

It's 80 degrees in the oven-dry Nevada desert at just past 8 a.m., and I still have two more miles to run.

Problem is, my quads and calves strain against all forward movement. As women around me slow from run to walk, I pass them in what feels like the stop-motion mode of an astronaut jogging on the moon. I ignore my deepest urge to collapse on a roadside curb by dumping a cup of ice-cold water from the nearby aid station over my head.

I didn't come all the way from New York City to become roadkill on the final leg of the Aflac Iron Girl Lake Las Vegas Women's Triathlon. And wasn't

I once a kick-butt middle-distance runner in college who flew through a mile in 4:43? I could eat a 5K like this for breakfast—if it weren't for that 800-meter swim and 30K bike ride that I spent the past hour and a half racing. It's unfair that this last leg, the one I should have in the bag, feels the hardest.

Yet I keep moving. Because the craziest part of this triathlon is not the pain or the fact that I trained three and a half months to endure it, but that despite my exhaustion, I love every second of it.

Back in New York, I'd burned out on competing with my amateur running club and had spent the previous year without so much as a gym membership. Last time I remember swimming was from a sandbar to a raft in my neighborhood lake as a kid, and the one and only bike I'd ever owned had a makeshift second seat for my Barbie. Somehow this didn't stop me from volunteering when FITNESS was looking for a guinea pig to do a triathlon.

Before I knew it, I was posting online polls for readers to pick my coach (Neil Cook at Asphalt Green Triathlon Club in New York City) and everything from my wetsuit to my wheels. (See the winners on page 94.)

I relearned to swim at Friday night lessons, where my sagging legs were captured instant replay-style on video, and to ride a bike while clipped into the pedals—in city traffic! At the crack of dawn every Tuesday from February through April, I met up with other sleepy amateurs to run sprints across a soccer field on Coach Cook's command. I hauled around sweaty gear nonstop—to the office, work events and dinners with friends.

All of which was meant to get me to a starting line some 2,200 miles away on an early spring morning.

In my wetsuit and pink race-issued swim cap, I'm hard to pick out among the 661 other women being released one by one into 320-acre man-made Lake Las Vegas, just 17 miles from the Strip. Within the first five minutes, some are already backstroking, others cling to safety paddleboards to catch their breath, and the rest of us swim over, under and on top of one another.

I rehearsed this inevitable collision course for months in the pool, but I'm not prepared for the swelling waves. During the

In an exercise rut? Training for a triathlon was the perfect antidote for this gym dropout. Find out how to make it work for you, too.

By Rachel Sturtz

My First Tri



Log on to watch Rachel demonstrate the transition from wetsuit to wheels to sneakers at fitnessmagazine.com/tri.

first part of the half-mile course, I pop my head up for a look-see like a gopher every time I turn it for a breath. Except that this tactic breaks my flow and causes drag. I imagine my vigilant swim coach, Mike Galvan, yelling “Keep your head down!” at me and heed his advice at the half-way point. I begin passing people for the first time.

On the dash up the beach to the parking lot transition area, I peel off the top part of my wetsuit down to my next layer of spandex. When I reach my bike, I quickly kick off the bottom half. I put on my helmet and sunglasses and towel sand off my feet before I strap on my clip-in cycling shoes. The 30K (about 19 miles) bike course begins with a half mile uphill—a sign that this will be no leisurely ride. I’m surrounded by almost every kind of bike imaginable: sleek tri racers, 1970s road bikes, mountain bikes and cruisers with baskets. I overtake a girl half my age and then get passed by a woman more than twice my years. Recalling all the times Coach Galvan pushed the pace in practice to see if I could keep up, I shift to a higher gear and pedal behind her.

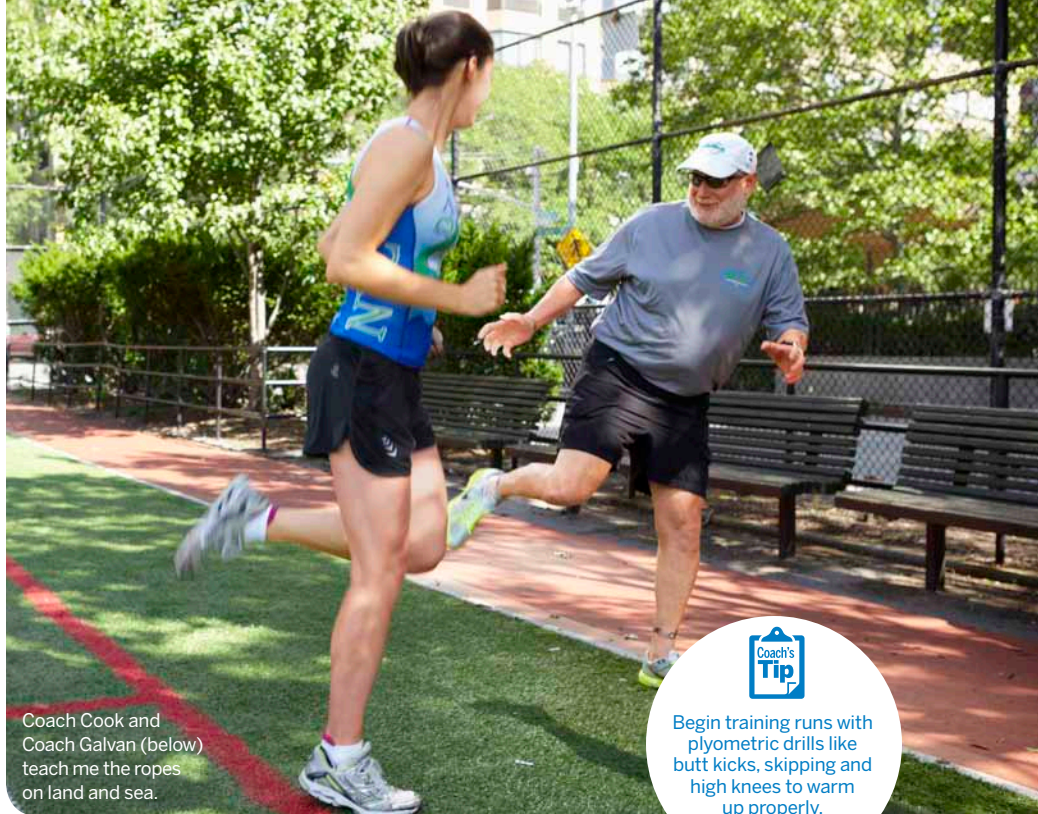
After nine miles of trailing her, something suddenly clicks in my head: I want to compete. “Go get her,” I think. I feel an adrenaline rush I haven’t experienced since I was on the straight-away to the finish line in

college track, seven years ago. Coach Cook always said to empty the tank on the second half, and now I understand what that means. Instead of just pushing your pedals, push

your limits. At mile 15, I pass her as I mentally high-five myself. I go hard for the last three miles, barely noticing the charming residential neighborhood around me. On the final

mile downhill I fearlessly pedal and feather the brakes only when I come to 45-degree turns.

I pull into the transition area to drop off my bike and make a run for it on the



Coach Cook and Coach Galvan (below) teach me the ropes on land and sea.



Begin training runs with plyometric drills like butt kicks, skipping and high knees to warm up properly.



As you stroke, use your lats, or upper back muscles, not just your shoulders. Imagine stretching your arms to reach over something.

My Surf-to-Turf Timeline



Nothing new on race day. That means food, socks, shoes—everything—should have been tested at least once during practice.

6:55 a.m. To spot race buoys without creating drag, I count my strokes to three and then look up.



7:05 a.m. My slowest transition. Though I practiced laying out my gear in my hotel room the night before, I waste precious time double checking everything when I should be in go mode.



7:08 a.m. Resisting the urge to pedal all out the instant I get on my bike, I tell myself to push it only during the second half of each leg, as my coaches have taught me.



7:40 a.m. I want to race! I'm so excited about this new take-no-prisoners attitude that I sail through the rest of the ride.



8:20 a.m. I gulp water as I run by the aid station and wish I could bathe in it. I also throw back my first energy gel to refuel on carbs and replenish electrolytes.



8:30 a.m. The final 200-foot gradual incline becomes my Everest. I shorten my stride slightly but make sure to lift each foot completely off the ground so I'm not shuffling.



8:31 a.m. Homestretch! My body is spent, but digging deeper, I put my head down and swing my arms.



8:34 a.m. At the finish I plaster a sweaty hug on my mom, who's there with the same "Good job!" she's greeted me with since high school track. I'm back.



concrete racecourse. The 5K starts with a mini hill, which proves to be an instant buzz kill. Though I trained for this very moment by practicing bike-to-run "bricks" in Central Park, my legs are shaky and miss the momentum of pedaling. I continue into the desert—a stark contrast to the resort's emerald green trees and manicured lawns. A mile later I reach the turnaround point of the out-and-back course: a giant hard-packed sand hill. As I struggle to hold my pace on the way up, I focus on the downhill in my future, when gravity will give me a shove.

I'm weighing the bliss of walking (it's my first triathlon; I can do whatever I want!) when a group of three women, just now heading into the desert, wish me luck. I gasp out a "You, too!" and find the energy to power through the slight yet excruciating incline to the finish.

When I pass under the arching pink banner at the end, I'm happy, but oddly not *Rocky*-moment happy. No *Breaking Away* celebration. No *Chariots of Fire* sound track. I realize it's because my head is no longer in this race; it's already in the next one. I walk my bike back to my hotel and, unshowered, begin surfing the Web for race number two—when I'll really be ready for a comeback!

Gear Shifts

SWIM



You'll be the best of the beach in the **Tyr Graphic Swim Cap**, made of silicone for easy-on-the-hair removal. (\$10, tyr.com)

Speedo Air Seal Tri goggles with extended lenses cut glare and fog. (\$20, speedousa.com)

READERS' PICK

Channel your inner Dara Torres in the **Aqua Sphere WRacer wetsuit**, with special panels that maximize buoyancy. (\$400, aquasphereswim.com)

BIKE

READERS' PICK

The chafe-free **Zoot TRI Racerback top** has side pockets for gels; the comfy **Zoot TRI 4 shorts** have extra grip on the leg bands to prevent them from riding up. (\$65 top, \$60 shorts; zootsports.com)

The 21 vents in the featherweight **Bell Bellissima Luxe Pink Slice helmet** help keep you cool. Tighten the fit with a dial in back. (\$45, bellbikehelmets.com)

READERS' PICK

The women-specific **Specialized Amira Comp bike** has a light-weight carbon-based frame with a lower center bar for more comfort. Attach clip-in pedals and you're unstoppable. (\$2,700, specialized.com for dealers)

Shimano SH-WT51 women's triathlon shoes boast sock-free comfort and a weightless carbon fiber outsole. (\$190, bike.shimano.com for stores)



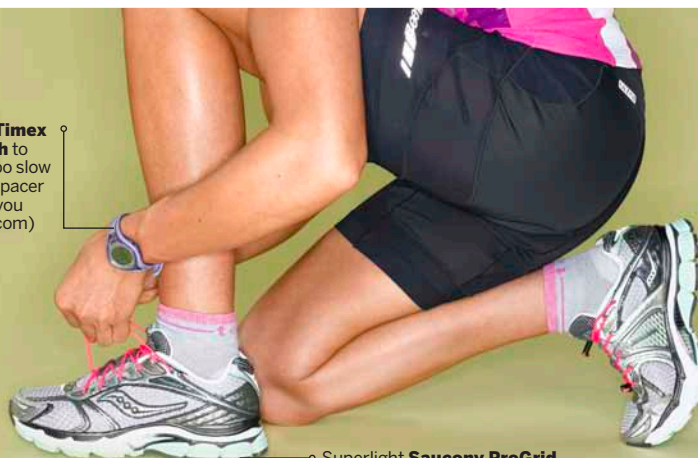
Protect your paws with padded **Specialized Women's BG Gel Gloves**. (\$35, specialized.com)

RUN

Tap the screen on the **Timex Sleek 150-Lap watch** to mark splits. If you go too slow or fast, the target time pacer will sound off to keep you on track. (\$90, timex.com)



Prerace, sprinkle baby powder in your socks and running and cycling shoes. It's a quick way to absorb sweat and prevent blisters.



Superlight **Saucony ProGrid Triumph 7 neutral sneakers** have a cushy midsole to absorb shock and help propel your foot forward with each step. (\$130, saucony.com)



Make sure you buckle your helmet before mounting your bike in a race or you'll automatically be disqualified.

Four Races Worth a Tri

Earn your bragging rights at one of these sprint or Olympic distance races. You have plenty of time, so get training!

1. The 29th annual **Avia Wildflower Triathlon Festival** race in Bradley, California, boasts more than 7,500 competitors (beginner and elite), who camp out on-site, sit around bonfires and listen to live music—true to its nickname, the Woodstock of Triathlon. (May 1, 2011; 1.5K swim, 40K bike, 10K run; \$150 registration fee; tricalifornia.com)
2. The **Danskin Triathlon Series** is the largest and longest-running race of its kind. Among the six beginner-friendly courses in six states, our favorite is the sprint tri in Orlando, which cuts through Walt Disney World. (May 8, 2011; half-mile swim, 12-mile bike, 3.1-mile run; \$115 registration fee; danskintriathlon.net)
3. Race alongside other newbies in the women-only **Iron Girl National Event Series** in locations such as California, Colorado, Georgia, New York and Wisconsin. (March through November; distances and prices vary; irongirl.com)
4. While the Big Apple is known for its marathon, the **Nautica New York City Triathlon** is equally memorable. You'll swim with the fast-moving Hudson River current (and surely break your old swim PRs), pedal in and out of the Bronx and run to the finish in Central Park. (August 7, 2011; 1,500-meter swim, 40K bike, 10K run; \$245 registration fee; nyctri.com)