

Off-road Triathlon Training and Technique

Sophia Sagur, Triathlete and Registered Physiotherapist, Active Life Physiotherapy, sophia@activelifephysio.ca

For those looking to tackle an off-road triathlon next season, the fall is a great time to start transitioning road skills to off-road without disrupting your usual training regime. For the off-road triathlon veterans, now is a great time to evaluate your skill set while the season is fresh in your memory. Off-road tri's are ultimately about swim, bike and run fitness, but these basics need to be applied to the

higher technical demands of off-road racing. You will need a good aerobic base, anaerobic fitness, and a lot of strength and power. Start building your technical skill set now, and plan your winter and spring to incorporate some of the specific energy-system demands of off-road tri's. This article

will focus on the training and technique required for a great season off-road racing.

Most off-road triathlons are about 60% mountain biking, 30% running, and 10% swimming. Your training should reflect this large proportion of bike time and include both strength and power on the bike, as well as technical skills. Being skilled on the bike will make you more efficient, and makes a big difference when it come to being ready for the run. Generally, off-road tri's stress the anaerobic energy system (depending on the course profile) much more than road tri's. Interval training, hill repeats, and other higher-intensity workouts with bursts of effort will prepare your anaerobic system. However, you will still need to develop a solid aerobic base, as races typically last 1.5 to 4 hours.

The Swim

Since the swim in an off-road vs. road tri is essentially the same, do what you know works when it comes to training for the swim. Just be prepared for a short jog on the beach before the second swim loop in some races! Practice your entry, exits, and sighting, and make sure you spend lots of time in the lake during the summer.



Look far ahead, don't chicken out: commit! Tips on biking as part of an off-road triathlon

The Bike

The most important workout on the bike is still the weekend long ride to build your aerobic base. Try to do this ride on a hilly course to improve your leg strength. Once you have a good base, perhaps in the spring, introduce hill repeats. Find a hill that takes about 10 minutes to climb, and do repeats with gradually increasing intensity. Don't just coast on the downhill, get used to the feeling of speed!

The most important skills to develop on your bike are your technical skills. Here are few hints:

- Always look far ahead. The faster you go, the further ahead you should look. If you focus on the creek bed on either side of the log you're crossing, that's where you'll go! Look where you want to go.
- Brake early, before the corner, and ac-

celerate out of it.

- Don't chicken out; commit! Choose your line and stick with it.
- On a climb, keep a steady smooth cadence and use the full pedal stroke for power. Gear down before you get to the hill, and choose a gear that allows you to keep a steady pace right to the top of the hill. Shift your weight to the nose of the saddle. You will have to make small adjustments to your position on the seat in order to maintain both good traction on the rear tire and weight on the front tire for steering. Stay seated, as this is more energy efficient, with intermittent stands to stretch your body. Relax your shoulders, keep your elbows bent, and minimize upper body motion.
- On uphill switchbacks, stay towards the outside of the turn where the gradient is not as steep and there is generally not as much washout.
- Mentally break the climb into smaller sections. When you make it to the top, continue to pedal past it!
- Learn to bunny hop, or un-weight your wheels over obstacles. A good way to practice this in the off-season is over curbs in a parking lot, or other obstacles on an open lawn.
- Learn to balance on your bike. Try track stands at every stop light. Practice turning tight corners at slow speed. Get to know the feel of your bike.
- Take a technical skills course.

Lastly, become mechanically inclined. You are more likely to run into mechanical problems on a mountain bike than on a road bike. Know how to fix a flat tire, mend a broken chain, set your brakes, etc. and bring the tools you need to do so (saving weight is not necessarily better in this case!). Know what tire pressure to run (hint - it's not around 100 psi!). Tire pressure will depend on the course and conditions, but generally, a higher pressure will prevent flats and lower pressure will improve your traction.

The Run

Like the bike, the weekend long run is the key to developing your aerobic base. Try to do this run on trails. To develop leg strength and power, begin hill repeats once you have developed a good base. Running uphill and downhill are two different skills and each needs attention to get the most out of your training. On the uphill, keep the stride length short and powerful. Stay tall with a slight forward lean. On the downhill, focus on letting it go; let yourself fly! Try to increase your cadence rather than stride length. Land with your knee slightly bent, keep your hips forward, and be “light” (you shouldn’t hear your feet). Keeping your arms wide will help you with balance, and remember to look where you want to go, not at your feet. Tempo runs and interval session will also help to increase leg turnover and improve your anaerobic capacity. Trail miles take much longer than road miles (30-60 sec slower per mile) so don’t be too hard on yourself and focus on the duration of the run rather than the distance. Make sure you’re prepared for a trail run where help may not be nearby. Always carry extra food and fluids, a warmer layer, and a cell phone. Try to run with a buddy, but if not, let someone know where you’re going and when you expect to be back. Keep in mind that your risk of falling and injury increases with physical and mental fatigue.

Strength / Power training

Strength training will improve your performance by training your fast twitch muscle fibers, and help you avoid overuse injuries by increasing the integrity of your musculoskeletal system (you bones, tendons, and muscles). For most athletes, two strength training sessions per week is enough. Focus on sport-specific exercises and try to incorporate an uneven base such as a wobble board or BOSU ball whenever you can. This will improve your proprioception (the ability to react to uneven surfaces and know where your body is in space) and your core strength. Both are important in injury prevention (you don’t want a sprained ankle!). Using a cable or band to simulate an underwater swim pull, or bounding up a set of

stairs are excellent examples of sport-specific exercises. Off-road triathlons demand a stronger core. Ball, cable, band, foam roll or other core exercises should be incorporated into your training routine. Try also to incorporate bounding motions (plyometrics), such as jump squats or lunges. Stair climbing is an excellent strengthening exercise for trail runners (think... Grouse Grind). Ask your physiotherapist, personal trainer, or other health professional to help you design a specific core/power/strength program. If you aren’t keen on the gym, there is a lot that can be done on the beach, on the bleachers, on a bench, or on a log in the outdoors!

Bricks

Just as in road tri’s, bricks are important to become comfortable with the bike/run transition. Immediately after a long ride, throw in a 10-20 minute run at an easy to moderate pace. After a cycling hill session, try running 20-40 minutes and building your intensity midway in the run to near race pace. This will help you build leg strength and endurance. Finally, throw in a mini off-road tri to prepare you for the real thing. This dry-run will answer questions such as “should I wear cycling gloves?” and “what type of sunglasses do I use?” as well as help iron out any issues with the transition.

Putting it all Together

Keep in mind that in off-road triathlons, every race is different. Some may have a beach run in the middle of the swim, some have windy single track, gravel roads, steep climbs, or sandy descents. The variability in terrain is endless. Know your course and train specifically for it. If possible try to pre-ride the course. Plan where you can take your hands off the bars to grab some fluid or fuel, decide what tire pressure to use, and remember what gear you want for the steep climb.

Overall, be prepared for the unexpected but let your hard training reward you with a great day on the trails.

Websites to Check Out

www.xterraplanet.com/training

www.trailrunnermag.com

www.bctrailrunning.com

Sophia Sagur is a TriBC member and has been competing in the sport of triathlon for seven years, more recently in off-road triathlons. She is a Registered Physiotherapist and co-owner of Active Life Physiotherapy in Lonsdale, North Vancouver. The clinic specializes in the treatment of triathletes, mountain bikers and runners as well as providing bike positioning and video gait analyses. Call 604.987.LIFE or visit www.activelifephysio.ca for more information.

