

The Rules Of Triathlon

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The rules of sport are put into place for a reason. They are usually implemented for safety, or to decrease the liability of the event director and sanctioning body. They may be instituted to create a level playing field for all competitors. Rules are generally not made to be broken. And yes, rules ARE made to be enforced.

Perhaps this post should be entitled “An Open Letter to USA Triathlon” ... or the World Triathlon Corporation, or to all of the triathletes out there that are doing events sanctioned by these bodies. Suffice it to say that in the races that I have either participated in or have viewed as a spectator, there have been plenty of instances of people “breaking the rules”. It’s not just the pros. And it’s not getting better with more and more participants in the sport – if anything, I think it’s getting worse.

The basic premise of triathlon is simple – complete the course under your own power, and without any external assistance. It’s the thrill of the competition, and the challenge that we face within ourselves. Sadly, this can get lost in the mix.

It all begins with the swim. When you register for an event, you take on the risk of being able to complete the swim under your own power. Yes, it’s a risk that we all undertake. If you have an issue in the water, there are kayaks, surfboards, boats, etc – all manned to provide assistance if needed. Another fine example of water safety equipment is the “noodle”. I am sure you’ve seen a noodle before – perhaps your kids have played with them at the local pool. As an urgent safety measure, for the athlete that has a dire situation, panics, or is overcome with anxiety, it makes good sense to have a few of them floating around. But what happens is that people oftentimes support themselves on the noodle, then continue to move forward towards the end of the swim. Rule violation. And it should not matter what the size of the event is, or the demographic of the participants. This occurs with great regularity at the Danskin Austin triathlon and many others, and I have yet to see anyone, anywhere, at any race, be penalized for it.

The bike is also a breeding ground for rules infractions. Drafting – using the cyclist ahead of you to break the wind for you, thereby making it easier for you - happens all the time in NON-draft-legal events. I’ve been passed by packs of riders, drafting mercilessly and flying in the face of the rules. Rules violation. Again, rarely penalized. Perhaps worse yet is arriving upon two cyclists riding side-by-side, just chatting away as though it’s a Saturday group ride. Sorry, that is against the rules as well. There is a passing zone – enter it, pass, get through it (and have the passed rider drop back). Simple.

And now, we’ve taken a turn for the worse - the run has also become home to a number of rules violations. There are many people that wear headphones while running. Frankly, I don’t care if you need it to keep your mind off the perceived boredom associated with running. It’s simply against the rules, and can create a hazard for those around you. Add to this a new violation. Just this past weekend, I witnessed a number of runners pass by my vantage point – running with pacers. Yes, other athletes that are NOT registered for the event, just logging in the miles with their chosen runner. Do you really need someone to pace you? Another blatant rules violation.

The problem is that these violations are getting out of hand. Why? Rules are not being enforced – thus athletes tend to go forward with a “well, it won’t be a problem, it’s acceptable behavior” logic. If it is a USAT sanctioned event, then the rules are the rules – whether we like them, agree with them, or not. Participants need to obey the rules. Training groups should

become more vigilant about instructing their athletes about the rules - what they are and how to obey them. Finally, USAT needs to enforce them. By allowing too much leniency, we have created an environment in which the acceptable behavior is to simply disregard the rules if the athlete so desires.

Of course, if you want to not bother enforcing these rules, that's fine as well. If that's the case, take them out of the rule book, and let's all just do whatever it takes to get to the finish line. Performance enhancers or otherwise, violating the rules simply isn't in the spirit of this sport or any other. Enforcing the rules involves having a governing body that is willing to aggressively promote it's own policies, and an athlete population that is prepared to bear the responsibility that goes with them. Fostering more participation is great for the sport, as long as it goes with the athlete being responsible for their participation.

Let's go back to a time when the pride in completing the race under your own power, your own efforts, and without the assistance of a rules infraction was the gold standard in endurance sports – and triathlon in particular.