

Parties to Podiums

Two years ago, Helen Croydon wouldn't even take the Tube in the rain let alone get on a bike. Last year she competed at the ITU Triathlon Age Group World Championships in Chicago. Here's how she did it.

THREE YEARS AGO if someone had predicted that every Saturday last summer I'd set my alarm for 5.30am, get on a bike, cycle eight miles to a reservoir and swim in it, then slum it with a shower in a public changing room with no hairdryer, I'd have spat out my passion fruit martini.

Sure, I kept fit, but it was purely for vanity. My workouts were strictly confined to temperature-controlled gyms and the occasional 30-minute jog, if the sun shone.

So what changed? A little over two years ago I rocked up to Victoria Park Harriers running club in east London. I wasn't even bothered about running particularly. A low patch in my personal life (a break-up and my two closest friends moving abroad all at the same time) left a gap in my social life and I was desperate for new social interaction, preferably that didn't involve drinking.

My lifestyle back then revolved around trendy bars, restaurants and parties and I rarely left London. If I didn't want to drink I felt I had to stay in so the idea of a day out to a sporting event with a big lively group appealed.

THE RACE BUG

Over the next six months I became the "yes" woman to every running club event or outing. It wasn't through any competitive leaning, I just wanted to fill my weekends. It was winter so my first race was a short cross-country. I wasn't used to getting dirty. I remember grimacing as I saw the first sea of mud. There was no other way but to go straight through it and I felt like a superhero for braving to get my feet wet so far away from a shower.

After my first two races my body didn't know what hit it. I'd only ever done gentle jogging. The leap into anaerobic exercise left me feeling sick and my core temperature would plummet. I wasn't kitted out with any thermal après wear. My idea of casual clothes back then was last year's fashions downgraded. I didn't own a backpack so I turned up with an Estee Lauder beach bag and my clean, dry clothes were soaked. After my first club race, we all headed to the pub and I sat shivering, but I was determined to stay and make new friends.

Soon I wanted to get faster so I went to a weekly track session. A typical session would be mixed intervals like 1,500m, 1,200m, 400m repeated five times with 60-second recoveries. It was the hardest thing I'd ever done. I dreaded it so much I had butterflies in my stomach all day every Tuesday before the session. When I first started, I'd get home and stumble around my flat as if I were drunk. The cardio burn in my chest was unbearable.

The following spring, I went to a triathlon training camp in France with my running club. Cue my debut into road cycling and open water swimming. I'd never ridden anything other

than my Dutch bike with a basket on the front. I practised clipping in and out of cleats on a patch of grass just ten minutes before our inaugural ride. I didn't know how to change the gears but I didn't dare ask. We did 70kms and I spent the whole time chasing the dots of my fellow riders on the horizon ahead of me.

Trying to keep up with faster people pretty much sums up my first year's fitness plan. My main goal in my early days of running and cycling was simply not to be the one holding people back. Performance is as much to do with determination as ability and if I hadn't been so driven to fit in to my new sporting milieu because of a low patch in my personal life, I wouldn't have pushed myself so hard.

TRIATHLON BEGINNINGS

My appetite for new challenges grew. I was growing mentally stronger as well as physically stronger and I found the transformation addictive. I entered other events outside of running club, keen to see what I was capable of: trail runs, obstacle runs, a river swim, a 5km sea swim, triathlons and sportives including

a 100 miles over The Peaks in treacherous weather. I took a particular shine to open water swimming, which is a miracle because the first time I tried it the water was only 13 degrees and when I got out, I was shaking, blue and couldn't talk. My hands were so numb my running club friends had to dress me. I needed help going to the toilet an hour later because I couldn't do up my zip! I trained my body to tolerate the cold by taking cold showers regularly – and I still do!

I enjoyed the variety of events that triathlon training offers, rather than just running, so a year ago I joined London Fields Triathlon Club, also based in east London. I joined club rides and became enlightened to the etiquette of group riding. I went to structured swim sessions, and became acquainted with speed work and varying paces, rather than simply swimming up and down.

WORLD CHAMPS BECKON

The ITU Age-Group Triathlon World Championships is the highest level competition for non-elite triathletes. There are three qualifying races each year for both the sprint and standard distances. The top four finishers in each age category qualify, providing they finish within 110% of the winner's time.

I qualified for the Olympic distance at Dambuster Triathlon in Leicestershire in June last year. It was particularly poignant as it was roughly one year on from my first ever triathlon. I was stunned! I entered to get an idea of how much I would need to improve should I attempt to qualify in the future.

At first I didn't know whether to take up my qualifying place.



Words Helen Croydon





I didn't feel ready for that level of competition, not to mention the expense of flights, hotel and race entry fee. But the prospect of wearing a trisuit with "GBR" and my name printed on it, was too great an opportunity to miss!

STRATEGIC TRAINING

I had four months to tailor my training to get to be the best I could. Until now, my mantra had been "Enter everything going and try your damndest not to hold people back." If my running club organised an outing to a half marathon, I'd go. If my triathlon club organised a long cycle to the seaside, I'd join. If my gym launched a new class, I'd try it. Now I had to be more strategic.



My knowledge of sports science comes from reading **Outdoor Fitness** and chatting to fellow running and triathlon club members in the pub. But I couldn't afford a coach so I devised my own training plan.

I set myself one speed session and one endurance session for each of the three disciplines each week. So, a long steady run (10 miles); a speed session on the track; a long open water swim (3km); an interval session in the pool (a mix of 100m, 200m and 400m sets); a long cycle (100km); a spin class or Watt bike intervals. And one strength session in the gym. That's seven sessions per week. I have two rest days so sometimes I trained twice a day. I am a freelance journalist so luckily I can arrange my working hours around my schedule – a luxury many don't have.



With six weeks to go before Chicago, I consulted triathlete coach Dr Garry Palmer from Sportstest.co.uk. His one-off sessions include a VO2max test and personal heart rate zone analysis. From this he identifies strengths and weaknesses and advises tweaks to your training plan accordingly.

After being fitted with an oxygen mask and wired to a heart rate monitor, Garry concluded that my endurance was very good, but my ability to hold my threshold heart rate not so good. He advised I replace my long cycle with more Watt bike sessions where I try to hold my threshold heart rate (175bpm) for five sets of 5-8 minutes, and replace my long run for a shorter tempo run, or a hill session. (Ouch!)

THE BIG DAY

I arrived in Chicago five days before the event on 19th September 2015 to shed jet lag. The atmosphere around event HQ on the banks of Lake Michigan was amazing. Fellow GB triathletes in team branded kit were everywhere so it was easy to make friends.

On race morning, nerves got the better of me and I had a disastrous swim. I was swam over and pushed under water. Add in race anxiety, cold water and setting off too quickly and the result was a full-on hyperventilating fit. I had to resort to breaststroke to calm down. When my breathing regulated I was so anxious to make up time that I missed out a buoy on a corner and had to swim back around it. I was bitterly disappointed because swimming is usually my best of the three. I was aiming for a PB of 25 minutes. Instead I clocked 26:06.

I managed the best bike split ever at 1:02:27. I put this down to my new best friend - a Bianchi Oltre XR2 and clip-on tri bars, which I bought a month ahead of the race. I'd only ever raced on my entry-level road bike, and I'd always ranked lowest on the bike than the swim and run. My new steed however knocked a whole 10 minutes off my previous triathlon bike record and my bike split put me in the top 26% of females. I had a disappointing run though. The course was long (10.7km) so my 47:38 wasn't as slow as it sounds. My goal was to run 7-minute miles. I've managed that in other races but I was ten seconds per mile slower and I have no idea why.

OVERALL RESULT: 2:23:30. 41st in my 35-39 year age category, out of 107

Was it worth it? It was amazing to experience a competition on a global stage. I've had the opportunity to see what my body is capable of. I can genuinely say I could not have trained harder. Maybe with more professional input I could get a bit quicker, but I don't think I have the genes of a podium level age-grouper. And would I want to sustain that level of pain and dedication through training long-term? I intend to fill my summers with triathlons for the years to come but I think I'll go back to my old approach – enter everything and try to keep up! A certain level of pain and sacrifice is required for any endurance race but I never want to lose site of my original goal when I first started this journey – get outdoors, make friends and have fun.