

By Steve Kelley

By the time you are reading this article, it probably means that you have already completed a couple triathlons this season. If so, congrats! Now you may be asking yourself, “What should I do next?”

For young triathletes, sometimes this is a complicated question to answer. In addition to getting mom or dad to register you for, and drive you to, the event, you may also find yourself navigating family vacations, summer camp, and other athletic commitments. The first piece of advice I’ll offer is to sit down with mom or dad now and develop a schedule that makes sense for the entire family.

Now, with your calendar in front of you, your next task is to identify an age-appropriate event. Athletes 12 years old or younger should look for an event designed specifically for youth triathletes. These events typically feature a pool swim, a bike course closed to traffic, and extra volunteer support. One sign of a well-designed youth triathlon is incremental age divisions, such as 7-8, 9-10, 11-12. Likewise, race distances should increase gradually with each advance in age. See the table on this page for recommended distances by age group.

Recommended Competition Distances for Youth and Juniors				
Racing age*	Category	Distances		
		Swim	Bike	Run
7-8	Youth	50-100m**	2k	1k
9-10	Youth	100m**	3k	1k
11-12	Youth	200m**	5-7k	2k
13-15	Youth	200-400m	8-10k	2-3k
16-19	Junior	400-750m	15-20k	5k
13-15	Youth Elite***	400m	10k	2.5k
16-19	Junior Elite***	750m	20k	5k

**Racing age is determined as of December 31 of the year in which the event takes place.*

*** Pool swim recommended*

****Youth elite and junior elite races are draft-legal, typically staged on multi-lap, closed courses, and are officiated using International Triathlon Union Competition Rules.*

Please note: The recommended minimum age for Olympic/Intermediate distance events is 16. The recommended minimum age for long course/half-iron/ultra distance events is 18.

Once you have a few finishes under your belt, the temptation to compete in longer events will surely arise. Rather than look to longer distance triathlons, focus on improving your speed and skill. Identify your weaknesses and work on improving in those areas until you have maximized your speed at a given distance. One approach is to create a personal race-against-the-clock by having your parents or coach to time you at certain key points during your next race. Can you

swim the second half of the swim faster than the first? Can you transition in under a minute? What is your personal best first half-mile off the bike? Tracking these personal bests is a way to improve your overall speed and skill and stay motivated for the shorter races.

Athletes in their early teens often are drawn to racing with the adults in sprint distance triathlons. If you and your parents feel you are ready to try a sprint distance event, look carefully for one that takes good care of its youngest athletes. Choose an event that recognizes multiple age divisions under 19, as this indicates that the race organizers have an eye on younger participants. Also, look over previous results and try to predict your finish time. If the event is likely to take you longer than 80 minutes to finish, you are better off sticking to youth triathlons and working on your speed. Most importantly, make sure the course is suitable for your ability.

Another option for athletes in the 13 to 19 age range is Youth Elite and Junior Elite triathlon. These events add the challenge of draft-legal bicycle racing, just like the elites do at the Olympics. Before diving into this race format, however, it is best to acquire some draft-legal experience in junior cycling races or by working with a coach or club that practices pack riding. You'll also need to look over the equipment regulations to ensure that your bike is set up properly. Youth Elite racing is an exciting and dynamic format and a great way to develop speed and skill while continuing to improve your speed and skill at the half-sprint distance.

Once you have made a short list of events, you can develop a racing plan that will keep you healthy and motivated, and mom and dad sane. For athletes under the age of 15, I recommend racing no more than twice per month and a maximum of six times per summer. If you are inclined do more than that, then spice up your calendar with some junior bike races, a swim meet or two, or a different sport altogether. End the triathlon wanting more.

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