



# UNLEASH THE AQUABIKERS

By Pete Williams

**T**hough “aquabike” sounds like a personal watercraft, Neptune’s chariot or equipment for a spin class in a swimming pool, it’s actually one of the fastest-growing segments of multisport.

Aquabike combines swimming and biking and varies in length, though the most common distance, as well as the USA Triathlon National Championship distance, is a 1.2-mile swim and a 56-mile bike.

Like a duathlon (run-bike-run) or aquathlon (swim and run), aquabike gives athletes the opportunity to compete in an event that’s one leg shy of a triathlon. Duathlon is a cold-weather option for triathletes and those who prefer not to swim in any weather. For race directors, aquathlon is easier than triathlon to stage since it does not involve road closures and elaborate transition areas.

But while duathlon and aquathlon often are stand-alone events, aquabike is almost always held in conjunction with a triathlon. After all, with a triathlon course already set up, it’s easy for race directors to simply unleash the “aquabikers” following the last wave of triathletes. Some race directors wait a few additional minutes to put some distance between the last wave of triathletes and the hard-charging aquabikers who don’t need to worry about saving something for the run.

Summer Ohlendorf discovered aquabike by accident. A high school swimmer and college rower, she found she enjoyed the bike leg of triathlon the most. She suffered a knee injury one summer while training for the Hy-Vee Triathlon. But rather than sitting out, she turned in her chip after finishing the bike course, taking a DNF and wondering how she might have finished.

“I had always wanted to be able to go out and bike as hard



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as I wanted without worrying about having to save my legs for the run,” says Ohlendorf, a research assistant at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. “Aquabike sounded like it would be a different kind of challenge, and something that would be really fun. I like to run, but it’s my weakest sport and it can be so hard on the body sometimes.”

Ohlendorf resumed her triathlon career but kept an eye out for races that included an aquabike division. Racing in October at the second-ever USA Triathlon Aquabike Nationals, held in conjunction with the Rev3 South Carolina event, she won the overall women’s title, as well as the 25-29 female division, with a time of 3 hours, 11 minutes, 58 seconds.

“Aquabike is a great alternative to triathlon,” Ohlendorf says. “Not only for athletes who may find themselves unable to run, but also for triathletes who want to add a little bit of variety to their seasons, or get some solid racing experience in with a shorter recovery time than for triathlon races.”

That’s what Dean Peterson had in mind more than a decade ago. A USA Triathlon member from Arizona, he knew an older training colleague who no longer competed in triathlon because his body no longer could handle the running.

Peterson heard the same story from other longtime triathletes and approached Mike Greer, then the interim executive director of USA Triathlon, about staging a swim-bike event. Thus, in 2005 the Aquabike Series, consisting of nine long- and ultra-distance races, was born.

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Chuck Graziano, 63, says aquabike has extended his multisport



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career. After having a knee replacement three years ago, he was told by doctors to stop running. He still competes in sprint triathlons, but aquabike allows the nine-time Ironman finisher to keep racing up to ultra distance in the swim and bike.

"We're going to see more older athletes in our sport and some of them can't or don't want to run anymore," says Graziano, a triathlon coach and former USA Triathlon board member. "But this is something they can do for many years."

Aquabike entry fees can be lower than

triathlon fees in some instances. Race directors typically set up separate finish lines for the aquabikers and require that they dismount at least 25 feet prior to the finish line and walk/jog with their bikes across the mat, not unlike how athletes approach the transition area.

Russ Pugh, race director for the Vineman Triathlon, says he often sees athletes who initially plan only to watch friends or family compete in the ultra-distance event in California's wine country. Instead, the would-be spectators

register for the aquabike, treating it as a training day or an event that will require less recovery.

"It's cool to be part of a larger event, finish, grab some food and watch your friend or spouse do the whole triathlon," Pugh says. "Whether it's for one day or because of where you are at this point in your career, aquabike fills a need for a lot of athletes."

*Pete Williams is a triathlete in Clearwater, Florida.*