



North Carolinians catch on to triathlons

It's no Ironman event, but hard work will pay off in Sunday's Triangle Triathlon

BY LORENZO PEREZ
STAFF WRITER

Paul McCall spent 17 years in a pool wondering why anyone would run for fun.

But after graduating from Wheaton College in 2003, the former college swimmer missed the excitement of racing and entered his first triathlon this spring. He picked up an early case of shin splints as a novice runner, but also picked up a 12th-place finish in the April 29 Riverwood race in Clayton.

The Durham computer programmer claimed top-10 finishes

in two other triathlons this year and will be one of more than 1,000 competitors scheduled to race in Sunday morning's Triangle Triathlon. Starting at Morrisville's Lake Crabtree County Park, the race features a 750-meter (about a half mile) swim, 15-mile bike ride and 3.1-mile run and is one of the largest sprint-distance triathlons in the state.

Elite amateur triathletes dream of qualifying for the Ironman World Championship in Kona, Hawaii, eager to swim 2.4 miles of choppy ocean, navigate another 112 miles of lava field

hunched over the skinny saddle of a bicycle and run another 26.2 miles.

Thousands of other amateur triathlon competitors are happy to race in less exotic locales over much shorter distances, however, and North Carolina has emerged as one of the sport's growing hotbeds in this country.

"It's allowed me to keep alive that piece of me that loves to compete," said McCall, who hopes to qualify for the Oct. 21 season-ending championship race in the North Carolina Triathlon Series.

According to USA Triathlon, the sport's national governing body, more than 70,000 competitors, coaches and others have registered as organization members. USAT membership is not required to compete in area triathlons, yet North Carolina ranks seventh nationally with 2,241 registered members.

In terms of the number of triathlons held each year, North Carolina ranks even higher, according to the owner of Set-Up Inc., the Kure Beach-based

Cyclists grind out a 35-mile training ride through Cary on Thursday. Many will compete in the Triangle Triathlon.

STAFF PHOTO BY TED RICHARDSON

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Training riders carry their bikes across the tracks between Carpenter Upchurch Road and N.C. 55 in Cary on Thursday.

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organizer and director of 28 races in this state. In addition to his company's slate of races, which includes sprint-distances, three international-distance races (1.5-km swim, 40-km bike and 10-km run) and two Half Ironman distance races (1.2-mile swim, 56-mile bike and 13.1-mile run), Bill Scott estimates there are as many as 10 other races scheduled this year in North Carolina.

Only three other states — Texas, Florida, and California — host more annual races, he said.

"When we put on our first race in 1994, there were no more than five or six triathlons in North Carolina," said Scott, 56. "The real boost came in 2000, when it became an Olympic sport and was showcased with a tremendous amount of TV exposure worldwide."

Cid Cardoso Jr., 37, an elite-

level amateur competitor and owner of Cary's Inside-Out Sports, traces the boom to the early 1990s. Back then, however, it was merely a faddish sport that took a dip in popularity when weekend warriors switched to inline skating, mountain biking and other sports.

"Ten years ago, people said, 'You're crazy trying to open a triathlon store. There's no such thing. You can be a running store or cycling store,'" Cardoso said.

Inside-Out Sports recently sold its Raleigh store, but will replace it with another store in Charlotte. Like the Triangle, Charlotte has emerged as another triathlon hot spot in the state.

Before the end of February, a month before the first North Carolina race of the season, four of Set-Up Inc.'s triathlons had reached the registration caps. To date, seven races filled up registration caps, and as of Friday afternoon, less than 100 spots remained open for the Triangle Triathlon.

"I think we're close to capping the number of races we can have in North Carolina," Scott said.

Three years ago, Set-Up Inc. introduced a series of shorter "Endurance Development" triathlons, sponsored by Chapel Hill's Endurance Magazine, for novice competitors. Many of them include short pool swims — the Aug. 13 UNC Wellness Center Super Sprint Triathlon in Chapel Hill starts with swimming 10 lengths of a 25-yard pool.

When Cardoso speaks to people curious about triathlons, he said many people assume that the only triathlons out there cover Ironman distances that leave dehydrated and jelly-legged competitors staggering across the finish line.

"I was talking to a marathon training group last week, and I was telling them, 'You're training for a race that will take you five-to-six hours to finish. There are sprint-distance triathlons you can race in less than two hours.'"

The Cary YMCA and other organizations have offered seasonal triathlon training programs and have hooked novices such as Karen Scofield, 32.

A married occupational therapist with a 22-month-old son, Scofield signed up for the Cary YMCA's program last summer with no formal swim training. Her workouts were limited to sporadic trips to the gym to lift weights or use a cardio machine, and Scofield admits she had never sat on a road bike before the program and hated to run.

Since last summer, however, Scofield has completed four triathlons, including two international-distance races.

"It clicked for me when I was able to run a few miles and felt comfortable riding. I was truly a novice," she said. "Now I get up early in the morning because I crave that jump-start to my day."

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