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Triathlon: A Viewer's Guide

There are thousands of triathlons staged worldwide every year. One of the unique things about the sport is that all races differ. In each, talent in the form of speed, strength and endurance plays vital roles, but strategy becomes an all-important factor with so many variables in play.

Once the initial gun sounds, the clock is continually ticking — no timeouts, no delay. In the **1.5k** (.9 mi.) swim of an international distance race, the best swimmers usually take the front quickly, trying to avoid flailing arms and legs. A weaker swimmer will try to stay on the toes of a stronger swimmer; this **drafting** saves energy and allows a weaker swimmer to stay with a faster swimmer.

Since the clock never stops, triathletes not only have to be fast swimmers, bikers and runners, but also quick-change artists. Upon exiting the water, swimmers will remove their swim caps and goggles (wetsuits for water below 25.6 degrees C, 78 degrees F) and run to their bicycles racked in the **transition area**. They will then put on their helmets and mount their bicycles upon exiting the transition. Most will already have their cycling shoes attached to their pedals and put their shoes on as they generate speed on the cycling course.

When legal, **drafting** is very crucial during the **40k** (24.8 mi.) bike. Drafting another cyclist on the bike portion saves energy and allows weaker cyclists to keep up with faster cyclists. Many times breakaway groups will form, usually weaker runners who are trying to develop an advantage going onto the run course. The stronger runners are usually content to sit in the pack and allow for the race to be won or lost in the final leg. An **Olympic-format** triathlon is **draft-legal**, that is, cycling directly behind another competitor is allowed. But all amateur racing and most other race formats are held in a draft-illegal or **non-drafting** formats.

The **bike-to-run transition (T2)** is as fast as the **swim-to-bike transition (T1)**. Cyclists will dismount, leaving cycling shoes attached to their pedals and remove their helmets. After sliding into running shoes, which are usually modified with elastic laces or lace-locks to maximize time, the runners begin the **10k** (6.2 mi.) run. Many times, runners will be seen carrying hats, sponges and water bottles out of the transition area. During the run, similar to breakaway attempts in cycling, athletes will often surge. The surge is an attempt to create distance between competitors.

The following are hints for viewing the race from traditionally the best points on the course:

The Swim Start

The first staging area in a triathlon is the swim start, the area in which athletes congregate and prepare for the start of the race. In most large triathlons, the swim start is a popular photographer's spot. Several hundred or more athletes churning through the water in a frenzy to get to the front of the pack is often a very powerful image.

The Transition Area

The transition area is the hub of race activity, an area of controlled chaos. A fenced-in pen of bike racks, the staging area is where triathletes transfer from one segment of the event to the next. The seconds won or lost in transition can amount to the difference in the outcome of the race. (Please see photographer's note below.)

The Finish Line

After the transition area, the finish line is the best place for spectator viewing as it is the most important part of the race. In most major triathlons, the media tent used for distributing notes, quotes, results and the mix-zone for meeting athletes for post-race interviews is adjacent to the finish line.

Photographers note: Many races offer media vehicles, but once you are on the vehicle it may not stop until the race is over. Other recommended viewing areas are the swim start, swim finish, transition area and finish line. Photographers may wish to wade into shallow water to shoot the swim start. It can often be difficult to determine the best place from which to photograph the transition, though it's usually near the entrance or exit. Find out in advance where the entrance and exit will be and set up outside the fencing. Often the swim entrance and the run exit are the best places for quality photographs, because the athletes are moving slower and are upright (many times cyclists are bent over adjusting their shoes). Please be careful near the transition area. Stay outside of the fencing and out of the flow of traffic.

Medical Note: The medical tent or building is usually located near the finish line and is always closed to media. As with all sports, the safety of the athletes is paramount – please respect the wishes of all medical personnel attending to athletes.



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