

CRAIG ALEXANDER'S 5 TOP TIPS FOR RUNNING FASTER OFF THE BIKE



presented by



A few years ago, having just completed my race, I was returning to the finish chute to welcome age groupers across the line.

The conditions that day were challenging, and athletes were really leaving it all out there, doing their best.

Suddenly, behind me, I heard a fit-looking 40-year old triathlete exclaim:

“Damn it! I didn’t spend 8 months of my life training for this Ironman... just to walk the run!”

Boy, did that strike a cord!

The frustration and disappointment he expressed brought back a flood of similar feelings I remembered from my early years in our sport.

I began my pursuit of triathlon following relatively successful stints in track & field and soccer. I considered myself an accomplished runner, but quickly and painfully realized that “triathlon running” was different. For some reason, I couldn’t replicate my success from the track when racing triathlon.

Getting off the bike in T2, my legs would feel lethargic and heavy. They ached and lacked that familiar “snap” of a fast turnover. I wanted to walk, too!

Worst of all, I had studied sports physiology in university and thought I understood the principles of training. Apparently I was missing something.

For the first couple years, I remained frustrated

and confused by my inconsistent performances. Then I decided to buckle down, apply my academic training and seek out a repeatable solution.

That led to my “Aha! Moment” (described below), which began my triathlon turnaround. The rest is history, including 3 titles at the IRONMAN World Championships in Hawaii, 2 World Championships in IRONMAN 70.3 and countless other victories.

In this eBook, I outline my most important tips and strategies for running faster off the bike.

These tips have taken nearly 25 years of trial and error to compile, but I’m delighted to present them to you here.

I’m absolutely convinced that – if you integrate them into your personal training plan – then you’ll see great improvement in your triathlon running.

I encourage you to give them a try for 8 weeks and let me know what you think.



TRIATHLON RUNNING IS DIFFERENT

Before I share my specific tips on how to become a more efficient and effective “triathlon runner”, it helps to first understand why it’s so challenging to run well off the bike.

As you know, triathlon running -- or running off the bike -- is different to “fresh” running because you’re already fatigued from swimming and biking.

Triathlon running is infamous for that familiar, awful feeling of heavy legs. This awkward, uncoordinated sensation is experienced by triathletes at all levels as we quickly transition from cycling to running. Here are its two main causes:

- 1 Shifts in Blood Flow & Muscles Firing.** Cycling workloads require that our blood flow be prioritized to deliver oxygen to the muscles that are working the hardest. When we stop cycling and immediately begin to run, different muscle groups become the prime movers, so the body is required to quickly modify its muscle firing patterns and redirect blood to these new muscle groups.
- 2 Changes in Blood Pressure.** There is also a change in our blood pressure when we dismount our bikes and move to the weight bearing activity of running. This transition contributes to the discomfort as our heart rate spikes for a brief period before settling in.

The good news is that, like many skills, running off the bike improves with practice. Even better, improvement can be seen in just a matter of weeks!

So, how can you run faster off the bike?

MY TOP 5 TIPS FOR FASTER TRIATHLON RUNNING

Triathlon running, or running off the bike, is different to “fresh” running because you are already fatigued from swimming and biking. First, it requires a good foundation of endurance and strength in order to maintain form and pace under load, followed by specifically targeting and practicing the changeover between disciplines.

1. STRONGER IS FASTER

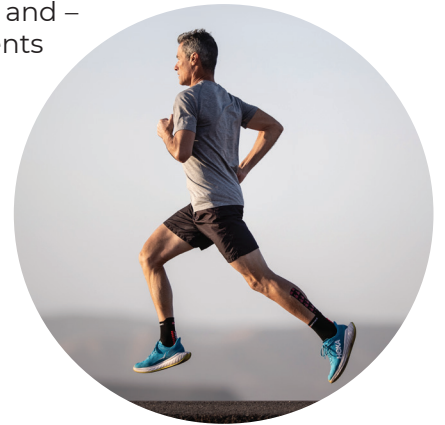
Purposeful strength training is missing from most triathletes' programs and – once introduced – produces the fastest and most significant improvements in run speed off the bike.

When coaching my athletes, one of the very first things I do is evaluate their core strength. The core is comprised of 35 muscle groups that connect the hip area and spine into the pelvis.

A strong core is necessary to stabilize the trunk and efficiently transfer power. Endurance athletes often have incredibly weak cores, which translate into the breakdown of form later in the race (often represented by wobbling, a bent over posture and shortened stride).

For specific examples of my favorite core exercises, [check out this video](#) I did with 220 Triathlon Magazine... it's a great place to start!

In addition to core strength, we also work on overall body strength with a focus on the legs.



Triathletes have many options to build strength. Here are two of my favorites:



Hill Repeats

Incorporating run-specific strength training into your weekly routine is a necessity.

I like hill repeats. Not only do they build strength, but they also seem to make my bike-run transitions less painful.

Find a hill in your neighborhood that has a mild to moderate grade (2-4%) and is at least 200 meters long (but can be up to 1,000 meters). As your strength and fitness improve, seek out steeper and longer grades.

My typical hill session includes 8x2min repeats. Start with a 10-15min warm-up jog on flat terrain before commencing the hill reps. Holding form and pace are key... Don't start too quickly!

Frequency: I typically perform hill repeats once per week.



Gym Work

I do bodywork in the gym year-round. A major reason for my longevity in triathlon was my consistent strength training. Even when traveling, I'd find a gym or I workout in my hotel room. No excuses!

Strength training is a very broad topic (certainly beyond the scope of this eBook), and there are lots of great resources (including my Sansego Tri Club training plans!) that will teach proper technique.

I've tried almost every strength routine imaginable but find that I always return to these basic exercises:

- » Lunges
- » Box jumps
- » Squats (front & back)
- » Single-leg balance exercises
- » Swiss ball stability exercises
- » Comprehensive core routines
- » Basic upper body exercises

I like to remind endurance athletes not be afraid of free weights (including Olympic bars and plates!) They're effective tools for achieving your goals.

If you haven't pursued strength training in awhile, embrace being a beginner. You'll make progress quickly and you'll see the results in your running performance in as little as 8 – 10 sessions. Remember, proper technique is crucial when performing exercises in the gym. For injury prevention and maximum strength gains, I advise working with a competent trainer whenever possible.

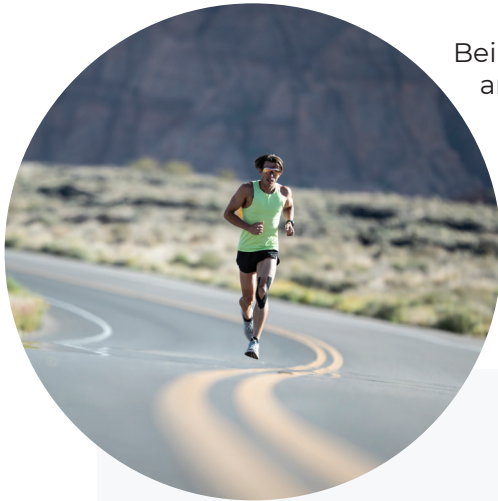
Frequency: I usually strength train 2x times per week year-round, but perform core work every other day.

When performing strength work, take care not to overdo your effort. The key to making progress as an athlete is consistency, so your mantra should be "Never Miss a Day."

Sometimes, however, after particularly rigorous sessions you might experience DOMS (Delayed Onset Muscle Soreness). Light massage and a topical analgesic like professional strength IRONMAN ActivICE help relieve pain and keep me in action.



2. STOP FIGHTING YOUR BODY



Being perched on your bike saddle for 4 to 6 hours – just like sitting on an office chair all day long – shortens your hip flexors and tightens your lower back. Tight hip flexors limit your extension and restrict your range of motion, which are essential for fast and efficient running.

To counter this, I focus on compound strength training that creates a stretch while under load. I find such exercises to be far more specific and relevant to our needs as triathletes.

In my experience the most effective of these exercises is the dumbbell lunge. Sometimes I'll hold light dumbbells in both hands, and sometimes I'll use only one to create an imbalance that I must overcome and control.

Frequency: I always include 2 to 3 sets of dynamic stretching lifts, and typically aim for 10-12 reps per set. I perform these as part of my strength training sessions, which I schedule twice weekly.

A personal note about static stretching. Static stretching has never been part of my routine, either before or after a workout. I find that it produces little improvement, so I choose to devote my time to the dynamic loaded exercises described above, which work extremely well for me.

3. BUILDING WITH BRICKS

I'm always surprised by how many age group triathletes avoid brick workouts! However, like most things in triathlon (and in life!), consistently doing the right things pays huge dividends over time.

In my way of thinking, I prefer to spend extra time working on my weaknesses in order to elevate my overall potential. And, like most triathletes, running off the bike was one of my major weaknesses!

My "Aha! Moment" occurred 2 years into my pro career. I'd been suffering from terrible inconsistency in my racing, and wondered if I had what it took to succeed as a professional triathlete.

One day I was cycling behind two other local pros on a group training ride, and I overheard them describing the benefits of a recent workout they kept referring to as a "brick".

Aha!

Looking back, it almost seems ridiculous that – until that moment -- I never really understood the power of brick workouts. (Remember, I came from a soccer background.) Suddenly, it all became clear and I began experimenting with different types of bricks.



As we've discussed, running off the bike is difficult, but can be improved with practice. I'm living proof! Within 2 months of consistently integrating brick training into my routine, my results improved dramatically and – more importantly – I had more confidence in my performance.

My Two Favorite Brick Workouts

I realize that some coaches like to structure very complex and unusual brick sessions but I prefer to keep things simple. Here are my two go-to sessions:



Endurance Brick

In the build phase during my preseason, I prefer endurance bricks. These are comprised of a longer ride (90 min to 6 hrs), immediately followed by an easy run of 20 to 30 min.

The purpose of the endurance brick is to familiarize your muscles – and mind – with the sensations and brief discomfort caused by the transition from cycling to running. You'll be surprised by how quickly your body adapts to this stress if practiced regularly.

Frequency: I perform endurance bricks once or twice weekly, at low intensity.



Race Pace Brick

As my priority events approach, I begin to introduce the race pace brick.

This brick begins with 90 min to 3 hours on the bike. After a patient warmup period, I ride the bulk of this session at race pace. Then I transition immediately into a 3 to 5km run, again performed at your target race pace.

Remember to refrain from riding and running too hard! Since the distances are shorter than your actual race, it's easy to overcook your pace. The objective here is to get comfortable with the effort and speed you plan to maintain during the race. Although this brick is challenging, you should find it doable. Properly executed, it will really build your confidence!

Frequency: This is a demanding workout, and I only perform it once per week during the final 2 weeks prior to my "A" races.

As with any progressive exercise, begin conservatively to maximize long-term improvement. This is especially true with brick workouts, which can place enormous stress on the muscles and connective tissues of the lower leg.

In my training, I must carefully monitor my lower calves and Achilles tendons. They're especially susceptible to overuse injuries.

If I feel a strain developing, then IRONMAN Far-Infrared Kinesiology Tape really helps. Applied vertically from my calf to beneath my heel, it helps relieve pain and pressure. The product's incredible adhesive allows me to keep the tape in place during all of my training for 4 to 5 days... long enough for me to recover and return to full speed.

4. PACE WITH PATIENCE



Six-time IRONMAN World Champion Mark Allen once said, “Triathlon is a closed energy equation. Once the race starts, spend your energy wisely!”

I've always taken that message to heart and, even when I got off the bike minutes behind my competition, I executed my runs with a plan and with patience. I encourage you to do the same.

Any triathlete would agree that having a pacing plan is the obvious thing to do. However, in the heat of battle within the high-energy environment of racing, all too often an athlete overcooks the bike leg and is left with no legs on the run!

You can avoid these catastrophic consequences by knowing – and staying within -- your cycling “sweet spot” for power, heart rate or perceived effort, and staying laser-focused on avoiding overzealous cycling efforts that put you irretrievably into the “red zone”.



Set the Governor

You might have heard the old saying, “Bike for show, run for dough.” Let’s face it: a good triathlon performance requires solid, consistent efforts in all 3 disciplines. But if you aspire to excellence, then a strong, fast run is required. By now you know that your best run begins with an intelligent ride.

Avoid the temptation of “over-biking”! I typically ride at about 85-90% of my capacity. Holding back on the bike can be very testing (especially when I’d watch Chris Lieto or one of the Uber-cyclists ride up the road without me!) But I’m in a triathlon, not a bike race. Knowing that I still have a marathon ahead keeps me patient and prevents me from needlessly “burning matches”.



Start Easy, Finish Strong

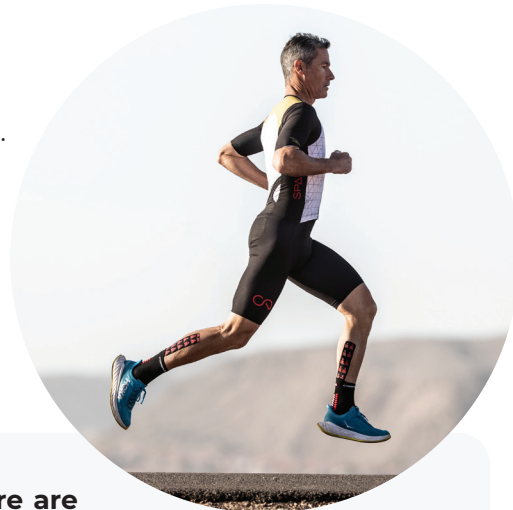
Coming out of T2, I continue to pull in the reins. It’s easy to be swept up in the moment and carried away by the cheering crowds, but I’ve found that it’s best to ramp into my optimal pace during the first 15 min of the run. It’s motivating and energizing to run a strong and fast second half, passing competitors who got their pacing wrong.

Remember, it’s a long day out there, so vigilantly managing your pace will deliver you to the last few miles of the run... where you can kick it in!

5. FUEL METHODICALLY

Nutrition is oftentimes referred to as a triathlon's "fourth discipline". Countless races are lost – or utterly ruined – by getting race nutrition wrong. We've all seen the cramping, bloated athletes suffering and shuffling through their own private hell because they mismanaged their eating and drinking.

I've attended all-day seminars on race day nutrition, and our sport is awash in countless opinions about diets and fuel and feeding strategies. Nutrition is a big topic!



However, regarding nutrition's impact on your running, here are my key tips that you can adopt immediately:

1. Train With What's On Course

This is a corollary to the tenet that all endurance athletes should follow: **"Nothing new on race day!"** I'm always surprised to hear how many athletes have no idea what products are being served at the aid stations of their "A" races. Training with the products that are being served on course, in conditions similar to what you're likely to encounter at the event, goes a long way towards building confidence and executing an effective nutrition plan.

2. You're Not a Camel

Just because it's a big race, don't excessively "top the tank" before the gun goes off. Strive to arrive at the start line being light and balanced, not stuffed to the gills!

3. It's Not an All-You-Can-Eat Buffet

Most race day disasters are caused by eating and drinking too much. Think about how much you consume during your longest training days, and it's usually a fraction of what you typically eat during a big race.

Nutritional requirements are very personal, so I encourage you to spend the time to work out your own hourly fluid, sodium and caloric needs while exercising at race intensity. I find that my Race Pace Bricks, described in section 3 above, are the ideal time to experiment and dial-in your nutrition plan.

4. Start Fueling Later

There's really no need to eat or drink much of anything until about 15 min into the bike; by then your heart rate has settled down and you can focus on the long ride ahead. Then proceed to fuel with very light servings at regular intervals, according to your predetermined schedule.

When you're subjected to the stress of racing – especially when it's hot and humid – your stomach no longer empties efficiently. If you've overloaded yourself with food and drink during the bike, once you reorient yourself into the upright position of running, gravity takes over and your GI tract can rebel.

5. It's Okay to Skip Aid Stations!

When out on the run, it's okay to fly by an aid station without partaking.

You definitely don't need calories or fluids every mile! If it is hot and humid, try using sponges, ice or water to douse yourself to cool off, rather than overfilling your stomach.

The good news is that, if you truly do need something, there's always another aid station just up the road.

Again, think light and fast... and that's how you'll run.

SUMMARY

I've provided a lot of information here, so I'll summarize the key points:

1. Commit to Strength Training

- » Hill running: 1x week
- » Purposeful weight training: 2x week

2. Improve Functional Mobility

- » Lunges: 2x week

3. Embrace Bricks

- » Endurance Bricks: 1-2x week
- » Race Pace Bricks: 1x week leading up to "A" races

4. Pace Patiently

- » Hold back on the bike (I typically rode at 85%)
- » Aim to negative split the run

5. Fuel Intelligently

- » Eat and drink later and less
- » Practice your fueling tactics during training

Running off of the bike is difficult. All triathletes must learn to deal with its awkwardness and discomfort.

The good news is that faster triathlon running is a learned skill. Just like me, you'll become more proficient once you employ these training techniques and race strategies.

I hope that you've found these tips useful. I'm confident that if you build them into your training routine, you'll be running faster and stronger off the bike in your next triathlon!



YOUR NEXT STEP

If you'd like to learn about how you can train more effectively (and have more fun doing so), then be sure to check out my [Sansego Triathlon Club](#). Since 2014 we've guided over 7,100 triathletes to better performances. Whether you're looking for a coach or just need a training plan, then we're the perfect multisport community for you! I hope you check it out.



FASTER TRIATHLON IS FUN!



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