

# TRI THIS FOR SIZE

Triathlon is one of the fastest growing sports in the world and in recent years specialist outlets have popped up to cater for arguably the fittest of the fit. Adrian Hill reports

Tradition has always been important in sport, but so has evolution - and a pursuit that sums the latter up perfectly is triathlon. Forty years ago the swim/bike/run format was barely known and it wasn't until 1974 that the first contest tagged as a 'triathlon' was staged. In 2000 the sport became an Olympic discipline; its rate of progress has been staggering.

None more so than in Britain, the current fulcrum of the sport, which is home to the men's and women's world champions (Alistair Brownlee and Helen Jenkins), the global sprint triathlon title holder (Brownlee's brother, Jonathan) and the reigning Ironman triathlon world champion (Chrissie Wellington).

## EXPECTATION

Alistair Brownlee and Jenkins added further lustre to their reputations last year with victories in the Olympic Games 'dress rehearsals' and there is real expectation of British medal success, with the course wending its way through the attractive environs of Hyde Park - triathlon will create some of the images of London 2012.

Triathlon is the ultimate good news story in British sport at the moment, so how has the industry been grasping this opportunity?

A new trade body has been set up this year, the Triathlon Industry Association, which acts as a central representative for UK-based manufacturers, distributors and suppliers - an industry now comprising more than 200 companies. The driving force behind the formation of TIA was the triumvirate of David Townsend of TCR Shows, Paul Shanley of Tri247.com and Gary Roethenbaugh of triathlonbusiness.com.

"About 12 months ago at the Triathlon, Cycling and Running Show there was a discussion in the industry about setting up an association," recalls Roethenbaugh. "In the US there is Triathlon America, which was formed in October 2010 on a for-profit model, but we felt it was better going the traditional not-for-profit route and it has snowballed. We have 23 signed up members and we should double that this year.

"To have brands such as Wiggle and Chain Reaction Cycles on board is fantastic and we have a good mix of bricks and mortar speciality brands, media and race directors in the membership. Any others who want to join will be more than welcome."

The TIA is conscious that, compared to the longer established sports, triathlon lacks a database of evidence to back up its apparent success in luring a wide variety of the population into lakes and rivers, on to bikes and pounding footpaths and pavements. An activity initially seen as for the super-fit is now marketed as a sport for all. The TIA wants to spread the message by pooling knowledge and backing up impressions with facts.

"My background is research and I have worked in markets for both fast moving and slow moving goods," says Roethenbaugh. "I have seen there is always a benefit in working together from a practical point of view, raising awareness and using syndicated

buying. We are all in competition with each other, but the main benefit of the association is gathering information and disseminating it to the media. Triathlon is a very young sport, which is growing rapidly. It has been said that it is the fastest growing participation sport in the UK, which may be true, but where is the data to prove that?

"We are working closely with British Triathlon and we share a common objective to raise participation levels."

Roethenbaugh would also like to open a dialogue with the governing bodies of the three constituent sports within triathlon - swimming, cycling and athletics. He explains: "We need to raise awareness of the sport. It has a great image, but we need more education about what is involved in taking part. Our retailers need to keep on doing what they do so well - giving impartial advice and guidance to those new to the sport, making sure they buy the right products and get what they need.

"You need a bike and a wetsuit, but beyond that it is an affordable sport across all social groups. There is a great sense of camaraderie among triathletes, which makes the sport so attractive."

## COMMUNITY

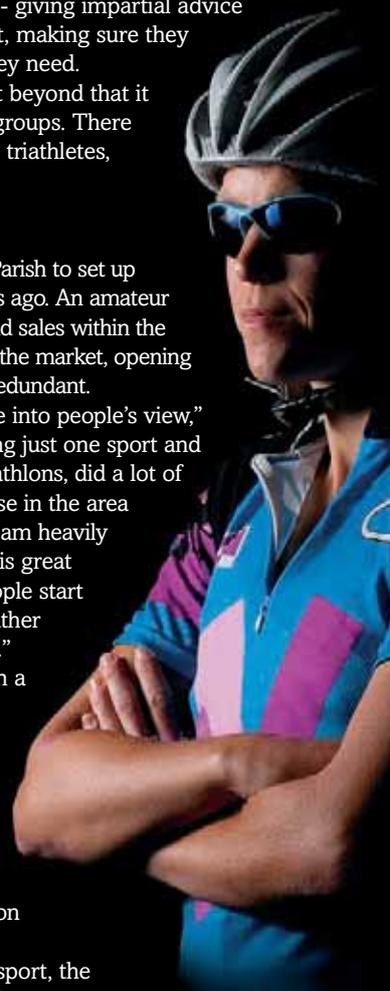
That sense of community led Vivienne Parish to set up her operation, Tri-Sports Plus, 18 months ago. An amateur triathlete with a background in design and sales within the lingerie industry, Parish decided to enter the market, opening a shop in Cambridge, after being made redundant.

"Triathlon is getting more and more into people's view," says Parish. "Many are fed up with doing just one sport and are keen to give it a try. I was doing triathlons, did a lot of research and discovered that no-one else in the area was offering a specialist for the sport. I am heavily involved with the local clubs and there is great demand. It's vital to make sure that people start in the sport with the right equipment rather than go overboard and spend a fortune."

There is a wide differential between a beginner on a budget and a real enthusiast.

"It's a relatively cheap sport," says Parish. "You can hire a wetsuit for £7 and I have even seen a woman compete on a bike with a basket on the front. But those who get really into it can spend £3,500 on a bike and £500 on a wetsuit - the sky is the limit."

With three distinct sports within a sport, the retail opportunities appear abundant. For a specialist manufacturer of wetsuits, the emergence of triathlon alongside open water swimming as a



mass participation sport opens up all sorts of possibilities.

"It's only since triathlon that swimming in wetsuits has been accepted," says Dean Jackson of wetsuit specialist Huub. "Our initial aim is to get people into wetsuits and then triathlon is the next step. Triathlons are the new challenge and people no longer see swimming in open water as a barrier.

"You have to offer entry-level products. I would suggest to a newcomer to buy a £150-£200 wetsuit and tell them that they can always sell it on if it doesn't work out for them. A suit can last several years if you look after it. Its shelf life is only your expectation."

**BARRIER**

Competing in triathlon is a serious commitment, the ability to swim in open water is a prerequisite and, as Jackson says, the biggest barrier to participation. He believes the design of wetsuits in the past has done the sport few favours.

"We at Huub were the first company to identify that there are two types of swimmer involved in triathlon - there's the 'leg sinker' and the good, strong core swimmer," Jackson explains. "85 per cent of triathletes come from a non-swimming background, yet the buoyancy in the wetsuit was pitched at the

other 15 per cent. So what we did was to reduce the buoyancy in the hips and increase it in the thighs. We have been pushing the technology on this with research from the Netherlands and coaching expertise from Australia."

Triathlon is not the cheapest sport to take up, but its addictive nature makes the serious competitor open their wallet to an extraordinary degree. Wetsuits retail for anything up to £1,200, although Jackson warns that those price levels are not sustainable: "Our top suit costs £495, which leaves a four per cent margin after VAT. It's a good proposition and I think that in the current economic climate the market will only take a certain limit. It's a real balance - to deliver a unique product at the right price."

The predicted British Olympic success in triathlon is bound to be a springboard for participation. The newcomers will need to be nurtured.

Jackson adds: "As long as the path into the sport is managed well through the system, I see a very bright future. Too often in other sports we see kids reach junior level and leave the sport. Triathlon is a lifestyle - early morning swim, afternoon cycle ride, evening run - and is an excellent cross training activity that could be attractive to schools."

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