

The Journey to an Ironman.

How long does it take to prepare for an Ironman? Just like most questions, the answer depends. It depends on your current fitness levels, your amount of triathlon experience or experience with each one of the disciplines, the amount of time you have to give to training, and of course, your goals for the event. It also presumes you will stay healthy, that your work schedule is flexible enough to enable you to fit your training in, and that your family is on board. Before you seriously commit to training for an Ironman (IM), you need to be sure that you have the time available for training anywhere between 13 and 20+ hours a week. Therefore, you should be sure that all your near and dear ones understand the commitment it will take from them too, as well as the actual time spent training (and remember it will not just be training time—you may well be too tired to do a lot of the things you usually do). Hopefully your work schedule is somewhat flexible to facilitate your training regimen. Additionally, you should give some thought to how this will affect vacations as well, as once you have started your journey to an ironman, you don't take time off. Do you have other interests besides triathlon? They more than likely will have to take a back seat, or maybe even go goodbye. It takes dedication, organization, some sacrifice, and a tremendous amount of planning and support to get to race day prepared and ready to race.

With all of that said, what kind of shape do you need to be in to safely begin to train for an IM? Ideally you will have been competing in triathlons for at least a year, with experience in sprints and Olympics, maybe even a half IM. Your current training takes about 8-9 hours a week and includes a couple of swims a week of about an hour, you can ride your bike for 2-3 hours comfortably and ride another 2 times a week, and your long run is about 90 minutes, with 2 or 3 more runs (about 15-20miles total/week for the last 6 months). Hopefully, you are doing a little weight training also: 2-3 times per week for 30 minutes of full body and core work. With that kind of base, you could race an Ironman in about 19 weeks. This presumes you are used to training on a 3 up, 1 down schedule. That is; 3 weeks of hard training, then one recovery week to allow for physiological adaptation as well as a mental break. If you are over 45 it is generally advised that you work on a 2 up, 1 down schedule to allow for more recovery, and of course this will lengthen the time to race readiness.

What would your training schedule look like? To prevent overtraining, burnout, or injury, you will do one key workout in each discipline per week and a rotating schedule of long workouts to build endurance. You don't do a hard run and bike session on the same day ("hard" = a key workout like a tempo, interval, hill session or a long workout even if it is done, as it should be, at under 75% of your max). However, it is okay to do a hard swim on the same day as a bike or run, but if you can spread them out that would be best so you come to the hard workouts as fresh as possible. While training for an IM can seem like there is never enough time to get all the training done, it IS possible with LOTS of planning. Probably one of the most important elements of any training plan is recovery and this must be incorporated into every week. Recovery can be a full day off (my fave) or you can use your easier workouts to work on form, without being concerned with speed, higher intensities, or distance. Each week you would add 10% to your long workouts (except on R and R weeks when you drop back to about 50%

in volume, intensity and duration to facilitate recovery so your training can actually be effective), building to about a 3 mile swim, a 120 mile ride, a 2 and half hour run, and a long brick of anywhere between 3-7 hours. A lot of the pros and regular IM competitors only do a long brick of about 3 hours, but for those of us that will take 12 or more hours to complete the actual IM, I think a longer brick will better prepare you both physically and mentally for the actual rigors of race day. I tend to set up the long workouts so that I do two long workouts a week on a rotating schedule.

For example:

week 1:

long bike 3 hours,
long brick 3 hours (1 hour ride, 2 hours run),

week 2:

long run of 2 hours,
long brick 3.5 hours(2.5 hr ride, 1 hour run)

week 3:

long bike 3.5 hours
long run 100 minutes.

Week 4:

Drop back week. Long ride = 2 hours, and long run or brick of 60 mins.

Note: This is only one way among many to set up your training schedule, and of course you will have to figure out what works for you so that you build the endurance required to complete an IM. During each of the long workouts, be sure to practice race day nutrition and hydration strategies: experiment with what works for you so that you get adequate liquid and calories without getting an upset stomach. This is another reason I think that we should build to longer bricks than the pros, as what your stomach can deal with after 8 hours of continuous exercise might be very different than what you can handle at 3 hours.

A 19 week schedule is all very well if you are already doing triathlons, but what if you are a single sport athlete: a swimmer, a biker, or a runner? How long do you need to prepare then? That's a tricky one, but to simplify it, I don't think you should start your actual IM training plan until you can at least complete the distances I initially stated. If you are new to running, the base minimum (6 months of consistent running, a long run of 70- 90 minutes and 15-20 total per week) is even more important, as running is the most likely of all 3 sports to cause injury in the build up to the marathon distance included in an IM. For those of you who may come to IM with no swimming or biking background, you should not skip on the initial investments of swimming lessons and a decent bike, with a proper bike fit done by a well established bike shop that is familiar with the needs of long distance triathletes. Swimming is a very technical discipline and learning how to do it the most efficiently will have a HUGE pay off. You don't want to begin the Ironman completely exhausted from expending twice the amount of energy you need to due to poor form. You have to spend entirely too long on the bike to either have the wrong bike or a poorly fitted bike—spend the money so you can get off the bike ready to run, rather than unable to stand up.

We have all heard stories about the people who are single sport athletes who turn around a complete an ironman after only 3 months of training. But just because it has been done, does not mean it SHOULD be done. Presumably you would like to stay healthy and be fit enough and pain free enough on race day to actually enjoy it and maybe even want to do another one. I try to talk athletes out of jumping straight into Ironman racing if they don't have the requisite training under their belts. I want my athletes to stay healthy, and to enjoy their training and racing, and to keep training for the rest of their lives. Ironman is all consuming and deciding to complete one can never be taken lightly. We often think we are different, and that injuries that have befallen others will never happen to us, but most often they will and they do. It is basic physiology: the body will get fitter and stronger, but not if you overtrain and not if you have not established a really solid base, especially for running where the stresses on the bones and muscles are huge. Triathlon is a lifestyle, so don't rush the journey to your first Ironman; enjoy your new way of life. After all, many of the best destinations are such because the journey itself was beautiful, unhurried, and well planned.

Have a great trip.

Dara E. Wittenberg
USA Triathlon Level II certified coach,
USA Cycling Expert Level Coach,
USATF Level I,
RRCA certified Endurance Running coach,
ACE certified PFT, and IDEA Advanced PFT.
Cell: 561-715-7737
Dara@tricoachdara.com