

## ARE WE FORGETTING WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT?

By Rob Maxwell

Do you want to hear a boring story about why I got into doing triathlons? You do? Good, here it is. (I've learned not to delay too long when I preface it that way)...

I was working on my Master's Degree in Exercise Physiology at UCF when I took up triathlon. I had to... Everybody else did! At the time, I was into competitive body building and I was really getting burned out with it. All the training seemed so serious and so self-involved. I really was thinking that I needed another fitness outlet. So, the foundation was forming in my mind.

In the class "Exercise Adherence and Compliance", the great Gerald Gergley (professor) used to have us run for 30 minutes before class. Being a body builder, this wasn't my cup of tea, but I was lean, so I didn't suffer too badly. During one of the runs, he (Prof. Gergley) overheard me and another muscle head (we were out numbered in that program) talking about our terrific feats in a squat exercise. He leaned back and yelled "Maxwell, if you had a million dollars and your awesome squat, you'd still only have a million dollars!"

To this day, I still don't know what he meant, but I got his point. Basically, he was implying that all that muscle did me very little good if my engine was not fit! And let me go on to say that Prof. Gergley and Dr. Frank Rhoter (another UCF professor) are legends in the field of exercise physiology and in triathlon. Both of them did Hawaii long before it was "cool" to do Hawaii, and they did it as masters. I was very fortunate to have each of them as professors, advisors and friends. Back to my point... This constant bullying by Gergley to start doing cardio partnered with my losing interest in body building brought me to the doors of triathlon. Gergley was right—once I did one I was hooked.

Why was I hooked? It was about the FITNESS. I didn't get hooked because of the T-shirt, or the magic marker I could leave on my leg when I went back to work on Monday, or because I thought I'd earned the right to ride an expensive bike. I was hooked because, at this time, everybody involved in the sport was longing for wellness. Everybody was so into health and fitness. It was such a cool new peer group. I'm not saying body builders weren't. They were (are) a very fit breed, but I needed a little more. I think I liked the appeal of being the all-over fit that doing triathlons resulted in. I started training and got more fit in a hurry. It wasn't long before the competitive bug really got me and I wanted to do better. But for some very fortunate reason, I never forgot that doing well meant being more fit! You know what I mean? Do most newbie's get that? Are we sending the right message?

Hopefully all of you know what being more fit is. If not, let's review. Fitness really is the same, no matter how you slice it. There are, of course, greater degrees of fitness for each person, but fitness is reached in the same way. What is approaching fitness? Fitness can be defined as a certain level of body composition—meaning the make up of body fat and muscle. Fitness is measured in terms of muscular strength and endurance. Fitness is measured in terms of cardiovascular fitness and aerobic capacity. Fitness is measured in terms of flexibility. Fitness

can, in part, be measured in terms of health related issues such as lipid profiles and blood pressure.

Of course, a triathlete is measured at certain levels of these fitness parameters. In other words, a great triathlete will not have the build of a body builder, and his “strength” is cardiovascular fitness, muscular endurance, some strength, and his/her best leanness ability. No matter how you slice it, if you accomplish these things while training for triathlon, you’re becoming a better triathlete. So shouldn’t the focus of triathlon be placed on getting more fit? Well, I certainly believe it should be. And you might think that fitness will just happen as long as you swim, bike, and run. That’s true to some degree, but it doesn’t mean you’ll be improving your fitness unless you actively try to.

When does this come up? The conversation of getting fit while doing tris usually occurs when a prospective athlete I may coach is trying to figure out some training goals. It seems the FACTS about triathlon have been lost a little over the years, I guess through reading all the magazines or new books. I’ll get the ol’ “Well, I guess I’ll have to do an Ironman to really be my best or most fit”. I’ll pursue this with the person. But where does this come from? You mean to tell me that you can’t get super lean, improve your cardiovascular system to its greatest degree, and improve your muscular endurance by doing sprint triathlons? I go the other way on that. I actually think sometimes athletes are in BETTER shape when they really put their focus on short course, but that’s an entirely other article. For our intents and purposes, I’ll state that you can get super fit or get LESS fit by training for any distances. And longer does not make you more fit. Then why do so many people gravitate towards long courses? I think it has more to do with the “survivor generation” than physical fitness, but again, that’s an argument that deserves its own space.

So, Rob—you say people can get less fit during their “training”? Yup, I’ve seen that. I’ve seen it a lot. In fact, I see it a lot with some marathoners. Now, I’m in the field of helping people get fit, so don’t think I’m prejudice and think everybody needs a “perfect” body. I’m not saying that. But you don’t know how many times I’ve had friends tell me they gain 10 pounds or more while training for a marathon or for an Ironman! Why? Well, simply put—they justify all those miles with way too many ice cream sandwiches, or vice versa. Yes, I know we need to eat a lot while training for all this, and I’ve written papers on glycogen loading, so don’t go down that road with me. But it’s not about that. What I’ve seen it about is people simply getting lazy with their eating habits and pigging out, then justifying it. Sorry folks, but really, that’s not healthy. And I’ve also seen many runners/triathletes forget about speed work while training for ultra distances, and they log a bazillion miles to finish. How is that good for aerobic capacity? Or are they simply trying to burn those extra cheese fries that are now on the plan? Again, that’s not a wellness mindset.

The bottom line is this. Triathlon is an endurance sport that, like it or not, measures YOUR physical fitness. Becoming more fit should be at the heart of any and all triathlon goals. And you can acquire your greatest level of fitness by training for the mile or the 50 mile race. You can acquire your greatest level of fitness by training for super sprints or double ironmans. It’s not the distance that matters—it’s you! Get leaner! Get that cardiovascular system working like a finely tuned Porsche! Improve that anaerobic threshold so lactic acid bounces off of you! Can

you do as many push ups as your age? Can you touch your toes? These are just some ideas of fitness.

I opened with a personal story and I'll close with one. Within my Master's program were many of the ol' pioneers of our Central Florida tri scene. One of the women in our program would go to the races with a lot of us, and chances are she'd win women's overall at most of the local sprints we went to. In those days, that included the famous "Gatorman" triathlon in Gainesville (You THINK you know why they called it that—let's just say you better swim fast), and the reverse-order Cypress Gardens triathlon just to name a couple. Well, this young lady in our program was pretty old-school (we all were then). She'd pull a blue 10 speed bike out of her trunk, and every race she complained that she couldn't really pump the tires up. I know "it's not the bike, it's the engine", but how many of you really trust that logic? She did. She'd crank along and put together one of the top bike splits in the race (on 60 psi tires), and the competitors she didn't eat up on the bike she'd bury in the run. And why? Because she was FIT!!! That was the focus back then. In everything she did athletically, she trained hard and pushed herself to the brink. She ate right, trained right, and found it prideful to be as fit as she could be, and consequently, that made her a great triathlete. Is that our focus now? I don't mean to pick on anybody, and I guess if you have it to spend then why not, but how many beginner triathletes really need to be on bikes that some of the top pros are riding? Did we forget that it wasn't that long ago that the Ironman pros were racing with toe clips on their pedals? Now we have newbie's that spend over \$200 in their pedals alone! Again, if you've got it, I guess more power to you. But maybe just take a step back and evaluate what is really important. What really deserves your attention? Are you doing all you can to be fit and healthy? If not, let's start in 2006.