



IF YOU CAN RUN, RIDE A BIKE, AND SWIM you've got the basics accomplished. However there is so much more that goes into competing in a triathlon. As the sport becomes demystified through increased media attention, more Americans are jumping on this extreme sport bandwagon. A growing number of competitors discover that the road to success lies in determination and training as well as technique and proper equipment.

With the public's interest in triathlons on the rise, STAR Physical Therapy in Spokane treated triple the number of people for injuries associated with training or competing in these events. Colleen Smith, a certified athletic trainer at STAR Physical Therapy, as well as strength and conditioning specialist benefited from the boom.

The most common cause for injury she says is the incorrect use of equipment or technique resulting in stress on the muscles, tendons, and the tissues around joints and bones. This stress results in overuse injuries that often show themselves as pain, inflammation, or muscle weakness that worsens over time.

Most injuries develop over time from a pattern of neglect and abuse of the body. Injuries related to swimming, cycling, and running are usually progressive and therefore can largely be prevented through early detection and treatment.

"Overuse injuries can result from any of the three stages of the competition," Smith says. Most commonly, her patients' injuries result from the bike portion of the triathlon, followed by the swim, and lastly the run.

"Some people believe if they rode a

bike when they were young, they should be able to just get on a bike now and ride the twenty plus miles without any additional training," Smith says. "This mindset contributes to a lot of the overuse injuries we treat."

Frequently bicycle-related complaints result from improper equipment, such as the seat being set too high or the pedals being misaligned. These conditions can cause a subtle pain in the knee, calf, or ankle area. "If left untreated," Smith warns, "these injuries could seriously alter the athlete's ability to train and compete."

"The best way to avoid these types of injuries is to take your bike to a professional and have it fit to your body," says Smith. "They will line your seat and pedals up properly to adjust for your individual physical characteristics. The alignment will not only help prevent these overuse injuries, it should enhance performance."

Incorrect technique can contribute to "Swimmer's Shoulder," the main overuse injury associated with the swim portion of the competition. This injury can result from the repetitive shoulder motion, muscle imbalances, or poor stroke form. It appears as sharp pain that develops in the shoulder in the late recovery or beginning stages of the stroke.

"Women are more susceptible to these upper body injuries," adds Smith. "Traditionally, women's upper body muscles tend to be weaker, causing additional stress to the shoulder and rotator cuff."

To minimize risk for developing this "Swimmer's Shoulder," Smith recommends athletes increase their core strength training and concentrate on strengthening their shoulder and arm muscles. In addition, she suggests hav-

ing a professional critique their swim to ensure the stroke form is correct.

For the run portion of the competition, incorrect shoes are a major contributing factor in overuse injuries Smith treats. Shoes, should provide proper support and shock absorption needed to support the lower extremities for running long distances.

"It is also very important for athletes to change out their running shoes every few months," Smith says. "Many overuse injuries come from shoes that are too broken down and no longer provide significant shock absorption or arch support."

Smith also cautioned that muscle imbalances of the leg can contribute to overuse injuries. Women are especially prone to knee problems resulting from imbalances of the thigh muscles. To remedy these imbalances, she suggested lower extremity strength training.

Smith said the best advice she could give to someone who is considering competing in a triathlon is to start with an individual component to gain proficiency and then add on the bike, swim, or run as you go.

"Adequate training, proper technique, and equipment are essential tools for every triathlete," said Smith. "While recent media attention has boomed, people need to remember this is still considered an extreme sport. You cannot expect to just jump in and compete."

*Christine Varela wrote about postpartum depression on **A Mother's Silent Shame** in NW's April/May 2006 issue.*