

Triathlon vs Swimrun



Triathlon is more predictable than swimrun, and hence less interesting



When looking at multisport, Mike Alexander argues that swimrun is a better choice for swimmers than triathlon

If you're reading Outdoor Swimmer magazine, then I assume you think swimming is awesome. But if you want to see the world from a different perspective, you may consider trying a multi-sport event. Triathlon is an option. It's been around in its modern format for nearly half a century and most swimmers understand what it is. Swimrun is a newer race format and less familiar, so you might naturally try to put swimrun into the same category. But swimrun is so much more than "triathlon without a bike". Here I look at the advantages swimrun has over triathlon, from a swimmer's perspective.

MORE SWIMMING

There's a higher proportion of swimming in swimrun than triathlon.

Many swimrun events have around 20% swimming, so on a 30km route that's 6km of open water. If you're a 3km/h swimmer and a 10km/h runner then you'll spend 2 hours swimming and 2 hours 40m running. That's a nicer time balance compared to the less than 10% you might get in a half-Ironman.



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SIMPLICITY

No bike means much less kit faff. Just turn up on the start line and go. And keep going. There's no messing around with changing shoes or getting told off if you take your helmet off too quickly, and your day won't be ruined by a puncture. In swimrun, a transition is simply getting out of the water and running or getting into the water and swimming, as you are.

Although there is an array of kit for swimrun, it's up to you what you use as long as whatever you take you finish with (most races expect you to wear a wetsuit, swim hat, race bib, and something on your feet). Hand paddles, pull buoys, towing and flippers(!) are all optional extras.

Easier and cheaper travel

Doing a triathlon requires travelling with a bike, whether it's attaching your bike to a car or the expense and hassle of bike boxes on planes. If I go to a swimrun abroad, I can fit all my gear into my carry-on luggage and can share transport and accommodation costs with my race partner.

ADVENTURE

Triathlon is more predictable than swimrun, and hence less interesting. The best swimruns are set in wild places – think rugged mountains, pristine lakes, stunning coastal paths, tempestuous oceans and sweeping archipelagos. Think trails, not tarmac. Race directors plot engaging routes through nature and are not restricted by the set structure of triathlon. Most triathletes know how long a race will take them. Predictability is far from adventure. There's a general feeling in swimrun races of the pure joy of completing an adventurous journey through nature with your race partner, rather than cracking an arbitrary time barrier.

CHALLENGING SWIMS

In swimrun, you may well find yourself swimming in what the International Triathlon Union (ITU) would deem as water too cold or too rough.

If triathlon rules were applied to swimrun then one of the best swimrun races, Ötillö Swimrun Utö, simply wouldn't happen.

Why is this OK? As a swimmer what's one thing you don't want after a cool swim? Wind chill. Cycling is one sure-fire way to achieve wind chill whatever the weather. Running, or even walking, in neoprene is a sure-fire way to generate heat. Plus you have the safety advantage of swimming with your race partner.

In swimrun, the swims may alter, but they rarely get cancelled.

QUICKER RECOVERY

If you are looking at Ironman distances, most people will be sore and stiff for several days post-race. Do a swimrun and your legs are almost fine the next day. Even though often you run near marathon distances you don't feel marathon sore. For me, the last five miles of a marathon are super-grim, and the next day walking downstairs is comical. After a swimrun, I feel like I could train the next day. Swimrun feels better for the body.

Why is recovery so quick? It could be that the run is split into multiple sections combined with some cooling and relaxation effects on the legs during the swims. In addition, most swimruns have run sections on trails where pounding of the joints is less pronounced. Most people also run slower on a swimrun, especially on technical trails, which may also aid recovery.

Don't get me wrong, triathlon is great, and I love cycling but for me it is more of a stand-alone sport. San Sebastian to Barcelona via the Pyrenees is what I'd like to use my bike for, not in between a swim and a run.

Simplify your racing. Swimrun

Mike Alexander is one of the most experienced swimrun athletes in the UK, competing in male and mixed category races across Europe including the Ötillö World Series, the BRECA UK Championships & the LoveSwimRun Series. He is an experienced Level 2 Open Water Coach and Mountain Leader. He is passionate about swimrun and loves sharing what he has learnt. Find out more: www.weswimrun.org/workshop

