

Bethany Rutledge

# Courage to Tri



FINISH YOUR  
FIRST TRIATHLON.

A MOTIVATIONAL  
HOW-TO FOR WOMEN.

Courage to Tri

To my husband John who faithfully supports all my #trycourage endeavors and to Bailey, who joyfully swim, bikes, and runs faster than me. To Sadie, my favorite running partner for 13 years: I miss you, I love you always, and I hope you're running free in heaven.

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Meyer & Meyer Sport

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library


**Courage to Tri**

Maidenhead: Meyer & Meyer Sport (UK) Ltd., 2018  
ISBN: 978-1-78255-795-1

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Aachen, Auckland, Beirut, Cairo, Cape Town, Dubai, Högendorf, Hong Kong, Indianapolis, Manila, New Delhi, Singapore, Sydney, Tehran, Vienna

 Member of the World Sports Publishers' Association (WSPA), [www.w-s-p-a.org](http://www.w-s-p-a.org)  
ISBN: 978-1-78255-795-1  
Email: [info@m-m-sports.com](mailto:info@m-m-sports.com)  
[www.m-m-sports.com](http://www.m-m-sports.com)

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COURAGE TO TRI



# PREFACE

Have you dreamed of crossing a finish line but have no idea how to get from now to the starting line? Do you have a secret goal you're terrified to tackle? Whether it's a 5K, triathlon, or another starting line, we'll provide the inspiration and insight to tackle your first race with confidence.

You *are* good enough, you are athletic enough, and now is as good a time as any. I'm inviting you, personally, to join me on a journey to your first triathlon.

***“If you can run or walk a mile, then you can train to complete a sprint triathlon.”*** – Jim Boylan, Atlanta Tri Club Founder

It may sound cliché, but these are words to live by. Even as a brand new athlete, completing a triathlon is within your reach, *if* you put in the effort to “try.”

In these pages, you'll get inspired by women just like you who found confidence, overcame unhealthy lifestyles, and made new friends along the way.

Whether you're 12 or 85; a student, executive, or stay-at-home mom; fit or a self-proclaimed couch potato, learn how to complete a triathlon with just a few months of effort and dedication.

- » Part One: Get Inspired—Find a powerful driving “why.”
- » Part Two: Get Prepped—Prepare to achieve your finish line dreams.

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- » Part Three: Get Trained—Learn the basics of swim, bike, and run.
- » Part Four: Get Set—Explore every step on race day.

Two added bonuses:

- » #TriCourage—stories from everyday women who overcame obstacles and changed their lives.
- » #TriLessons—anecdotes from others who balanced triathlon with real life.

# FOREWORD

Advertised as “one of the toughest races in America,” the Hogpen Hill Climb rises nearly 3000 feet in the North Georgia Mountains. Run every January, the typically miserable weather conditions perfectly complement the 18 kilometers of leg- and lung-burning terrain. Hogpen might not sound like a place one goes to make friends, but it’s where I first met Bethany Rutledge.

Bethany and her Atlanta Triathlon Club crew were regulars at races like Hogpen during the decade I called Atlanta home. Whether it was the “toughest race in America,” a competitive local triathlon, or a favorite all-women’s 5K, if a starting line was involved, I expected to see Bethany. Clad in the black and red of ATC, she was typically surrounded by other athletes of all shapes, sizes, and age ranges. Many were obviously race veterans, others inquisitive beginners, and Bethany seemed to have encouraging words for all of them, while simultaneously maintaining her own race focus and often earning herself a spot on the podium.

I’ve been lucky to follow Bethany’s triathlon journey as a fellow competitor, often running the same race course and sharing post-race laughs and stories over chicken soup or orange slices. Now, you, too, can be a part of those finish line festivities. In *The Courage to Tri*, Bethany welcomes all women to put on a pair of running shoes and join the club. Learn from Bethany and other women who share stories of triumph and transformation as they navigate their way through the endurance sports world.

We were all once beginners, we’ve all had help along the way, and now, thanks to Bethany, we want to do our part to pay it forward. I hope you find your own Hogpen Hill Climb, your own

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mountaintop finish, an accomplishment that makes you proud of yourself, and a place where you're greeted by friends, eager to hear the story of your day. There's always room for more women on the starting line and always a place at the post-race refreshment table for those who have the *courage to tri*.

—*Haley Chura*

*Ironman and 70.3 Champion, triathlon coach, and co-host of the "Ironwomen" podcast*

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to my all-time favorite training partners: Sadie, Bailey, and John. Thank you to John Rutledge for supporting my dreams in triathlon, writing, and beyond. Thanks to my dad who instilled my love of running. And thanks to my mom who taught me to be independent and self-sufficient. Thanks to my in-laws Ken and Sherrie Rutledge who have been amazing cheerleaders along the way.

Thanks to the members of Atlanta Tri Club and Energy Lab who are not only training partners, but a family, and John and I appreciate the chance to “do life” with this wonderful group. Thanks to all the amazing athletes I’ve had the pleasure of coaching. Hopefully I taught you all a thing or two; you’ve taught me too many life lessons to count.

Thanks to all my favorite training partners over the years. Some of my fondest memories are long, meandering bike rides, ending up at a gas station in the middle of nowhere not sure how we got there, or how we’ll get home, but happy nonetheless. Thanks to the best spectacheerers I know, Michelle Crossman and Sondra Choung, who’ve turned many a rural race into a five-star vacation complete with themed costumes and a five-part tracking strategy.

Thank you to everyone who contributed to this book in some way. I ran out of space long before I ran out of wonderful women to feature.

» Thanks to my beta readers and content editors: Amy Hafner, Angela Nelms, Kathryn Taylor, Kim Janke, Lillian Pettit, Marilia Brocchetto, and Sara Scott.

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- » Thanks to everyone who provided a story or quote. I received so many great ones, I couldn't fit them all. Thank you to Haley Chura, Sybil Jacobson, Debbie Wells, Dani Grabol, Kat Gurd, Marilia Brocchetto, Allie Bachelder, Kathryn Taylor, Amy Hafner, Lindsay Waibel, Cori James, and Heather Reynolds.
- » Thank you to those athletes who were willing to share their heart journeys in the pages of this book: Deirdre DeKock, Dusty Scott, Jenny Johnson, and Meg Geshay.
- » Thanks to my subject matter experts: Abby Keenan, Jesica D'Avanza, Ilana Katz, Dr. Melissa Smith, Candace Doby, and Megan Melgaard.
- » Thanks to the best critique group who gave valuable feedback even though they don't live and breathe triathlon: Heather Spitzberg, Erin Burba, and Kristen Stewart.

# INTRODUCTION



*John and me at our first 5K in Fayetteville, NC*

## MY FALSE START

I completed my first triathlon in 2009, but the idea was sparked years earlier during my then-current exercise routine—a tortuous out-and-back three-mile jog with a smoke break halfway. I’m not sure *how* I first thought of it; I was probably craving some fun. Because my “training” was pure drudgery, a punishment jog,



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a half-hearted attempt to burn a couple calories from the couple thousand extra I'd had the night before.

I was far from triathlon ready for a few reasons: I had little aerobic fitness, and I knew nothing about triathlon. I also lacked a driving *why*—a good enough reason to go for it—along with a when.

So instead of tri-ing, I just thought about it a lot and wondered whether I *could* do it, listing pluses and minuses from my experience. Swimming. Plus: I dog-paddled two miles across Lake Eloise on a dare after high school graduation; I signed up for a swimming class in college. Minus: I couldn't move my arms after the three-hour swim, and I dropped the swim class before the first day (I found out it met at 6 AM).

Cycling. Plus: I rode around the neighborhood for hours as a kid, and more recently, I borrowed my roommate's mountain bike. Minus: I was a kid a long time ago, *and* I was sore after riding one mile across campus.

And then there was running. I felt pretty good there; I ran races with my dad as a kid and on and off since. But, I didn't *enjoy* running, and I heard you can't listen to music during a tri, much less take a smoke break.

As far as the financial part of things, my sitch was *all* minus, literally and figuratively. My bank account balance was less-than-zero. I'd recently overdrafted writing a check for tacos at Acapulco—again—and I wasn't coming into a windfall anytime soon.

The verdict? I had limited technical ability in the sports, but not *zero*. Physically, I could probably do it, if I trained and dropped some bad habits. But mentally I was *so* far away. Yet, I felt certain I would do a triathlon *someday*. To remind myself of my dream, I bought the book *Your First Triathlon* and put it on my coffee table. I wouldn't think about triathlon again for years and never imagined that book and a three-mile jog—with a Parliament Light break—would lead to racing all over the world. But they did!



*Part One*  
*Get Inspired*

In this section, we'll bust common myths about triathletes and discuss your reason for tri-ing.

Then we'll discuss common obstacles on your tri journey and how to overcome them.

By the end of this section, you should be inspired to start your training journey.



# 1

## BUSTING MYTHS

Before my husband John and I attended our first tri club meeting, we had many preconceived notions about triathletes. Here's the gist: they would be overly tan, semi-pro athletes with less than 10% body fat who only cared about winning races. They'd be scornful of newbies like us, reluctant to give up any trade secrets. They might even *laugh* at our goal to do a sprint distance triathlon—or worse—tell us we were aiming too high. Silly, right? Yet because of those highly exaggerated fears, we almost skipped the meeting.

But I'm so glad we went. Because *none* of the above turned out to be true, and that meeting launched us on an exciting journey.

What do *you* think of when you hear the word triathlete? Here are a few common myths about triathletes, followed by the truth.

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### WHAT ARE SOME INCORRECT ASSUMPTIONS YOU MADE ABOUT TRIATHLETES?

- » *“They are all intimidating and scary.” – Smitha*
- » *“They eat healthfully.” – Susie*
- » *“They’re morning people” – Matt*

### MYTH 1: TRIATHLETES SHOULD HAVE A BACKGROUND IN SWIM, BIKE, OR RUN.

*“They can all swim. I prove that false.” – Andrew*

There is no “typical” triathlon background. Many triathletes have *no* background in swim, bike, or run, yet go on to complete events with success. Every Monday night at our tri club swim practice, swimmers in the “beginner lane” learn to swim, many from scratch. And, each tri season, we celebrate first finish lines with those same athletes.

Sondra came to triathlon with virtually no sporting background, learning to swim and bike only after committing to a race. Prior to age 35, she stuck exclusively to step aerobics for exercise. She never considered herself particularly athletic, either, yet a 5K led to a sprint triathlon and then the eventual completion of IRONMAN Augusta 70.3.

Of course, some triathletes *do* have a sporting background, like Debbie, a former collegiate swimmer turned sedentary adult. She discovered triathlon as an escape from a hated job and found greater fitness, athleticism, and new friends as a result.

The point is, even if you're starting from ground zero level fitness, you *can* complete a tri. We have a saying at the Atlanta Triathlon Club that is attributed to club founder Jim Boylan: "If you can run or walk a mile, then you can train to complete a sprint triathlon."

### MYTH 2: TRIATHLONS ARE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE.

*"Just try it' is a fitting mantra as we get older and stuck in the familiar, often reluctant to do new things." – Sybil*

Triathlon, like golf and tennis, is truly a lifelong sport. John and I discovered this when we attended my first half-iron distance race, Gulf Coast. There, we were amazed by the health and vitality of athletes in the older age groups. I enviously watched the 75 to 79 award winners jump on—and off—the podium blocks with ease after crushing the race (while I limped around at a snail's pace). Since then, athletes continue to defy age and redefine what's possible. Sybil Jacobson, who hails from the 75 to 79 age group, finished her first triathlon at age 61 and recently won her age group at IRONMAN Chattanooga 70.3.

Many pro athletes hit their prime in their mid-thirties and race pro into their forties. And on the age group level, it's not uncommon for many of the fastest amateurs to be 45-plus.



### MYTH 3: ALL TRIATHLETES RACE COMPETITIVELY.

*“They are all rail-thin, super-fast, and out for blood.” – Lauren*

Many assume *all* triathletes have Type A personalities. While the sport attracts its fair share of intense, goal-oriented individuals, athletes enter the sport for many other reasons.

For example, Kathryn was searching for community after moving to a new town and found it in triathlon. Lindsay was working through the pain of a divorce and found new friends and self-confidence after she started running. And Laura, looking for a personal challenge, found a supportive community and a sport that made her feel “alive.”

### MYTH 4: TRIATHLETES ARE UNFRIENDLY.

*“I figured they’d be very fit, extremely focused, and possibly even annoyed at the new girl with no clue.” – Kathryn*

I didn’t expect to make friends at our first tri club meeting. In fact, I was surprised to be invited to a run and a bike ride. Weren’t they afraid we’d slow them down? Weren’t they worried we’d ask too many questions? Nearly all the triathletes I met were friendly, *even* after I admitted I’d never competed in the Olympics or played a D1 sport. (Turns out, they hadn’t either!)

## MYTH 5: TRIATHLETES ARE OBSESSED.

*“Triathletes spend all their time training, thinking about training, or talking about training. They all race IRONMAN distance, and they’ve been racing their entire lives.” – Bethany*

Okay, some are that way. But not *all* triathletes spend their vacations racing and riding bikes every weekend. Some athletes race one or two times a month while others participate once per year.

There are triathletes who cross the finish line and then relegate their bike to the basement, and others who train and race for decades. There are also athletes who train and compete solely in short-course races (more on the distances later) and those who compete in IRONMAN (the one you’ve seen on TV).

### ARE THERE MANY WOMEN IN TRIATHLON?



*Some of my favorite ladies about to start the John Tanner Sprint Triathlon in 2016*

According to 2015 statistics, women comprise 38% of USA Triathlon members, the sport's national governing body. The designation of triathlon as an NCAA Emerging Sport for Women promises to bring that percentage up higher. So far, twenty schools have added varsity triathlon to their program.

USA Triathlon has also driven women's triathlon participation with the recently launched WIN (Women's Initiative) program, supporting women's events, clinics, and women-only start waves around the country.

Women for Tri, the branded initiative funded by World Triathlon Corporation, has dispersed over \$157,000 to tri clubs invested in increasing women's participation and collegiate programs.

## GETTING STARTED RIGHT



*Atlanta Tri Club coaches, 2018*

Our first tri club meeting proved many of our initial assumptions were wrong. In some ways, triathletes were the *opposite* of what John and I had expected. There were all sizes, all ages, all levels, *and they were all triathletes.*

The meeting also demonstrated how little we knew about the sport. There were so many things to learn, and some of them couldn't be solved using Google. For this reason, we were advised to *avoid* buying a ton of gear until we learned more about the sport. But I was ready to jump in! Why shouldn't I rush to get all the equipment I'd eventually need anyway?

That was my rationale as I gave my wallet a workout the very next day. I found an ill-fitting road bike at Play It Again Sports, some

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closeout tri suits online, even a “lot” of shorts on eBay that should have been listed as underwear.

Fortunately, most of the mistakes—and yes, those purchases were *all* mistakes—were fixable. The bike was given a new home, the ill-fitting gear was donated, and I never wore those ridiculous “shorts” in public.

Those were just errors I made in the first two days of my triathlon “career.” Always one to act before thinking, I learned many lessons the hard way. If I could go back in time, I would approach things in the right order. Fortunately, you have that chance. To truly get started right, your first step should be finding your “why.”

**Takeaway:** Myths about triathletes can intimidate newbies interested in trying the sport. But nearly anyone can complete a triathlon. Approaching things in a systematic way will save you time and money later. The first step in your journey is finding your source of motivation.

### TERMS TO KNOW

**Sprint triathlon**—A sprint isn’t a standard distance and generally ranges from a 400- to 750-yard swim, a 10- to 18-mile bike, and a 2- to 4-mile run. It takes most athletes 1 to 2 hours to complete.

# 2

## FINDING YOUR WHY

Why do you want to do a running race or triathlon? To look better? To feel better? Because your friends are doing it? What is *your* driving why? To figure it out, Certified Mental Performance Consultant Abby Keenan recommends listing your current motivations.

If you're unsure, examine your past motivations for participating in other sports or activities. I'll use myself as an example. In high school and college, I stuck with cheerleading and pole vaulting primarily for *social* reasons.

To illustrate, here's how a typical track practice went down: My childhood friend Chandra and I zoomed around campus in my red Saturn, practice poles sticking out the windows. Next, we stopped by Dunkin' Donuts for a Coffee Coolatta and a six-pack of donuts. After *all* that, we'd practice. Sometimes.