

# Off-Road Triathlons: Two Worlds Unite

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**Off-road triathlon (wikipedia): “A form of triathlon, consisting of a swim stage, mountain-biking stage, and a trail-running stage.”**

Sounds like a challenge. Sign me up! It all started in 1996 with a race called Aquaterra, as mountain biking and triathlon met in a duel of the fittest on the island of Maui, in Hawaii. The challenge consisted of an open-ocean swim, a mountain bike race, and a trail run. This bold new racing format attracted outdoor enthusiasts, including many mountain bikers and road triathletes. The mountain bikers brought their laid-back style and bold self-assurance to the races, while the triathletes contributed their intense training ethic and dedication. As different as the two worlds were, neither side could resist the challenges and thrills presented by this racing format. For the triathlete, an off-road triathlon offered a new technical challenge, more anaerobic demands, and a break from the monotonous pavement. For the mountain biker, the race offered a longer aerobic demand, the challenge of transitions and the opportunity to master three disciplines.

## Looking for Something Different

After many years as a veteran road triathlete and with an Ironman under my belt, I was looking for something different. Not singing lessons or a knitting club, mind you—I still had a serious endorphin addiction. I was just sick of having a sore butt from endless hours logged on a road bike, and preferred a fun trail run to pavement pounding. I also knew that trying something new was the best way to shake up a fitness routine. And of course I should mention that my new boyfriend was a serious mountain biker, and I have a strong competitive streak. I wanted to take him on in an event that catered to both our strengths—and weaknesses!

So, like a typical, confident newbie, I signed myself up for the longer distance (1 km swim, 24 km mountain bike, 10 km trail

run) XTC race in Campbell River, at the end of the summer. Then the fun part: I got to acquire some pretty fancy new gear, in the form of a full suspension mountain bike. Last but not least, I started training. I had my schedule planned, heart rate zones calculated, and routes measured, so typical of a dedicated road triathlete. I consulted and rode with my mountain biking friends, trying to pick up more skills.

In early summer, I knew I was ready for my first off-road race! I started with the perfectly named “My First Mountain Bike Race” in White Rock, although at the starting line the competitors seemed a fraction of my age (see photos). Placing in the top three, I felt strong.

## Training, and Some Panic

A month before the XTC triathlon, I pre-rode the course (again, a road triathlete move). It was much harder than I expected and made me wonder if I could even complete the course. They claimed this was a “blue-level” course! This course felt like a double black to me! I knew I couldn’t do four laps of it and survive. My confidence was crushed. Unlike any other triathlon I’d done, I realized my fitness wouldn’t be enough to pull me through this time -- I simply didn’t have the skills on the bike to complete the race. I

didn’t want to drop out entirely, so I recruited a mountain-biking friend and entered the race as a relay team. We confidently called ourselves “Hot to Trot” and managed to come first in the full-distance female team category. I thought to myself: “I’ll be back next year for the whole thing!”

The following summer, I signed up for a mountain bike skills course, rode some more,

and challenged my fiancée Andrew (yes, all the sweat, mud and competition did lead to a marriage proposal) to a head-to-head battle in the half-distance race. May the best athlete win! A 500 m swim, 12 km bike and a 5 km run sounds easy, right? Again, I set up my training schedule, logged my hours, tracked my heart rate, and carefully measured my progress. Andrew is one of those crazies you see riding massive bikes down a mountain over “teeter-totters” and “skin-nies,” doing “bunny hops” and “hucking” any obstacle while wearing gladiator-like body armour. Until I met him, I thought cyclists built leg strength by riding up the hills. This type of mountain biker actually drives (i.e., in a car) up the hill and only rides down. Andrew claims the downhill is the best part of the ride and still physically difficult. The ride up is simply hard, unpleasant, and boring. The funny thing is, by our estimates our finishing times would be too close to predict a winner. Because of the technical course, it might be possible for him to make up for a weak swim and run. Although I gave An-

drew free pool passes, and bought him the right running shoes, I have to admit, I never did see him get his feet wet or move faster on foot than a brisk walk.

## Race Day

Race weekend arrived and we pre-rode the course. Although it was the same course as last year, it felt easier

this time! There were still a few sections I would have to walk, but I had confidence I could at least complete it. Race day started at 9 am (a nice sleep-in compared to road triathlons), and we found the mountain biking gang crowded around the doughnut box and drinking coffee. I was drinking water, warming up, and checking my transition area while Andrew opted for doughnuts. At



New to Off-Road Tris: My competition at My First Mountain Bike Race - Was I ready?

10 am the start gun went off and the race was on! After the swim I had a 7 minute lead on Andrew, who reportedly used a leisurely breaststroke all of the way. If only I could hold my lead for the rest of the ride, victory would be mine! With the first lap of the bike course completed, there was still no sign of Andrew. My supporters hollered that I still had a good 4 minutes on him. Second lap, and a rider behind me shouted "on your right" and I pulled over to let him by. Andrew just snuck by too, ringing his bike bell in glee! I pulled out all my reserves, but couldn't catch him on the twisting single-track course. I decided I'd get him on the run. A short distance later, I saw a rider pushing his bike up the hill. Andrew! I sarcastically shouted "Get on your bike!" only to realize that he had a flat tire and was desperately trying to maintain his lead as we approached the transition. I'd like to tell you that I did what any loving girlfriend would do, and stopped to help Andrew fix his tire, because legally a rider can help another. But that day I gambled and carried no tubes, no pump, and no patches. Plus, there were other athletes to beat! So, in my type A style, I rode on by, and ran five kilometers to victory. The real winner? We're still discussing that.

Will I do another off-road triathlon? You bet. What I found amazing was that it took me 1:10 to ride 12 km on the bike! That's about 10 km/hour compared to my road pace of 28 km/hour -- and it wasn't easy! An off-road triathlon requires a higher degree of technical biking skill, as opposed to the high speed and endurance demands of road biking. However, my legs did feel "fresh" off the bike as a result of changing my riding position often and recruiting different muscle groups. Distances for the bike portion of an off-road tri are much less relevant than for a road triathlon. What truly

influences the course is the degree of technicality (meaning the number, pitch, and sharpness of turns through trees, rocks, logs, streams, and other obstacles on the bike trail).

## More about Off-Road Tris

The typical off-road triathlon is comprised of the following: 1.5 km swim, 30 km mountain bike, and a 10km trail run, although the exact distances may vary. There is usually a "half distance" race for beginners and a trail run event as well. Athletes can compete as individuals or as part of a team. You'll need a mountain bike (either a hard tail or full suspension is recommended), mountain bike shoes, and trail runners. If you're already a road triathlete, you've probably got the rest!



Two worlds unite: we both finished the race. Here, Sophia shows her stuff..

In Canada, the off-road race series is called XTC. The National Off-Road Triathlon Championships will be held on September 8, 2007 at the XTC Vancouver race. The XTC Campbell River race on August 12, 2007 is the BC Off-Road Triathlon Championships and part of BC Provincial Triathlon Race Series. In addition, the XTC Vancouver and XTC Campbell River race are part of the Triathlon BC Junior Race Series. Both races offer half-distance options, which are suitable for those just getting involved. This year, XTC will be hosting some training clinics. Check their website at [www.xtc-canada.com](http://www.xtc-canada.com) for more information.

Internationally, XTERRA offers races in many countries. The world championship takes place in Maui, Hawaii every October. An age-group athlete can qualify at an XTERRA race, or by entering the "at large" pool. For more information, see [www.xterraplanet.com](http://www.xterraplanet.com). Professionally, Canadian women were at the top in 2006! Local athlete Melanie McQuaid placed first for her third world championship win,

and Danelle Kabush from Alberta finished second. Heather King, another professional Canadian woman and physiotherapist from North Vancouver, also had a strong finish at the 2006 Worlds. Canadian women are dominating!

Off-road triathlons remind you how much fun it is to play in the woods: you hop across rocks, soar across streams, and zig-zag your way along a mountain trail. Be a kid again and rediscover your sense of adventure and wonder while getting a fabulous workout. Why not give it a tri this year?

*Sophia Sagur is a TriBC member and has been competing in the sport of triathlon for seven years. Heather King is a professional off-road triathlete and nationally ranked mountain biker. Sophia and Heather are registered physiotherapists and co-directors of Active Life Physiotherapy in Lonsdale, North Vancouver. Their clinic will open April 1, 2007 and will specialize in the treatment of triathletes, mountain bikers and runners as well as providing bike positioning and video gait analyses. Call 604.987.LIFE for more information.*

