



Competing Costs

Triathletes could be forgiven for thinking they have it tough. Ours is a gruelling, kit-heavy sport that demands hours of training, planning and preparation, but the next time you're packing your kit bag for a race, spare a thought for the race organiser. If you think the pre-race process throws up a logistical nightmare for the athlete, just imagine what a headache organising and staging the race can be.

Race organisers often take a lot of flack for the events they host, as triathletes can be awkward beings who want their swim-bike-run experience to be just right. After all, we've spent the entire winter training for it and often pay big bucks to enter. But remember that the organisers have also undergone a punishing workout of an all-together different kind, one which involves a similar amount of blood, sweat and tears...

Even when the idea of a race is still in its embryonic stages, the average race organiser's 'to do' list is never a short one. It could look a little like this: find a suitable venue and plan a course; meet venue owners to discuss hiring it; speak to local authority, police and ambulance; have health and safety and risk assessments carried out; start advertising and marketing the race; find sponsors; manage entries; ensure a medical team is in place for race day and find volunteers, marshals and referees. And that's all before race day arrives.

A triathlete's lot is an expensive one, but isn't it time we found out where our money goes? **Emma-Kate Lidbury** does the sums...

"It's a very bureaucratic process," says Nick Rusling, director of the Michelob Ultra London Triathlon, the world's largest triathlon. "For us it's a full-time operation, with people working on logistics, sales and marketing year-round."

This year will see the 11th London event, which has gone from having 1,000 entrants in its first year to more than 10,000 in 2006. Rusling knows that everything has to be spot-on if the race is to live up to expectations.

"We are effectively shutting down parts of London," he says. "If there were any errors then there are lots of people with the power to prevent us holding the race again, so we have to get it 100% right."

But getting it right is one of the last pieces of the race organiser's jigsaw to be put into place, as getting it off the ground is the all-important and often tricky first piece to find.

Rusling estimates it takes at least a year from the idea of an event being born to a race being launched and athletes signing up. And even then, it's unlikely that an event will make any money in its first year.

The same team launched the Blenheim Tri in 2005 with profits made from the London Tri over a number of years, but they were in the boardroom planning it from 2004 onwards.

Lorraine Ferris of TriFerris Promotions, which organises smaller, 500-strong events such as the Cotswold Sprint

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Triathlon and the Swindon Duathlon, says it took her a good year of planning and preparation ahead of her inaugural race, and a couple of years after that before the business began to make a profit.

“Race organisers, or at least ones of small to medium-sized events, are not in it for the money,” she says. “I would guess that there are only a handful of race organisers in the UK who make a good living out of it. Most of us do it because we love triathlon.

“The majority of race organisers have been triathletes themselves and are passionate about going on to organise events and putting on good races for athletes. I don’t think people realise how much time is put into organising. I do everything myself, from entering competitor’s data to filling registration bags.”

So with money not being the name of the game for most race organisers, how do they generate the cash?

That’s where the often thorny issue of race entry fees comes in. The entry fee you pay is, for many small to medium-sized events, the sole source of income for race organisers, so it’s important to get the price right.

Ferris says hiring space to traders on race day might also help line the coffers, and she may also secure some sponsorship, but that is usually in the form of prizes for athletes rather than cash towards the event, so money from entry fees is crucial.

For a larger race like London though, the set-up is slightly different. According to Rusling, the event is ‘absolutely reliant’ on sponsorship. It plays an important part in generating income and without it the race could not go ahead.

Merchandise sales and wetsuit hire are other reliable forms of income, although TV coverage of the event – which is sent to 60 countries – doesn’t generate a penny.

“It’s a free-to-air broadcast,” says Rusling. “Unfortunately it’s not like football, where they command huge fees for TV rights.”

But with entry to the Olympic distance race at London costing £74 and the sprint £69, the race experience certainly doesn’t come cheap, so where does your money go?



There are only a few promoters in the UK who have enough bike racking for more than 300 competitors

“Costs for seemingly small things, such as race numbers and safety pins, all have to be accounted for”

Mark Shaw, of Pacesetter Events, organisers of events such as Dambuster and Vitruvian, says his entry fee rates are set according to the costs of each event.

As a race organiser he says he tires of having to constantly justify his prices, saying:

“A company that charges too much goes out of business pretty quickly. We are often quizzed about race prices, but the fact of the matter is that if competitors think the price is too high then they should simply not enter, which is what consumers do.”

Shaw says an event with a higher entry fee usually means that the race organisers are more thorough and professional in their approach, which means you, the competitor, should have a safer race. He says, for example, that event organisers are ‘ill advised’ to rely on volunteers.

“It’s not a problem if all goes well,” Shaw continues. “But if it doesn’t then they better have a good lawyer. The effect of this

Organisation Timeline

Thinking of setting up your own triathlon event? Follow our step-by-step guide to do it right...



1 Find a venue with a stretch of open water and suitable roads, paths and tracks for cycling and running.



2 Plan a potential course and approach the owner of the venue or land owners to discuss hiring it for a race.



3 Contact the police, local authority and relevant health and safety teams to gain permission to stage an event.



4 Set a date which is both convenient to site owners and fits into the triathlon racing calendar. Seek out sponsorship and register the event with the BTF.



5 Ensure that all the adequate insurance, medical cover and water safety cover is in place and ready for race day.



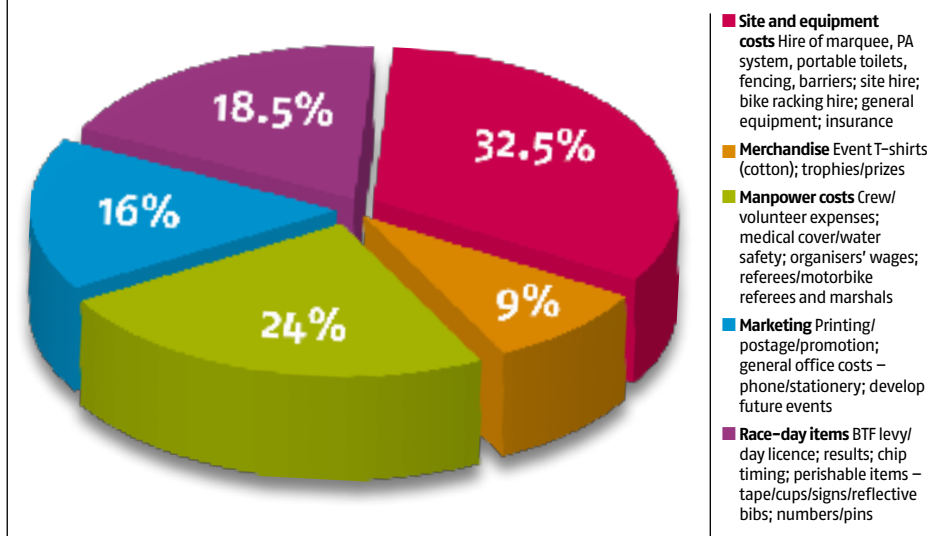
Whether they're volunteers or paid, marshals and stewards have to be found and organised



The St John's Ambulance team are great for those all-too-frequent spills, but they don't come cheap

The tri pie

Staging an event is an expensive business – here's how the costs break down...



- **Site and equipment costs** Hire of marquee, PA system, portable toilets, fencing, barriers; site hire; bike racking hire; general equipment; insurance
- **Merchandise** Event T-shirts (cotton); trophies/prizes
- **Manpower costs** Crew/volunteer expenses; medical cover/water safety; organisers' wages; referees/motorbike referees and marshals
- **Marketing** Printing/postage/promotion; general office costs – phone/stationery; develop future events
- **Race-day items** BTF levy/day licence; results; chip timing; perishable items – tape/cups/signs/reflective bibs; numbers/pins

knowledge means experienced organisations tend to use professionals and draw up practice agreements. The knock-on effect means that prices are generally higher.”

Rusling echoes this view, saying thousands are spent at London on road closures and a water safety operation, which means every penny of your entry fee is being pumped back into the event in some form.

“Fees tend to go into covering costs,” he says. “When you break down the costs of the event it runs into hundreds of thousands.

“There are huge costs involved with each of the three disciplines – the swim and water safety operation, the road closures for the bike,” continues Rusling. “It costs us more

than £10,000 just to shut one of the tunnels competitors ride through.

“We also have to pay the Royal Dock Association to use the water. Each year costs go up, but this year we’ve frozen our entry fees. With all of the costs involved, entry fees are not going to make us any profit.”

So it seems that a race organiser’s chequebook is undoubtedly a well-thumbed one, with the list of outgoings even longer than that hellish-looking ‘to do’ one.

At the Cotswold Sprint Tri, the organiser’s largest expenditure is on the hire of the race venue, Keynes Country Park, which costs more than £2,000 – a price which includes water safety cover.

The next largest outlay of cash – about £1,300 – goes on high security fencing and barriers for use in transition and around the venue. Marquees also have to be hired for competitor registration and medical areas, and then there’s the hire of toilets and racking. TriFerris Promotions owns enough racking for about 200 bikes, but this is hard to come by in the UK and there are few race promoters who own enough racking for more than 300 competitors.

Timekeeping systems, timing chips, a PA system and race numbers are also a less-than-modest outlay, as is paying for St John’s Ambulance and police on the course.

Costs for seemingly small things, such as competitor wristbands, race numbers and safety pins all have to be accounted for. Expenses for volunteers add up too, with each being given a T-shirt, food and drinks and entry into a prize draw.

This is standard practice for smaller events, although at London there are a number of points on the course at which professional stewards are paid an hourly rate to marshal.

At the Cotswold Sprint, a small amount is earmarked for marketing but with a limited budget for this type of thing, Ferris tries to ensure as much promotion as possible is free.

Expenses for race referees also have to be accounted for, which are £100 per person on average, and motorbike referees cost £80 each. There is also signage to be considered for the bike and run route and insurance premiums, as every commercial race organiser has to have insurance in place.

Once all of that has been taken care of there are then race levies to the British



6 Start marketing and promoting the event, and organise entries as they come in.



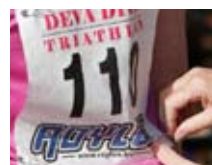
7 Hire fencing, barriers, racking, portable toilets, PA system, computing systems, timing systems and timing chips.



8 Book traders and food/drink services to set up at race venue. Buy T-shirts and get them printed for event.



9 Recruit volunteers to help you with marshalling and also book race referees and motorbike referees, too.



10 Buy race numbers, safety pins, signs, reflective bibs for marshals, prizes/trophies for athletes.



11 Send out race information to athletes and ensure everything is in place for race day.



The key to hosting a memorable event is good organisation, and free T-shirts

Triathlon Federation (BTF) to consider. Race organisers have to pay £1 (plus VAT) for each BTF member who takes part in the race or £3-plus for every non-BTF participant.

"This is for insurance," explains Ferris. "But we pay a lot to the BTF and don't get a lot in return. If you register with them in time then your race does appear in their handbook and on the website, though.

"All race organisers have their own insurance in place so more and more are not registering with the BTF because of this."

It's a divisive issue, and one that prompted a number of organisers to threaten to leave the then British Triathlon Association a couple of years ago and start their own triathlon body. The only one to do this was Vic Bickerton of Fun2Tri, which hosts events such as the South Coast Triathlon.

But Ferris and many like her believe that being BTF-registered has its benefits...

"The levies are a good way of supporting the BTF and, in turn, the sport," she says. "Also, there are now Government guidelines for staging races on highways, which strongly recommend that you register with your sport's governing body. It's an extra safeguard in case something goes wrong and you have to make sure that you're covered."

This is something Mike Shaw says all race organisers have to be aware of.

"An explanation of the legal consequences of putting on an event would result in all non-commercial organisers deciding against staging one. The legal risks and repercussions of putting on an event can be huge."

And things don't always go to plan, as some race organisers find out the hard way.

At London in 2003, the three-strong lead pack in the women's Elite race followed a

"Last year there were 100 more events staged than in 2005, with record numbers of first timers taking part"

motorbike marshal who led them the wrong way around the bike course. The women were directed back on track, but it cost them time and it was athletes in the chase pack who went on to take the top three spots.

"You have to just hold your hands up with things like that and make sure it doesn't happen again," says Rusling. "We reimbursed the athletes who were affected, but it was a very public error and one which we've been reminded of a few times, especially after it appeared on the What Happened Next? round of the BBC's *A Question of Sport*.

"If errors are going to happen, you have to hope they occur behind the scenes. We always have tight schedules and contingency plans in place to try to ensure things go smoothly."

And the majority of the time they do. Triathlon would not be enjoying the boom it currently is if it were any other way. Last year there were 100 more events staged than in 2005, with record numbers of first timers taking part, giving competitors more choice about where, what and when they race.

And while the purists of the triathlon world sometimes criticise larger, 'production-line' triathlons such as London, organisers of smaller events are thankful for them.

"Events like London have led to the explosion in the sport," says Ferris. "People do a race like that and then want to do another,

Races on a budget

SPRINT

Peebles Sprint Triathlon, Peebles, Scotland

10 June, 01890 750557

£10 BT members, £12 non-BT members

Helston Triathlon, Helston, Cornwall

10 June, 01209 614348

£13 BT members, £15 non-BT members

OLYMPIC

Brecon Triathlon, Penlan, Brecon, Powys

9 June, 01874 623677

£28 BT members, £32 non-BT members

Brighton Triathlon, Brighton Marina, Brighton

23 September, 07740 161589

£25 BT members, £26 non-BT members

MIDDLE DISTANCE

Helvellyn Triathlon, Ullswater, Cumbria

9 September, rob@trihard.co.uk

£35 BT members, £38 non-BT members.

Cleveland Steelman, Scarton Richmond, North Yorkshire, 7 July, Sandramain_41@msn.com

£35 BT members, £38 non-BT members

LONG DISTANCE

The Big Woody, Hartleton, near Ross-on-Wye

1 September, 07917 191095

£150 BT members, £155 non-BT members

DUATHLON

Manic Midweek Duathlon, Castle Combe Racing Circuit, Wilts, 6 June, 07905 771733

£10 BT members, £13 non-BT members

Croups Llandow Duathlon Series Race 2, near Cowbridge, Vale of Glamorgan, 13 June, 07968 374467, £10 BT members, £13 non-BT members

RACING ABROAD

There are plenty of cheap races taking place across Europe, and with no-frills airlines offering bargain flight deals, getting there doesn't have to cost the earth, nor does staying there if you're prepared to camp or check into a hostel. For events, check out the BTF's French equivalent at www.fftri.com or the latest from Spain at www.triatlon.org.

which is where smaller races come in." So with the larger numbers, will the prices of events drop? The answer to this is a unanimous 'no', unless organisers start cutting health and safety corners, creating a false – and dangerous – economy.

"It's important for triathletes to appreciate what goes on behind the scenes," Rusling says. "Costs will go up, but we need to make sure the sport doesn't jump massively in price and costs increase in line with inflation."

It looks as though the very thing which makes triathlon special – the fact it involves three sports in one – is also the thing that makes it costly, particularly in an increasingly litigious environment. ■

