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Kids do triathlons too

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For some kids, hitting the playground, spending the afternoon at the neighborhood pool or playing a pickup game of kickball on the cul-de-sac is enough activity. Others need something a little more ... sweat inducing.

Like a triathlon.

Triathlon? That Ironman thing they do in Hawaii? Swim halfway across the ocean (2.4 miles), ride your bike cross-country (112 miles), then run a marathon (26.2 miles)?

Yes and no.

Yes, it's those three events, only scaled back considerably for younger competitors. A typical triathlon for a 12-year-old, for instance, might be a 150-yard swim (six lengths in a 25-yard pool) followed by a 5-mile bike ride and a 1.5-mile run. An 8-year-old, on the other hand, might just do two lengths (50 yards) in the pool, bike two miles then run a half mile.

"We've certainly scaled the distances back," says Erin Christy, assistant wellness director for the Banks D. Kerr Family YMCA in North Raleigh, which is holding its first Kidz Triathlon on July 22. "The distances are definitely reasonable for kids this age."

The Kerr Family Y triathlon joins two other new kids triathlons -- both put on by Fit & Able Productions of Cary -- in a local kids triathlon field blazed by Kids in Training in 2003. Kids in Training, a local nonprofit that aims to get kids fit and healthy, has four kid triathlons scheduled this year (in addition to three duathlons and an adventure race).

"There are so many adults in this area who do duathlons and triathlons that this seemed like a good way to get kids started," Christy said by way of explaining why the Y decided to hold a triathlon.

A triathlon may seem a bit intense for a grade-schooler. In fact, says Alisa Wright Colopy with Fit & Able, it's the antidote to kids being pushed at an early age to excel in a given sport.

"It's a cross-training issue," Colopy says. "You do a better job of warding off injuries. I know a lot of kids who do multiple sports and they tend to get less injured." And less burned-out.

"It's an age when parents are wanting their kids to be an Olympian, to focus on one sport," she says. "They might be good at a sport, but they don't necessarily enjoy it." Triathlons, she says, expose kids to three disciplines: swimming, biking, running.

And through these programs, they may expose kids to an area they might not have access to otherwise.

In 2003, Maylene Jackson, a single mom in Cary with two kids, started Kids in Training. One of her goals was to provide high-quality training and coaching to kids who might not be able to afford it. At one recent event, Jackson says 70 percent of the participants received a break on the \$30 entry fee.

In some cases, it's not even expert coaching the kids receive. It's exposure to something new.

"One thing I didn't understand were some of the cultural differences," Jackson says. "In some of the lower-income families, a lot of the kids don't swim." As a result, Kids in Training, using a grant from the Carolina Hurricanes Community Foundation, has joined with a local swim club to teach disadvantaged kids.

With triathlons, the kids don't sign up for the event. Both the Y and Fit & Able programs plan to adopt the approach taken by Kids in Training. KIT holds clinics between events at which local coaches and

athletes share training tips and help chart the young triathletes' progress.

In its five years, Jackson says, the number of kids participating in KIT triathlons has remained stable -- 80 to 100 per event -- but the number of events has grown, to nine overall, four of which are triathlons. She sees that trend changing this year, though.

"Based on early response, I have a feeling we're gong to have between 150 and 200 kids in our Meadowmont race," Jackson says.

That triathlon isn't until July 28, by the way. Still plenty of time to sign up and train, kids.

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