

# The joy of triathlons

**THIS SUMMER** I completed my first-ever triathlon in Joroinen, the beautiful lake district of Finland. I managed the half-Ironman – 1.9 kilometres of swimming, 90 kilometres of biking and 21 kilometres of running – in five hours and one minute.

I know what you're thinking. Now he has finally flipped; triathlons are for loonies. Right? Wrong!

Triathlons may bring to mind the classic battles of athletes such as Mark Allen, Dave Scott and Pauli Kiuru in events such as the Ironman of Hawaii along with the accompanying images of these extreme athletes crawling over the finish line and passing out in their own vomit.

**Well,** that's what I thought about triathlons, too, until I tried one. My first attempt at a half distance was the best sports experience of my life. I felt fantastic afterwards. Ten times better than I've ever felt after a marathon.

Triathlons are not about swimming 3.8 kilometres, biking 180 kilometres and running 42 kilometres. That's the full Ironman distance. Triathlons are essentially about three healthy forms of exercise that we have all tried at some stage in our lives.

The Olympic distance is 1.5 kilometres, 40 kilometres and ten kilometres. A triathlon can also comprise a relaxed 200-metre swim combined with a ten-kilometre bike ride and a three-kilometre run. Not a bad way to spend an hour on a nice summer day.

**For me,** it all started with a running injury. I was simply running too much. In December I was diagnosed with the pre-stage of a slipped disk. Nothing drastic, most of us have slightly crooked backs.

My physiotherapist gave me a set of exercises and told me to take a break from running. She suggested that I should try swimming and biking instead.

I was not

thrilled. I had done the Brussels Marathon in October and was looking forward to the Paris marathon in April. Suddenly I had to hang up my running shoes for at least a month. I was never into biking, and especially not swimming, which I felt was better suited to fish, at any rate.

Fortunately I had read a great book *Run Less, Run Faster* by Bill Pierce, Scott Murr and Ray Mosson on marathon training. Their thesis was simple: cross-training is a good thing for any runner. As a matter of fact it will improve your times and help prevent injuries.

## We all get more energy from exercise.

So I got myself a bike and took my first-ever swimming lesson. I fell for biking immediately. It's a lovely form of exercise, easy on the joints and good for checking out the local scenery.

My swimming coach told me that I might survive in the water for a little while, but if I wanted to swim two kilometres, I needed to do a bit of work. Slowly but surely I got used to swimming. I had never realised how much a reasonable technique matters. I am no Olympic swimmer such as Finland's Hanna-Maria Seppälä, but I do feel fairly comfortable in the pool now.

**Why I am** telling you all of this? For two reasons. The first is to demystify triathlons. They are not as crazy as they sound. Two, I really think that all of us get more energy from exercise. As such, diverse training is the best way to prevent injury and it's more interesting than running the same route every week, or doing the same exercises at the gym every workout.

Go for something new. Try a triathlon. It's a lot of fun. I promise.

**Alexander Stubb is Finland's foreign minister, and a bit of a fitness freak.**

