valley, RI. A former cross-country and track captain at St. Bernard High School and the College of the Holly Cross, Hansen already possessed a strong running background and had also been cycling compressively for years, earning a spot on the U.S. National duathlon (bike-run) team. But when Hansen decided to take a stab at the triathlon, he encountered one major problem. "I didn't know how to swim," joked Hansen. "I hadn't swam since I was a kid. I knew Al (Lyman) coached triathletes, so he agreed to meet me at the pool one day. He asked me to jump in and show him what I could do. I was about halfway down the pool when I had to stop. I couldn't even swim the length of the pool."

With Lyman's help, Hansen has now become a much more accomplished swimmer, but his early struggles in the water are indicative of distance runners transitioning over to swimming. "The advantage is that I had no bad habits to break," said Hansen of his learning process. While distance runners can find success though the simple process of hard work, swimming requires technique and flexibility in order to move from Point A to Point B quickly and efficiently. "Water is 1,000 times denser than air," said Hansen. "You need to be able to slip through the water aerodynamically and be almost torpedo like". Hansen believes that distance runners often struggle in the water because of the differentiating mindsets of the two sports. "At first I thought, the harder I swim, the faster I would go," recalls Hansen. "I was wrong". Lyman and Hansen worked together on a process referred to as "slipping water", where the body is taught to move forward through a series of drills designed at improving technique and efficiency. Lyman focuses his teachings on developing body position in the water, which accomplishes this result. "Drills are the key to learning," claims Hansen. "Somewhat like Tiger Woods in golf, it's more about technique and not about the effort. You need to learn the feel of the water."

This article is Part One of a four part series on distance runners learning the three disciplines of triathlon training. Part Two, which will examine the sport of bicycling, will run in the Norwich Bulletin on Sunday, September 10th.

Running Notes

The running community lost a dear friend this week with the passing of Stephen Hancock. The 58 year-old Bozrah resident died at home on August 15th after battling pancreatic cancer. Hancock was a former United States Marine Corps Sergeant, earning a Purple Heart. He worked as a Human Resource Specialist at Electric Boat for 30 years and competed for the Mohegan Striders Running Club with a 2 hour 52 minute marathon best to his credit. Steve was probably most well known for singing the National Anthem at area road races. You couldn't help but feel patriotic after one of his heartfelt renditions. Steve Hancock was one of the toughest competitors I ever had the privilege of knowing. His presence will be missed.

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