



## Shane Eversfield

As we begin to experience a level of mastery at a particular triathlon race distance, we have two choices to further challenge ourselves within the world of swim-bike-run: We can go faster. Or, we can go farther. Ironman has long been revered as the pinnacle distance of our sport. Once an athlete finishes an Ironman, the only option is to go faster, yes?

Many Iron triathletes are just discovering that there are indeed races longer than 140.6 miles. In 2007, Ian Adamson offered the 2nd annual 24 Hours of Triathlon in Denver over Labor Day weekend. Steve Kirby produced the annual Virginia Double and Triple Iron triathlons [Steve's Note: These are Hammer Nutrition sponsored events] in Lake Anna, Virginia over Columbus Day weekend. (The Double began in Alabama in 1985, moved to Lake Anna in 1997, and was joined by the Triple in 1998.) Jane Bockus directed the 23rd Hawaii Ultraman World Championship over Thanksgiving weekend. And, if none of these events are long enough to get you warmed up, you can try your hand (and your arms and legs) at a deca-iron. (Yup, that's 10 times iron-distance.) Two formats have been used for deca's: 1) Swim 24 miles, bike 1120 miles, and run 262 miles. 2) Do one iron-distance race each day for 10 days consecutively. The Deca Iron World Championship was held in Mexico City in November 2007, using the second format. (For more information, see the sidebar "Ultra-Triathlon Race Formats").

Welcome to the "squirrel cage"! With the exception of Ultraman, most ultra-triathlons are "squirrel cage races". They consist of multiple swim, bike, and run laps, over a short, gently rolling or flat course. For instance, the Virginia

Double Iron consists of 12 out-and-back swim laps, followed by 45 out-and-back bike laps and 26 out-and-back run laps. The Triple Iron, which starts 24 hours earlier than the Double, consists of 18 swim, 67.5 bike, and 39 run laps over the same course. You might think such a short course for such long races would make a multi-day race monotonous. However, the Lake Anna course is quite beautiful, on quiet roads in a state park. The short out-and-back repetitions allow each athlete to return to the race center every 20-60 minutes, with access to his/her "pit area" for food, clothing, equipment changes, and crew support. This frequent "check-in" offers a sense of security, as the athlete endures such a daunting task. Unlike most conventional races on longer courses, ultra-triathlons allow pacers to accompany athletes. The short laps make it easy for spouses and other crew members to take turns accompanying their athletes.

Over multiple laps, the athlete gains intimate familiarity with the course, honing a perfect strategy for the greatest efficiency and economy. The age-old expression, "Practice makes perfect" really holds true for such courses, where triple-iron athletes typically spend 20-30 hours just to cover the 336 miles of the bike leg. Short lap lengths also mean the athlete has an accurate, continuous measure of progress.

**Why?** Why would anyone want to do an endurance event longer than an Ironman? What new discoveries or experiences are there beyond iron? What about the time commitment? If you max your weekly training at 20 hours for Iron-distance, do you max at 40 hours a week for a double-iron, or 60 hours for a triple? How can you train most effectively for ultra-tri's and still have

a life? What's the real secret behind training for longer distances?

**Well?** Are you ready to venture further into the intriguing landscape of physical and mental endurance?

**How?** In my limited experience, once the muscular, metabolic, and neurological systems are adapted to iron-distances, it is possible to sustain aerobic exercise for much longer duration, without an increase in training volume, if three criteria are met: 1) I have a simple nutrition protocol for continuous fueling. 2) I remain patient and calm enough to regulate a sustainable pace appropriate for the duration. 3) I focus relentlessly on executing each and every stroke and stride efficiently, economically, and gracefully. In reverse order, let's consider each of these criteria.

**Focus:** The big secret behind training and racing longer distances without devoting every waking moment to training is very simple, yet very subtle. There is a shift in emphasis from sheer volume of physical training to mindfulness training. In Buddhism, mindfulness is the first of seven factors for enlightenment. Jack Kornfield describes it very simply in "Seeking the Heart of Wisdom" as "a clear awareness of what is happening each moment". For endurance athletes, this translates to a capacity to remain present and focused in the "here and now," in order to swim, bike, and run with biomechanical efficiency and economy even under duress, for the duration of the workout or the race. Mindfulness is the foundation for every quality workout, regardless of duration. It includes our concentration

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and kinetic awareness.

With mindfulness, we swim, bike, and run more intelligently. An intelligent, mindful approach is evermore crucial as the distance increases. Each moment of training and racing becomes an intense investigation of efficiency, economy, grace, and harmony. Go faster and farther with less effort and energy. Recover faster and minimize incurrence of injury. These are primary intentions that all endurance athletes share, from sprint to ultra.

Mindfulness is simple, and it's profoundly powerful in all aspects of life. Yet, it is also intangible and hard to measure, so an athletic pursuit of mindfulness can be illusive. It's not something we can buy in a bottle and drink. However, as the hours and the miles add up over a long training session or an ultra race, the logical mind begins to soften and melt down. Unencumbered by that incessant internal commentary, it gets easier to enter the zone of clear awareness, to find the flow.

The most important guideline for combining mindfulness and endurance training is to approach each session with all the diligence and awareness you can muster – as if this will be the last time you will ever swim, bike, or run. Absorb every moment and every detail of your movement. There is no limit to your capacity for diligence and awareness, no limit to your capacity to execute each stroke and stride perfectly.

### Technique – A Relentless Pursuit:

Swimming is the discipline that really shows us the precedence of perfect technique over desperate exertion. Great swimmers seem to slide through the water without much movement or effort. However, as an

illustration for using mindfulness to survive an ultra triathlon, let's consider cycling. When I began the 224-mile bike leg of the 2007 Virginia Double, I had never in my life biked more than 171 miles in a single ride, and that was at Ultraman, 11 months prior. In the preceding 2 months, since Ironman Lake Placid, I had not ridden longer than 3 hours continuously. I had to approach the Double Iron bike ride with more efficiency and economy than ever before. Do or die, this would be a relentless pursuit of perfect technique. (Nothing like high stakes to perk up the concentration).

My focal points included joint alignment (of the hip, knee, ankle, and foot) and pelvic orientation for correct biomechanics. I also focused on keeping my shoulders low and relaxed, tucking my chin, lengthening the back of my neck and leading with the crown of my head. I continually kept this focus in both aero and upright positions. I was very concerned with saddle discomfort during the 15-hour ride and knew that the best way to avoid it was through diligent saddle positioning that minimized side-to-side movement and the chaffing it causes. (I had brought an ISM saddle on a separate seatpost, in case I felt the need to change saddles. However, I stayed with my Fizik Arione Tri saddle for the duration). I opted for tri shorts with minimal padding and minimal bulk, over bike shorts, for the entire ride.

I also focused on maintaining a cadence of 80-95 rpm throughout the ride, mindful to shift gears accordingly. After the first 5 laps or so, I had determined the best gear selection, cadence, and positioning strategy for every part of the short course. I rarely rode out of the saddle except to stretch as I coasted downhill, opting to conserve my leg

strength. Overall, I maintained a harmonious and symbiotic relationship with my bike, maintaining correct biomechanics and constantly exercising my "vocabulary" of riding positions.

The most difficult element of the bike segment was navigating the stretch of road closest to the transition area after nightfall, as we were sharing this section with runners. I constantly reminded myself that these runners were doing the Triple, and were enduring their second night without sleep. Many were in a state of trance that deserved a wide berth. Each cyclist and runner had a headlight/lamp. Depth perception was difficult, so I exercised patience and caution, keeping the speed conservative throughout this section of the course.

**Patient Pacing:** A second precious virtue for endeavors of this length is patience. It allows the ultra-athlete to remain in the present moment, without any mental "squirring" that can cause disassociation. Patience is most essential in determining a pacing strategy that is gentle enough to prevent injuries, yet focused enough to cover the distance in the allotted time. With patience, the athlete is less anxious to "hurry up and get this thing over with!" (Maybe this is why the majority of ultra-triathletes are in their 40's and 50's). In my experience, I use a combination of mindfulness and patience to gradually and gracefully click off the laps. For setting the pace on both bike and run, I focus on minimizing the perceived strain and impact to my hip, knee, and ankle joints, as well as my feet. I really enjoy the gentleness of this pacing strategy and I'm happy to sustain it for many hours.

**Simple Nutrition:** For the Double,

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## HOT TIPS

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I used the same nutrition strategy I've used in the past for ultra races: I refrained from eating anything on race morning until 5 or 10 minutes before I began. I consumed one Hammer Gel before the start. For the remainder of the race, I consumed 2 to 2.5 scoops of Hammer Perpetuem per hour (even during the 4.8-mile swim), along with water and Hammer Endurolytes appropriate for the climate conditions. Hammer Nutrition supplied HEED and Endurolytes that were available at the transition area and the run turnaround. On the second day, as the weather got hot on the run, I opted for Heed over Perpetuem. This simple strategy works very well for me – no fiber to process, a steady and even flow of complex carbohydrates with some soy protein, and electrolytes. It is a protocol simple enough for any crew member to anticipate and follow.

I feel that the perceived need for complicated nutrition strategies, with a wide diversity of foods, is more a psychological crutch than a physiological requirement. It is a result of mental “squirring” – the desire to disassociate and to seek out comfort. The consequence is often digestive distress and erratic energy levels. Keep in mind that stored fat is the primary source of fuel for aerobic activity. If the athlete provides an adequate and steady flow of carbohydrate (necessary for converting that stored fat to fuel), as well as electrolytes and water, the body enjoys a continuous level of energy without any gastric complications. The ultra-distance quest is demanding enough; keep the nutrition simple.

**Basic Ultra Training Guidelines:**

Novice athletes initially realize their greatest advances in endurance as they improve metabolic efficiency, training the body to burn fat and to conserve glycogen at higher levels of intensity and for longer durations. As the metabolic system adapts, the advances will level off, with occasional peaks through well-planned periodization. However, given consistent training and a diligent mindful approach, we can continue to improve technique indefinitely as we age. Focus on technique during every workout, whether it is a recovery session or a high-intensity interval session. Relentlessly pursue economy, efficiency,

and grace – in the water, on the bike, and on the run.

We train three physiological systems – muscular, metabolic, and neurological. It is the neurological that responds and improves the most, and the muscular that responds the least. However, don't discount strength training. Functional strength conditioning focuses on training the neuro system to recruit more muscle fibers for a given movement. Improved recruitment means greater endurance capacity with less mileage. Multi-planar exercises that cause you to stabilize joints and maintain balance, will train your neuro-based proprioception – your balance and coordination. Proprioception is a key element for that relentless pursuit of perfect technique. Finally, the pelvic core provides a stable center for all efficient movements – swim, bike, or run. Don't skimp on functional core strength.

As mentioned above, once you can maintain a training volume for iron-distance, it may not be necessary to increase that for ultra tri's. Rather, use progressively longer races every 5-8 weeks with adequate recovery in between to build up your metabolic and (more importantly) mental stamina. Alternatively, an epic workout 3-4 weeks prior to an ultra is effective. Instead of chaining yourself to the bike for 14 hours, be creative! I have used two creative approaches with success. One is a “volley” workout, alternating between two disciplines throughout the day. The second alternative works well here in the mountains surrounding Lake Placid: I go for an epic hike with lots of ascents and descents. (These approaches are detailed in the “Case Study” below.)

Finally, don't let up on the speed work. Obviously, you won't be doing much sprinting on the bike or run of an ultra-triathlon. However, speed work helps to train your muscle fiber recruitment for greater endurance and is essential in that relentless pursuit of perfect technique.

**Case Study:** For an illustration of the information discussed above, here's a quick 2.5-month overview of my training and racing leading up to the Virginia Double, 6-7 October. I followed Ironman Lake Placid, 23 July, with active recovery for the first week – easy swim and bike sessions. I also resumed my

combined core strength and stretching workout (including physio-ball work) three days post-IM, and resistance strength training 10 days later. For speed work, I raced High Peaks Cyclery's weekly Monday Night Mini-Tri (sprint distance), beginning eight days after.

My immediate race-focus after IM was the USMS National 2-Mile Cable Swim Championship three weeks later. Consequently, most of my high intensity workouts (with the exception of the weekly sprint tri's) were limited to swimming. Three days before the USMS race, I did an endurance bike-run “volley” in preparation for 24 Hours of Triathlon (24 HOT). The volley consisted of 90 minutes biking/30 run/90 bike/30 run/90 bike/30 run/90 bike. This format closely resembled the strategy I would use for 24 HOT. A few days after the USMS race, I did a similar swim-run “volley”. While these were long sessions, the volley format kept my running legs fresh and recovery times short.

I soloed 24 Hours of Triathlon 1-2 September – five weeks after IM, and two weeks after USMS. For this race, I alternated between multiple 1-mile swim laps and a single 2.8-mile run lap throughout the day. Although the temperature peaked at 90 degrees, I was back in the water after each 30-minute run to cool off. At night, I alternated between multiple 9.4-mile bike laps and a single run lap. (I never ran more than one run lap at a time throughout the race). This strategy of short run repetitions allowed for greater recovery and minimized injury potential, even though my total run distance was 42 miles. In 24 hours, I completed 15 triathlons, with one additional swim.

I resumed swimming, biking, core strength, and stretching as soon as I returned to Lake Placid. I refrained from running due to a minor injury to my left knee from the 24 HOT. A week after 24 Hours, I signed up for the Virginia Double and I went on a 4-hour fast-hike with friends to the summit of Giant Mountain, here in the Adirondack Park. My legs were very sore for 3 days after the climb, so I ran only twice in that week, 20 minutes each time.

The very next weekend, 5 of us completed a 13.5-hour fast-hike,

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summiting nine of the Adirondack High Peaks, with over 10,200 feet of elevation, covering over 25 miles. (All five of us had completed Ironman Lake Placid, and all of us agreed this hike left our legs far more trashed). This served as my peak training event for the Virginia Double, three weeks away.

I resumed biking and swimming the next day, but did not run for four days – and then, just 20 minutes. A week after the epic hike, I ran 10 miles. It felt like 20. This was only my fourth run since the 24 Hours, (the first one longer than 30 minutes), and my longest run before the Double. As mentioned above, my longest bike was three hours. With the exception of our epic hike, my weekly volume between these two long races was moderately low, peaking at a weekly total of 13:45. Regardless, I maintained my relentless pursuit of economy, efficiency, and grace in every workout. In addition, twice a week I did my yoga-Pilates core strength and managed a few multi-planar weight lifting sessions as well.

Psychologically, it would have been easy for me to feel anxious about my low training volume as I prepared for the Double, especially running volume. However, a key component of

my endurance athletic training is to disengage from the fear I associate with uncertainty and doubt, especially as I approach a new endurance challenge. This ability to disengage from the fear and befriend the uncertainty as an “elixir of life” is helpful when we approach any new and unfamiliar experience in life. Endurance training and racing provides a great arena for honing this life-skill. Continue to venture forth and explore unfamiliar territory as an athlete and you will continue to hone this skill. I am very grateful for the health, wealth, and the family, community and cultural support that enable me to do this.

In conclusion, the most important preparation for the Double was to arrive at the starting line in a calm state, with humility, gratitude, keen awareness, and lots of patience.

What is possible? One of the greatest psychological supports for me as I “raced” the Double, was sharing the experience with those who began 24 hours earlier, racing the Triple. Their daunting endeavor made my quest look much smaller and more attainable. Most noteworthy was Arthur Puckrin, a 69-year old judge from the UK who took up triathlon at age 50. Wearing his sandals, Arthur was still able to run on Sunday, when the temperature went

over 90 degrees, while I was reduced to a staggering walk. Still smiling and breathing deeply, he gracefully finished the 78.6-mile run to complete yet another triple-iron with more than an hour to spare. A month later he would begin the Deca World Championship in Mexico City.

Vicenzo Catalano of Italy also completed the triple. He holds the record for the most iron-distance tri’s completed in one year – 40. (Of course, most were accumulated during multiple iron events).

Finally, Guy Rossi of France, age 56, holds the world’s record for the most ultra-tri total mileage. He’s done 9 singles, a 24-hour (that included 8h swim, 8h bike, 8h run), 37 doubles, 27 triples, 1 quadruple, 2 quintuples and 8 deca’s. These accomplishments include 14 podium finishes. Kinda makes an annual Ironman look like a stroll in the park, huh?

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## ULTRA-TRIATHLON RACE FORMATS

**Ultraman:** Held annually in both Canada and Hawaii, this is a 3-day stage race. The format and distances for this race developed as a way for athletes to circle the entire Big Island, beginning at the pier in Kailua (which also serves as the start of Hawaii Ironman) and ending just a mile away. The first day includes a 6.2-mile point-to-point swim to Keauhou, followed by a 90-mile bike that finishes atop 4,000’ Kilauea, just a few miles from the active volcanic cauldron. Day 2 consists of a 171.4-mile bike through countless climatic zones and ecosystems, culminating with a fast descent into Hawi from the 5,000 crest of the Kohala mountains. On Day 3, athletes complete the circle back to Kailua with a double marathon along the same infamous coastal desert highway as the Hawaii Ironman bike course. (Canada Ultraman consists of the same distances.) The entire 320-mile course of both venues is open, with no traffic controls, and each athlete is required to have a support crew. Topography, wind, temperature, and road conditions are highly variable. Athletes must complete each day’s stage within 12 hours. Logistics constitute a crucial element of this race.

**24 Hours of Triathlon:** With a 2-year history, look for this Le Mans style

format to gain popularity. In 2007, 24HOT was held in Cherry Creek State Park on a 0.25 mile swim, 9.4-mile bike, and 2.8-mile run course, just outside of Denver. The event is open to solo athletes and teams. After the initial swim, bike, and run, athletes may complete legs of the triathlon in any order and combination. However, at the conclusion, placement is figured by the number of complete triathlons; an excess of bike laps won’t count. Swimming is allowed during daylight hours only. In 2008, the distances for each leg will be standardized to one-tenth of iron distance (0.24-mile swim, 11.2-mile bike, 2.62-mile run). This “go-as-far-as-you-can” format eliminates the distance requirement, meaning that every participant is a finisher. It’s a great way to break into the ultra-tri arena.

**Multiple Iron:** These classic “squirrel cage” races have been put on internationally for over 2 decades, including double, triple, quadruple, quintuple, deca., and even 15 times iron distance. In Europe, these races are usually held in well-lit urban areas on flat roads closed to traffic. Course lengths vary by location, however, all of these races consist of multiple laps of a short course. In the US, Huntsville, Alabama was host to the Double 1985-96, before the race moved to Virginia in 1997. The Triple was added in 1998. (For more info: [www.usaultratri.com](http://www.usaultratri.com), [www.iutasport.com](http://www.iutasport.com).)