

27 years ago, a legend began: The first 'Ironman' took place on Hawaii. An adventurous race created for a small group of endurance athletes who loved the challenge of taking their bodies to the limits of what is physically possible. This was something for committed sportsmen who were bored by the commercial world of running, biking, or swimming. Today, in a boom time for extreme sports, triathlon has itself become commercial and is now considered as a modern and innovative sport. Malin Auras reports on how a whole industry has developed around it, producing high-tech equipment from bikes to shoes and apparel.

# Stamina specialists and curious amateurs

**T**riathlon was invented in France around 1920 as an amateur event 'Les trois sports', but remained unknown for decades. Then, in the mid seventies, the modern multi-sport was introduced and became popular in America. The first so-called "triathlon" – the 'Mission Bay Triathlon,' was organised in California in 1974 and was a rather small event with 46 participants, running six miles, cycling five miles and swimming 500 yards. Along with a few others, one of the finishers of this 'inaugural race' later initiated the first 'Ironman' on Hawaii – and this led to an increasingly large following, with the sport gaining popularity in Europe again in the early '80s through American television.

Since then, the number of triathletes has risen continually, which has made it necessary for federations and unions to be established. One such organisation is the World Triathlon Corporation (WTC) which organises the Ironman race series, culminating each year in the Hawaii Ironman Triathlon World Championship. However, the Ironman races are not sanctioned by the governing body of the International Triathlon Union (ITU) and are therefore not the official Triathlon world championships.

The ITU was founded in 1989 to head up the associations organising the official world championships in different countries. Then in 1994 the 'Olympic dream' became true for the ITU: The International Olympic Committee added the Triathlon to the Olympic programme for the Games in Sydney in 2000, helping the sport to change its image from a crazy extreme

activity to a serious sport. However, the WTC and the Ironman triathlons have been in existence longer than the ITU and are better known among the serious athletic community. And—as always—the existence of two associations often leads to controversy.

## From niche to trend

Despite these internal wrangles, the sport of triathlon itself is becoming more and more popular. "All Ironman competitions in Europe are fully booked after two weeks," comments Matthias Filser, European manager of equipment specialist Orca, "and the Olympic distances are welcoming a growing number of participants." The German Triathlon Union (DTU) mirrors this trend: the DTU organises more than 1,000 competitions annually, has 25,000 registered members and 750 clubs. However, as it is an arduous, highly specialised sport that requires intensive training, the number of world-class triathletes is limited. Nevertheless, at a lower level and thanks to the general trend towards more fitness and adventure, triathlon has managed to establish itself as a sport for the masses. The marathon boom opened the doors and after having conquered these, many finishers started to look for a new challenge. The perfect answer to this was the shorter triathlon sprint (500 metres swimming, 20km cycling and 5km running); and even the Olympic distances offer beginners as well as more advanced amateur sportsmen the chance to participate in competitions.

*Traditional endurance sports brands such as Craft are launching triathlon lines. In their case the sport unites two of its core activities, running and cycling.*

 Craft



To bring triathlon closer to the people and to raise the attention it gained, organisers started to bring the sport into big cities – with great success. “Just looking at the starting lists, this positive trend is more than visible,” says Matthias Filser, “the ‘Hamburg City Man’ had 6,000 participants in 2005 and for 2006 they expect about 10,000 athletes.”

### Extending the idea

Besides the classic triathlon disciplines, there are several other multi-sports activities with different disciplines and varying popularity. The best known variation is the duathlon (running – cycling – running), which in Germany is integrated into the DTU. “Not being a really big thing in Germany, the traditional ‘Powerman Series’ made duathlon highly popular in the Netherlands and Belgium,” says Alex de Boer, manager of Sport Import Europe, licensee of Ironman Active Wear. In addition, there are crazy ultra-triathlons with multiple ironman distances; competitions with mountain bikes instead of racing bikes; or winter triathlons with cross country skiing replacing the swimming event. “But these events don’t play a major role in the market,” says Kai Marquardt, Rono manager Germany. The only really well-known race is the ‘Xterra’ on Maui (swimming – mountain biking – running), which celebrated its 10th anniversary last autumn. The ‘Xterra’ not only offers a new challenge but also brings back memories of the pioneer times in triathlon, when triathletes were a family, a small group of extreme endurance sportsmen.

Although triathlon is a growing sport in terms of the number of athletes participating, the market is still small and specialised. “In addition to the general fitness trend in Germany, triathlon attracts a great deal of extra attention because the German athletes are amongst the best,” reveals Andre Bachmann, sales manager Germany for Craft, “but in terms of sales, triathlon will continue to remain a small market. Most of the amateur sportsmen, just participating from time to time on the shorter distances, won’t buy expensive, specialised triathlon clothing.” Christoph Werschull, owner of CW De Soto Sport Europe, sees another factor, “The growth on the sports side isn’t in balance with the growth on the economic side.”

### Small but interesting

However, the industry is nonetheless satisfied with the business. Orca announced annual growth of 20% for its



*Orca’s specialised Apex triathlon range utilises air within the wetsuit’s construction to aid buoyancy and reduce drag.*

 Orca

general business, Craft and Rono have reported stable, slightly increasing business, and Ironman Active Wear has announced surprisingly good turnover. As the triathlon market itself isn’t growing much, this improvement in sales comes partly from neighbouring markets such as running. This is possible because triathlon clothing is innovative, technical and modern – and can easily be worn for single disciplines such as running or cycling, while general running wear isn’t the first choice for triathletes. “We don’t compete with the big players in the running industry, but we sell a number of products as a small, exclusive brand,” explains Christoph Werschull.

Although business is good, especially for the young and highly specialised brands such as Orca, De Soto and Ironman Active Wear, which exclusively produce triathlon apparel, they all face a common challenge. “Because of the limited market, we have to produce a small number of premium products and sell them at a premium price accordingly,” explains Christoph Werschull, “and only the brands managing that challenge can survive in the market.”

In addition to the triathlon-only brands, traditional endurance sports oriented brands such as Craft are playing a role in the market. These brands launched a triathlon line mainly because of their positive “extreme image” and their aerobic know-how. “Triathlon clothing only makes about 4% of our total turnover, but as triathlon unites two of Craft’s core activities—running and cycling—it is an important market in which to build up a positive image,” says Andre Bachmann.

### Global players

The third group of suppliers are brands such as Nike or Asics. “Some years ago the global players almost gave up on the triathlon market, because the market was too small for them,” says Matthias Filser, “but now some of these brands are working on a comeback.” Asics, for example, sees the triathlon market as an important target group—even if the number of serious athletes is limited in comparison with running. “Triathletes are open-minded to new technologies but very critical at the same time,” says Claus Hanenberg, promotion manager, Asics Germany. “That makes it very interesting for us to test our products or to develop new ones with triathletes.” Although Asics doesn’t offer special triathlon wear as yet, it produces a special competition suit made from high-tech fabrics exclusively for its sponsored athletes and the National Triathlon Team. Furthermore, Asics says it is investing quite heavily in fabric development for triathlon wear.

But, although some of the global players have not invested in the triathlon market on the product side as yet, most of them do have an interest in the marketing side. Nike, for example, is sponsoring Lothar Leder—probably the best-known triathlete in Germany—providing him with running shoes for training and competition and functional clothing for training. Asics also has a long tradition in triathlon sponsoring, “We have been investing in the triathlon market since 1984, when almost nobody knew what triathlon was”, states Claus Hanenberg, “With our latest engagement in the title sponsoring of various big

triathlon contests like the 'Asics-Kiel-Triathlon', we are committing to this market for the future."

### Apparel concepts

As in all highly athletic sports, triathlon apparel is becoming increasingly technical. One of the reasons for this is the huge progress made in the development of new materials and fibres in recent years. Most of the specialised brands are using their own materials developed specifically for triathletes. "The end-consumer will only accept high quality-fabrics made for their special needs," says Matthias Filser. "Triathlon is an expensive sport anyway, so the athletes clearly focus on the performance and not on the price of their clothing." No wonder, looking at how hard triathlon wear has to perform.

The classic, most functional triathlon wear is the one-piece suit, which is worn from start to finish—ideally for races where neoprene suits are not allowed. "With this piece the athletes don't lose time changing their clothes, have protection for their kidneys and don't have a seam on the belly which could restrict breathing," explains Filser. But this kind of triathlon wear puts the highest demands on the material, as the user needs to feel comfortable during all of the disciplines. "Developments are going towards 'fast' fabrics with good water- and aerodynamics," says Kai Marquardt (Rono), "and additionally, the fabrics must provide great moisture management plus very low water absorption to dry quickly after swimming."

Another criteria is a perfect fit, as movements vary in each discipline. Because of the swimming, triathlon wear must offer a tighter fit than typical running or cycling wear. As Christoph Werschull puts it: "Textiles need to carry you – not you the textiles."

### Fast and fitting fabrics

To achieve all of this, Ironman Active Wear is using fine, lightweight-fabrics incorporating supporting and elastic Power Lycra with a Teflon finish. Thanks to new production technologies this elastic

material is partly water-resistant as well as moisture absorbing. It has tiny channels that help to transport sweat and surplus body heat to the outside. Additionally, all of the seams are treated with silicon to reduce chafing. For colder days, the fabric is available in a thicker, warmer quality. Orca uses a special blend of polyester, polyamide and elastane fibres. Its suits, which are used when neoprene suits are not allowed, are additionally treated with a silicon finish to make them faster in the water. De Soto also uses Power Lycra, which, thanks to its special knitted construction, compresses the muscles and prevents pain and fatigue for longer. For next season, De Soto is releasing a new, lighter and faster fabric for short distances, made of a polyamide and elastane blend.

The other way of producing functional triathlon wear is a two-piece combination. These are worn under a neoprene suit during swimming. In this area, brands such as Rono and Craft (that will start producing a one-piece suit in 2007) feel at home. While Rono uses Speed-Lycra fabric, Craft incorporates its proprietary knitted 100% polyester fabric with mechanical stretch. Thanks to the mechanical stretch there is no need to use elastane fibres which eliminates the disadvantages of slower drying time, and lower UV- and chlorine-resistance.

However, lower chlorine resistance doesn't play a role for most suppliers. "98 % of the competitions happen in natural bodies of water, while athletes wear standard swimwear for practicing," says Alex De Boer. Odour resistance isn't a big issue for triathlon wear either: "After hard triathlon training sessions or after a strenuous competition, you should wash your clothing anyway," says Andre Bachmann, and no doubt he is right.

### Good-looking and multi-functional

With the trend of attracting a wider range of amateur triathletes, there are some additional points of interest, "In addition to quality, we focus on multi-

functionality," says Christoph Werschull. "The growing group of amateur athletes is looking for designs which are easy to combine and usable for other sports like spinning for example." According to Alex De Boer, Sport Import Europe also targets amateur athletes, "The product design needs to be more fashionable for them. To serve their aims, we have produced a new line for amateur triathletes in close co-operation with Cannondale for next season."

Overall, the industry seems to be quite happy with its situation. A lot is happening in the small triathlon market – from the development of new fibres and fabrics to a growing group of amateur athletes. And even if the specialised retailers are still the ones investing in this niche market, general sport retailers are starting to take notice of triathlon. 

*Major global brands such as Nike have rediscovered their enthusiasm for the triathlon market.*

 Nike

