

FROM PARTICIPANT TO COMPETITOR TO PARTICIPANT

I remember the first triathlon I ever did. It was the original Cypress Gardens triathlon, which was done in reverse order (run-bike-swim). I did it with a bunch of folks who were in my Master's degree program with me. The entire time I "trained" for this was a blast. The reason it was so fun was because I did not take it that seriously. Like many things, triathlon was a way to stay in shape and have fun... A new way for me, which is why it was so joyous. I came from a background of body building, which I took so seriously (way too seriously---I was taking *myself* too seriously in those days). And I got very burned out on the seriousness of my training and how I thought about it. I wanted a fresh start. I've always believed that it's really about staying in shape and being fit. I've never lost perspective of that. And early on, I had no idea what to expect. So this "new" sport was just what the doctor ordered! Back to my first race. It was utter joy. I just loved being in it. I felt so good, and part of a comradery. I just wanted to be a part of this group called "triathletes". I did the race and felt so proud of myself! My friends were all there and we had a ball. The results were posted, which I really hadn't thought about before the race. Some of my friends told me how I'd done. I really didn't care. I was curious, at best. I remember driving home. I felt high—and I mean high! I can still remember the CD I was listening to... U2's "Rattle and Hum". That's how vividly I remember the high I got from this triathlon. Another cool memory that sticks out about this particular race was that I was able to come back years later with my wife, who had never done a triathlon before I met her, and we were able to do this course together. That's what it's all about!

That was many years ago. This year is different. I started the season more out of obligation than out of joy. Many bike workouts I was not looking forward to, and the trips to the pool were a drag versus an excitement. I felt differently at races as well. I remember being at one of the Clermont races and thinking about how I simply did not want to be at the race that day. Very low motivation. It all came to a head when I went up to New York to do the Hudson Valley triathlon, the area I'm from. The last time I was there, I loved every minute of the race. This year, I had very little joy, and found myself not wanting to be there. Ironically, I had always wanted to "place" at that race, and this year I did—yet I really didn't care that day. What was it? It was burnout. I realized I was doing triathlons now out of obligation and ego, and not out of pleasure and fitness. Obligation because I was coaching triathletes and writing about triathlon, so I better darn sure do them! And Ego because I felt like I had something to prove. Both of these reasons are not good reasons to do them. So, for now, my racing days are over. And for now, my writing days (on a regular basis) are over as well. I've really enjoyed writing for Florida Running and Triathlon these past couple of years, and I assure you that I've learned as much as the readers of my articles have. I feel honored that my opinions were valued by the editors, and I hope that the readers have gotten something from these years. Since I'm not racing, I feel it's important the readers get a fresh perspective from a coach or writer who will deliver the TRI lines from a fresh perceptive.

I do want to leave you with what I've learned through the years:

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I shared before that I was burned out on the sport. This does not have to be the case. I got burned out because I had somewhat lost perspective. Intellectually, I know, and always have known, that the important part of doing triathlon is that we're getting more fit and being healthy. But I must admit that somewhere after that first great race at Cypress Gardens, I let my EGO take over. EGO, in a sense, means separating oneself from others. Remember how I mentioned that part of the joy of that first triathlon was that feeling of belonging to a group known as triathletes? Well, ego is the opposite of that. Ego wants to be better, or thinks it needs to be better, to be as good. I got wrapped up in that, I must tell on myself. And yes it's fine to compete against oneself and to do the best, but I, like many, started worrying too much about how I was stacking up and how I was placing and all that "stuff". Ego can come from an inferiority complex turned into a superiority complex, and I for one must admit that I was there. I lost the love for triathlon because I started worrying way too much about how I was doing and who I was beating and how I was placing. This is way too stressful, especially when you know better—which I did. I always told others not to take themselves so seriously and it's just a silly sport, yet I was caught right up in it. It was easy to get caught up in it. I attempted to justify it as healthy competition. Well—healthy competition is simply showing up and doing your best, whatever that might be that day, and has NOTHING to do with anybody else. I'm very fortunate that I have become aware of how this threw me off course, and I realize now that it's participation in triathlon, life, etc. that is really all that matters. I used to not get that about triathlon. As a coach, I used to think that each person had to go and compete, at least against yourself, or why show up? I was wrong. I started a kiddie dash the other day, and my 3 ½ year old daughter, Joanna, was running in it, along with about six other kids. There they all sat with their number 1s on their shirts. I had the megaphone and I kept calling out, "Remember kids, there are no winners and no losers. You are all winners for participating in this event". I had to chuckle and think about how I truly meant that, and how glad I am to see it that way now. They all came across the line grinning ear to ear, and they are all winners.

ART AND SCIENCE

When I started coaching and writing, I really came at it from a scientific perspective. After all, I am an exercise physiologist, and that is my forte. Through the years, I've realized all the value of science just like I had on day one, but I also recognized the value of art, and that not everybody is the same. I've seen so many people train in various ways and for the most part, I've yet to see a bad plan. There is so much room for different opinions in this sport, as in any other sport. So my message here is very simple... "If it works, don't fix it". If what you're doing is meeting your particular goals, stick with it. If you are not happy with your progress for whatever reasons, maybe you haven't been able to finish a long race or maybe you get injured frequently, if that is the case, then you want to think about change. Because doing the same thing will only bring the same results. And where do you turn? My advice is to take the next logical step. Again, both science and art have a strong influence in the training wisdoms of coaches and trainers. Go with what works for you. Many people love a very scientific approach. I've had athletes who want every minute defined as far as what HR to be at. Others feel confined by that and would rather go more by their gut. I'm here to tell you that science, experience, art, etc. have a place in the wisdom of doing triathlon. And you have to find what works for you. And you have to experiment to find that. And what works, as I clearly stated earlier, isn't always about how you're placing; it's also about if you are happy. Is your body holding up? Do you have fun when you train and race? Is your stress being helped by training, or made worse? Is

your family happy? These are the questions in the formula of whether it's working. Keep experimenting until you find it and then DON'T FIX WHAT'S WORKING!

IT'S STILL ABOUT FITNESS

Finally, again, it's all about staying fit and healthy. This can be such a great hobby when we don't take ourselves seriously. And I'm not just telling on myself here. I've been around so many triathletes, and that is all they talk about. They talk it, live it, buy it, you name it. Keep the hobby/sport in perspective and get the benefits of being very fit and very healthy. I think triathletes are among the most fit athletes on the planet, and if you think about what we do, it's really awesome that we can get our bodies to do it. That's enough. Let's keep it at that and have fun doing it. Currently, I'm enjoy my very easy runs; I'm loving walking, and I've traded my carbon fiber Italian racing bike in on a hybrid that I can attach a trailer to so I can pull my daughter around the neighborhood. Right now, that's my idea of fun and fitness.

It's been a blast! Rob