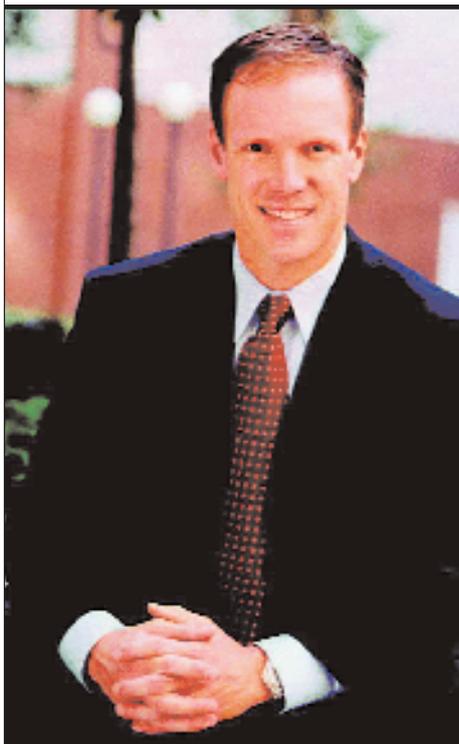




Team triathlon

The often-overlooked benefits of our sport

Jordan D. Metzl, MD



Four of us decided to make the drive from New York to the Timberman 70.3 triathlon in New Hampshire in August. We left New York on Friday afternoon at 3 p.m. As is often the case in the summer, the traffic was heavy. As we slowly crawled along the highway (and I mean slowly), the conversation turned to the

upcoming race: Were there many hills? Was it going to rain on race day? Were we prepared? Did we have the right nutrition plan?

The miles wore on and afternoon turned to evening and night. We kept talking. We played the world-famous “Metzl name game”—a ridiculous way to pass time by guessing the names of famous people from their initials. We talked about our plans for the upcoming year; we talked about our hopes for the future and, once in a while, the conversation drifted back to triathlon. By the time we finally got to New Hampshire, eight hours later, we were psyched to be there. But we had learned more about each other in those eight hours than we had in the previous several months.

The triathlon crowd is really a pleasure to be around. Triathletes tend to be healthy and driven to succeed but not fanatical, successful in life and in sport and able to multitask in many areas of their lives. I’d rather spend eight hours in a car with three other triathletes than with three of just about anything else.

As I looked around the expo the day before the Timberman, I realized how team-oriented the sport is becoming. Yes, team-oriented. Okay, perhaps not in the same way as football or basketball, but it was clear from looking around the expo that many who had made the trek to New

Hampshire had experiences that were similar to ours. The friendships among teammates, among friends and families, were apparent everywhere. This was more than just a race—it was a weekend of fitness spent among friends and supporters.

On the day of the race it rained like crazy. A teammate of mine held an umbrella over my head while I prepared my transition site, and I did the same in return. Teammates shared clothing, teammates shared encouragement and teammates shared preparation tips.

When the gun goes off, it always becomes an individual sport, and this time was no different. But in this race, a few things along the way struck me.

A woman had flatted out and was done for the day at mile 40 of the bike. Rather than sulk on the side of the road, she stood there, in the rain, cheering for everyone as they rode by. Later in the race, during the two-loop run course, teammates yelled encouragement to each other as they passed; no matter how much athletes were hurting, they all had an upbeat, positive word to pass along to their fellow racers.

It was at mile 11 of the run, when I had already developed a massive blister on my foot, that I realized how much our individual performances on race day really are team efforts. I was ahead of my friend Sari. As I ran toward her on the loop back, she shouted, “Jordan, you look awesome!”

“You too!” I yelled (I am not known for my creativity).

The truth of the matter, of course, was that my foot was killing me and I desperately needed to use the port-a-potty, but her encouragement made me feel so much better that I almost forgot. I perked up, pushed onward and made it to the finish. Of course we were all there, waiting for Sari, when she finished shortly afterward.

Usually my column is about injury prevention and recovery. But in this one I wanted to highlight the tremendous psychological benefits triathlon can confer when we recognize the sport’s ability to build and strengthen our relationships. And I wanted to underscore the value of giving back and encouraging others to achieve their dreams. Triathlon would not have half the merit it has if it were truly an individual sport. ▲

Jordan D. Metz1, MD, is a nationally recognized sports-medicine specialist at Hospital for Special Surgery in New York City. In addition, Dr. Metz1 is a 25-time marathon runner and four-time Ironman finisher.