



Developing Children toward the Performance Pathway



Who is this booklet for?

This booklet seeks to help those parents and coaches supporting a child who is enjoying their triathlon racing and with that are at/working towards the level to be selected into their regional or Scottish/Welsh/Jersey Inter Regional Championship (IRC) team. Along with this athletes would also have a desire to progress further in the sport e.g., British Youth and Junior Super Series and beyond. The booklet can also work to support a child who has shown ability in any of the three single disciplines, has limited triathlon experience and is progressing into the sport and with that stepping forward to IRC level and beyond.

In so doing we aim to provide you with some guidance on training volume and frequency & other important information especially on swimming performance standards for triathletes aged between 11-14.



Before we start

Athletes, and especially younger children, all develop at different rates and this booklet seeks to provide a guide only. While of course as the parent or coach you'd probably prefer a set of programmes that can be worked toward for guaranteed success, sadly it is not that easy! It is impossible to individually programme without having a detailed knowledge of each athlete, their strengths/weaknesses, rate of physical, emotional and biological development along with their training history and lots of other factors.

As such there is no hard and fast rule or 100% correct answer when it comes to training and young athlete development, especially in a sport with three disciplines where athlete's abilities across the three can vary considerably. Instead, this booklet aims to give you some general themes and principles around which to work towards to give your child/athlete every chance of enjoying their training and racing and stepping up into the Pathway when they're old enough.



Further relevant info

Alongside this guide we believe the following resources might also help.

Parents we'd encourage you to take a look at our **Performance Parenting** guide found [here](#) as well as our **Parents guide to the ADF** which is found [here](#). The ADF is our Athlete Development Framework, a learning philosophy and set of guiding principles that we use to develop athletes in the sport. There are also links to both the above booklets and some other useful resources on our Performance Parents page [here](#).

Coaches, while the above documents/links are ostensibly aimed at parents there is plenty of relevant information in both that could be useful so, especially if you aren't familiar with how we work, we would encourage you to have a quick look them both.

In addition, both parents and coaches we hope will find the following useful too, the IRC handbook [here](#) and Academy Handbook [here](#). Academies are the first stage in our performance pathway selecting athletes in the September/October of each year who are at Youth and Junior age in the following summer race season.



What is most important?

There are two answers to this question, the first and most important answer is that athletes have to **enjoy the journey** – whatever their ambitions athletes will not progress in the sport over the longer term if they do not enjoy their training and racing.

While doing well and winning is massive motivation and is in a lot of cases what attracts athletes into the sport at younger ages, the further you go in the sport the harder it becomes to win and the more likely it will be that you will encounter setbacks on the way. As such it is important to support young athletes with falling in love with the sport and with training especially – this aligns well with the first pillar of our **Athlete Development Framework (ADF)** which is called **‘Training as Play’** and there is some useful information on how you can support athletes to develop this pillar in our **Parents guide to the ADF** which is found [here](#) – see section two Training as Play. Further you will find some useful information on supporting athletes in the Performance Parents Handbook [here](#) in the second section entitled ‘Understanding the journey’.

Enjoyment in sessions is paramount and while some children really engage with pushing hard and challenging themselves physically, all children engage with sessions when there is an element of fun to them, so think about how this can be incorporated into a weekly programme.



What is most important?

The second answer is swimming. Swimming, especially at the younger ages, is fundamental to athletic development. Swimming should lead both volume and intensity and so be the key discipline focus each week for all young athletes in the sport up to around the age of at least 17-18.

Why?

1. Swimming is the most technical of the three disciplines and requires a lot of repetitive practice to engrain the correct techniques.
2. It is much easier for athletes to develop the flexibility, in the upper body especially, to swim well if they start younger.
3. Swimming is non weight bearing and so is relatively safe from an overload perspective, as such athletes, when safely and appropriately coached, can achieve greater volumes than in cycling or running at younger ages.
4. Swimming well and at the front of races puts athletes in more control and significantly increases their chance of success.



How fast/much should I be swimming?

Athletes who are swimming in front packs at junior and senior levels in international racing will have the capacity to swim at regional* to national level in the pool, depending on their ability to convert their pool speed into open water speed.

What does this mean for younger athletes? Younger English athletes should be aiming to achieve county times as a minimum standard i.e., times that allow qualification into county swimming championships, AND be working towards developing an ability to then progress to regional* qualifying times (England), while Scottish and Welsh athletes should work towards achieving their respective national qualifying times. In British Super Series races at least the first two thirds of female and open fields will be able to swim at county standard, with the front and often second pack all swimming at or close to the the level to achieve regional times, while the out and out leaders will be at or close to national level.

How much swimming does this mean? Again, this depends, it will almost certainly mean being in a swimming club that has a focus on developing athletes towards county/regional or Scottish/Welsh times as a minimum standard, and this probably means a minimum of 7 hrs of swimming per week. There are very few triathlon clubs that have the 'water time' to develop that level of swimming. Also, clubs will focus on all four strokes, this is good and will develop your all-around swim skills and aerobic conditioning/strength endurance and with that benefit your front crawl pool and open water swim speed too.

My athlete does well at IRC without achieving county/regional times or training in a swim club? We are seeing swimming standards falling at younger ages and athletes without this level of basic swimming speed will not progress at national/international level in triathlon once at youth/junior age. Without the basic speed to get out well over the first 100-150m they will be swamped off the start line and then find themselves well down nor will they have the speed to swim back up either, so in most cases they'll be out of the race by the swim finish. In draft legal racing at British Super Series level and higher, it is almost impossible to ride a big front group back. It is also much easier to develop swimming through Tristar ages than at youth and especially junior level, when bike and run volumes also need to be increasing.

**Like triathlon Swim England is split into regions e.g., North West/South West, London etc.*

So, what does this look like?

On the following pages we have detailed the times that swimmers will need to achieve to be considered for County/Regional/Scottish and Welsh Nationals from ages 11 to 17 over **200m**. Females are on the first page of tables and Open athletes on the second. We have chosen 200m as it is the distance swum by athletes aged 14-16 in Academy trials, as well as a popular distance in most swim meets for younger swimmers too, and while the focus shifts to 400m/800m from age 16 upwards 200m pace is still a useful benchmark at these ages too.

English County Championship consideration times differ quite a bit from county to county, so we have taken an average of 2 Northern, 2 Midland and 2 Southern counties to give you a good idea of what this level is, it is similar again with English Regional times too, though these differ less across regions than county times do. For Scotland and Wales, we have detailed the published 2023 times. It is important to note that while all the listed times will change slightly year on year, they will continue to provide a good guide for the foreseeable future of the levels required to step into and through our Pathway. All times shown are **short course** (25m pool) - if times were listed long course they've been converted to short course for better comparison.

Along with this we have also detailed the times associated with scoring 160 and 180 points on the British Triathlon points [calculator](#), this is one of the tools that is used in determining selection to Academies with 320 being a score that almost every Academy athlete will be able to achieve. While it is rare athletes will score exactly the same number of points in both swim and run (i.e., $320/2 = 160$), a 160 swim gives a good idea of a **very minimum standard**. Further, 180 points is where the best front pack swimmers are, certainly at ages 16 and over, with a number of Next Generation athletes always having the capacity to score around 360 points.

The tables also include some real-life anonymous examples of either Next Generation athletes that have come through the programme and were swimming at the front of British Super Series races, as well as some World Class athletes who have gone on to swim at the front of WTS events. You will notice that all the athletes detailed developed at different rates and were by no means all linear in their trajectories, however, the rate of improvement across all those highlighted was achieved through heavily prioritising swimming from ages 11-18.

200m swim times for Female athletes aged 11 to 17

	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
English County	03:05.2	02:46.4	02:34.5	02:27.1	02:23.8	02:22.6	02:21.2
English Regional		02:33.8	02:22.6	02:17.5	02:14.4	02:13.4	02:10.4
Scottish National			02:26.8	02:22.4	02:19.2	02:18.4	02:16.1
Welsh National		02:39.1	02:29.6	02:24.3	02:20.6	02:10.1	02:18.6
160 Points				02:29.5	02:28.0	02:25.5	02:23.8
180 Points				02:14.7	02:13.3	02:11.6	02:09.9

Athlete Examples	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
Next Gen A	02:23.0	02:18.2	02:18.3	02:13.4	02:12.2	02:14.4	02:12.2
Next Gen B	02:38.7	02:27.4	02:28.6	02:19.9	02:15.0	02:14.2	02:13.2
Next Gen C	02:51.6	02:42.6	02:34.7	02:31.0	02:23.4	02:18.6	02:14.2
Next Gen D	02:51.0	02:37.0	02:22.2	02:19.3	02:16.5	02:13.4	02:11.2
World Class A	02:59.0	02:32.2	02:23.1	02:16.2	02:11.3	02:09.0	02:09.0
World Class B	02:35.2	02:28.2	02:18.3	02:18.7	02:12.3	02:14.3	02:12.1

Senior Female WTS front pack swimmer 02:07

200m swim times for Open athletes aged 11 to 17							
	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
English County	03:06.0	02:50.7	02:39.6	02:25.3	02:18.5	02:14.2	02:12.4
English Regional		02:36.8	02:23.6	02:13.4	02:08.3	02:04.2	01:59.1
Scottish National			02:26.4	02:18.0	02:11.1	02:08.5	02:03.3
Welsh National		02:39.2	02:30.3	02:23.6	02:17.3	02:12.1	02:10.1
160 Points				02:23.9	02:21.1	02:19.5	02:17.9
180 Points				02:08.8	02:06.2	02:04.8	02:02.5

Athlete Examples	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
Next Gen A	02:55.2	02:47.3	02:29.7	02:24.0	02:17.4	02:06.0	02:00.0
Next Gen B	02:40.1	02:35.0	02:20.2	02:15.2	02:11.3	02:05.0	02:01.0
Next Gen C	03:17.0	02:58.2	02:31.9	02:21.0	02:12.3	02:04.0	01:59.2
Next Gen D	02:35.1	02:33.5	02:24.7	02:15.4	02:11.1	02:07.1	02:05.1
World Class A	02:36.0	02:30.2	02:27.1	02:20.2	02:14.3	02:08.0	02:04.0
World Class B	02:28.2	02:24.2	02:14.3	02:12.2	02:08.3	02:03.3	02:00.1

Senior Open WTS front pack swimmer

01:58



What about running and riding?

Both should very much play second fiddle to swimming with running being the next priority. Athletes, if swimming at the levels detailed, will be developing their aerobic systems effectively in the pool so do not need to do much additional training in the other disciplines.

Running - at age 11/12 (Tristar 2) one to two runs per week will be fine – one or both could be with a tri club or an athletics club and consist of age-appropriate activities*. If going out for a run this should be a short duration and at an easy pace e.g., 20mins and ideally off road on softer surfaces. Tristar 3's (13/14) again depending on swimming commitments could be running 2-3 times a week with a longer easy run e.g., 30-40mins (assuming this has been built up to).

Riding – younger athletes especially Tristar 2's do not need to ride much at all, a short session once a week or every 2 weeks is fine. A 20 min session on the rollers is ideal given the technical focus, in the winter months cyclo-cross racing provides an ideal training session as it naturally develops a whole range of technical skills, cornering, climbing, descending, use of gears, braking, etc., that you don't get riding on the road/turbo. If sourcing a bike for a young athlete it is a good idea to ensure it has the tyre clearance for 'cross' tyres (while at UCI level this is 33mm, local regional races in the UK allow 35mm -38mm, with young kids also allowed to ride mountain bikes), tyre clearance will also help for doing regional series triathlon events where the bike is often on grass. Tristar 3's, again assuming good swimming volumes will also be fine doing one or at most two short rides per week that ideally are skills focussed. All athletes should work towards being able to ride in cycling shoes and being able to draft (ride in a group safely at race pace) by the time they progress into Youth racing at British Super Series.

*playing team/other sports that involve a reasonable amount of running/multi-directional movement can be substituted for a 'run' session.



Do I need to be a member of a tri club?

While of course we would like all athletes to be a member of a tri club, if there is not an option locally it is not absolutely necessary. However, in almost all cases membership of a swimming club is necessary for athletes to progress into the Pathway.

Tri clubs are useful for being able to practice some of the triathlon specific skills and perhaps have access to open water sessions, as well as gain information on junior race series and other competitive opportunities e.g., the IRC.

Very important to note is that to score points in the Regional and Scottish/Welsh Race Series and take part in the IRC athletes will need to be members of their respective Home Nation e.g., Triathlon England, Triathlon Scotland, Welsh Triathlon.



How much training?

For the best progression through Tristars and into the Pathway **consistent training** is required, and this should be the priority in setting any programme.

Swimming will lead*, and those training hours will almost certainly be dictated by the number of sessions the athlete has via swim (and tri) club to ensure they're working toward achieving county and regional times. On top of this are added the run and bike session(s). Again, it is important to underline that if athletes are working towards regional swimming times their overall aerobic load from swimming alone will be high and will allow them to compete in running and riding events with success, such that they may not need additional specific 'harder' sessions in these disciplines, but instead some easier/steadier sessions.

What is critical is that this overall load can be managed consistently well week on week through the year, as this is what will build both the overall aerobic system in the longer term to develop toward the Pathway and beyond, and the conditioning in the shorter term to do well in races each season. In being consistent, athletes will obviously be recovering enough week to week to progress in their training so look out for signs that mean this may not be happening e.g., periods of tiredness over several days, getting ill more often than normal, poor performances in races, etc. If this does happen, you will need to consider if the overall load is indeed too much.

Athletes at these ages will be growing and, in some cases rapidly at certain points – it is a good idea to keep an eye on growth rates by measuring athlete's height regularly (monthly). All athletes respond differently to growing but some will get very tired through these periods especially when in the middle of a growth spurt and/or may struggle with sore joints especially lower limbs or other growth-related issues which can impact running especially. All of this may mean that training/racing might need to be modified for short periods with goals and training/racing focuses potentially dialled back too.

*this principle does not change even if the athlete is already swimming at a high level and well inside regional/national times

How much racing?

Racing at all ages is important, however, what is most important for children looking to progress in the sport is finding the balance that allows them to develop their racing skills while maintaining training consistently week on week, and this will be different for all athletes.

Simply put racing cannot compromise training, and with that longer term development; this means not easing up for every race. This is helped as children's races are relatively short (in most cases) so, there should be no need to modify training too much other than in some cases have an easy/lighter training day before a race. That said, for one or two important events each year it does make sense for athletes to have more recovery and be able to race at their absolute best. Take the pressure off some races by looking at them as training races/sessions especially when athletes are training through/not easing up much.

Swimming must be the priority with the focus being on achieving county and then regional times in 200m and 400m freestyle.

Running wise through the winter at all ages athletes should be looking to race cross country events, with a focus on qualifying for national level events e.g., English/Scottish or Welsh Schools Championships or the Inter Counties through your school or athletics club, as well as running some track meets over 800 and 1200m/1500m (depending on age) in the summer. Around 5-8 cross country events in the winter and 2-4 track meets in the summer would be enough to fit in/around other racing commitments. Focus on age-appropriate race distances wherever possible e.g., Junior Park Run (2km) rather than standard (5km) Park Runs – very few young athletes have the conditioning to truly race 5km and should focus on shorter events that will encourage a faster pace and are within the limits of their conditioning/fitness.

Racing a bike is great BUT should not detract from swimming and running goals; 2-5 cyclo-cross races, if you have access to them and a bike are great through the winter, and a small number of road or circuit racing events in the summer can be considered.

Finally, triathlon wise, 4-7 races across the summer months is about right with the programme being set around what is required to make IRC selection (this will be different across regions/Wales/Scotland/Jersey).

