



PHOTOGRAPH BY TRIATHLON.ORG/DELLY CARR



# RACE DAY HABITS

» MATT DIXON «

Race day is the big event for triathletes and the time when we get to put all our hard training to the test. Just like training, where swim sets are religiously repeated on the clock, kilometres and power are recorded on the bike and run intervals hit to the nearest second, race day needs to be executed in a similar fashion. It's not just a case of turn and let the day unfold, it's about being prepared and setting everything up to allow you to get the most on the day based on your training and preparation. It might sound obvious but in the blur of race day madness it's easy to lose sight and just go with what feels right or let your mind drift elsewhere. This month *Triathlete Europe's* resident coach, Matt Dixon from purplepatch, shows you the best way to approach and execute the perfect race day.

## RACE DAY MISTAKES

Race day is often a blizzard of emotion and tasks from the time you wake and try to force food down at some unearthly hour, to getting to race site, setting up transition, warming up and then getting to the start line before the gun goes off. A massive amount of energy can be expended before you even get into the meat and potatoes of racing.

Beyond each race having its own logistical challenges, I consistently see athletes put up roadblocks and hurdles for themselves. Often they arrive without a plan, without a ritual of process and no means of making their approach to the race automatic. With an already tense situation looming, these are the athletes that add to the tension as they try to filter all the things to do through already confused and racing minds.

Ironically, these athletes are often those that are most likely to begin introducing unpracticed elements into their race day in pursuit of saving time. Should you leave your

bike shoes in your pedals? The answer is obvious, only if you have practiced this to the point that the skill is an automatic behaviour. If not, then don't do it. The same goes for many other factors in your race day arsenal. Don't try new shoes, new nutrition, new hydration, an untested bottle set-up, a new wetsuit and the list goes on. New is generally not great when it comes to race day. Pretty obvious stuff really.

To limit unnecessary stress, minimise risk of controllable factors preventing good performance. Allow yourself to focus on the process of executing a great performance on race day. We can focus on a few key areas.

## MAKING ACTIONS HABITS

The most obvious way to facilitate performance is to make as many of the 'learnable' skills or actions associated with your race second nature to you. By practicing these actions and skills, they can and should become so automatic, that you hardly need to

pay them attention for them to run seamlessly on race day. Having your shoes in your pedals is an example, but so is learning how to mount and dismount your bike, eating and hydrating on a set schedule, executing a swimming start effort, peeling your wetsuit off or even running off the bike. These skills and actions require practice, and the more familiar you are with them before the race, the less likely you will be derailed on the day of the event.

If these actions are not second nature, then the chances of negative consequences occurring are greatly increased. Of the examples above, it is easy to see that some of these are absolute necessities to get right, including your approach to nutrition and how to approach a swim start. Others, like shoes in your pedals or learning mounts and dismounts, are 'nice to haves', but certainly not essential to a great performance.

The only way to conquer this area is to integrate these types of skills or actions into

»MATT DIXON« **RACE**

your training programme. There is no other way around it. Using our examples, you have to practice fuelling on the bike and during run workouts, you should absolutely build swim sessions that simulate the conditions of race start, incorporate skill-based runs following some of your riding sessions and, if time, work on your transitions.

### **RITUAL OF THE DAY**

Having mastered transitions, knowing how you are going to fuel and having a grasp of how the swim start will feel, now you need to minimise the potential stress of the process of race day. As startlingly simple as this is, so many athletes fail to create simple rituals on race day to ensure their race unfolds without incident.

The key here is that you want to maximise the predictability of how your race day flows, and aim to replicate it, with potential refinements, in every race. Making every step in the process a ritual, it takes away any chance of nervous energy being expended to simple tasks and minimises the risk of you missing or forgetting something important. At purplepatch we focus on creating habits, or rituals, that each athlete repeats for every race. This allows a sense of familiarity, calmness and focus before every event. Repetition will lead to familiarity and comfort. Here is a sample of the process, and what to think about:

**Breakfast and wake up:** Aim to have the same breakfast the same amount of time before the

start of your warm up before every race. Remember this meal is not supposed to be your favourite breakfast but to simply fuel your muscles and body for the event ahead.

**Arriving to race site:** Always give yourself plenty of time, plan ahead for logistics and aim to give yourself more time than you think you will need. Around 90 minutes per-race start is our typical approach.

**Planning and setting up the transition:** Whenever possible, the first action is to review the transition area, including swim, bike and run entrances and exits. This includes mapping your course through each area. Following this comes setting up your

PHOTOGRAPH BY TRIATHLON.ORG/DELLY CARR



wetsuit on and grab your cap and goggles. You might also begin fuelling now because you have begun activity.

**Head to race start:** This is key. Before you simply dive into the water and begin a swim warm up you need to set the stage for a successful swim. Check out what the conditions are like (current, chop, or flat), look to see where the sun is now and where is it going to be when you're racing. Look to see if the course set up is as anticipated and scope out the ideal place to line up. Also try to find terrain that can help with sighting. Going through a ritual of swim course assessment provides more familiarity and control. It allows you to focus on executing your perfect performance.

**Swimming warm up:** At almost every race it is possible to get a swim warm up. It might not be on the course but you can usually warm up. Take advantage of this. A progressive warm up should take 10 to 15 minutes. You should already know what your warm up is, and you simply execute and don't deviate.

**Line up:** Once you are done with your swim warm up you are ready to line up. Be standing near your intended start position five minutes prior to the gun going off.

Now it is simply time to execute the day. Let's talk about the mindset of racing itself.

### PROCESS MINDSET

Whenever I discuss race strategy with athletes I always find myself coming back to the word 'process'. So many athletes train incredibly hard but then show up on the day of the race with their mind full of nerves hoping they can attain their goals and have a good day. Many wait at the start line of the swim and are full of thoughts about getting onto the bike, then spend much of the early stages of the bike assessing their swim performance and how their legs feel on the bike. Then when they hit the run it seems like a wonderful time to start the mathematics of calculating what times they need to hit each kilometre in to achieve their goal. So many questions all sit within a result driven mindset, and only act to prevent your best performance on the day.

Race day should be the time to forget your goals for much of the day. Your goals were there to help you get out of bed for those early morning swim sessions or get you on your bike in the rain, but race day is about execution. To execute you need a plan, and part of your training and preparation has to include a well thought out strategy of how you are going to approach your swim, bike, and run portions, as well as other factors such as nutrition and hydration.

If you have done a good job in training and have managed to make many actions and skills automatic, and you have cemented a ritual of preparation, hence not wasted lots of emotional capacity on how you are setting up your transition, then you should have plenty of mind space for the process of execution. A triathlon provides you with a big problem of swimming, biking, and running, but by staying in the moment and breaking the big problem into little 'projects', you facilitate success. I break down an athlete's process in racing into three main areas:

**Form:** A global reminder to set how you are swimming, mastering your bike and the terrain you are riding in, or setting up proper mechanics and form in running. There is a mindset component to this but simple examples might be:

- Thinking about finding rhythm on your bike.
- Choosing appropriate gears and cadence at the right part of the race.
- Staying relaxed and quiet on the bike.
- Running with quick feet, tall posture and shoulders in front of the hips.

**Fuelling:** Execution of fuelling and hydration can be a massive supporter of your best performance. Stay on schedule with your type, timing and rhythm of fuelling and hydration to ensure you have the energy needed to maximise performance.

**Pacing:** This is an ongoing puzzle of maintaining the appropriate effort at each part of the race. A few examples:

- Staying smooth and controlled in the initial few hundred metres of the swim start. Most start too strong.
- Allowing the legs to 'come to you' on the bike before pushing a stronger effort.
- Keeping effort or power up in the later stages, which often requires focus, effort and commitment
- Setting appropriate pacing in the initial stages of the run.

In each discipline I like athletes to retain a mantra that can remind them; form, fuelling, pacing. It is an ongoing cycle of assessment, execution and staying in the moment. If you commit to this process it becomes second nature and your mind can be clear, thriving and focused on squeezing the sponge of performance.

Set up your rituals, make racing a habit and leave your mind clear for executing your best performance. Finally, leave the evaluation of your race performance until after the race is finished. There is no positive to predicting the future before it has occurred. t

transition area, which should always be done in the same order, with things in the same place. As much of a nerd as your friends will think you are, use a checklist and follow it. It provides ease of mind.

**Jogging warm up:** I am amazed at how many athletes, even elites, who fail to properly warm up before an event. This is a big mistake. I believe a proper warm up includes light jogging and running to increase your metabolism and increase your core temperature, then a focused swimming warm up (if possible).

**Get swim ready:** Sometimes halfway through your warm up, you will need to put your

