

The older I get.. the faster I was.. Is it time to go long? Taken from:

Lepers et al (2010) Age related changes in triathlon performance. International Journal of Sports Medicine 2010 Apr 31 (4), 251-6

As we get older we generally get slower, although this may not always be the case due to the large number of factors which can potentially impact upon performance. It is common for ageing athletes to 'step up' in distance and compete in longer events based upon the presumption that short races are for youngsters, but the older athletes can keep on going in the longer races. Historically, 5k runners will step up to half marathons and marathon events whilst triathlon competitors will choose ironman distance rather than sprint distance racing.

Lepers et al set out to identify whether there is any truth in such presumptions. The aim of his research was to compare age related decline in Olympic distance triathlon (1500m swim, 40k cycle & 10k run) compared to ironman distance triathlon (3800m swim, 180k cycle & 42k run). In addition to comparing the decline between events, he also aimed to identify the decline in relation to the individual disciplines of swim, bike and run i.e. did swimming performance decline more than cycling performance as competitors got older.

Methodology

The researchers accessed results data for the 2006 / 2007 ITU age group world championships and compared the top 10 finishers in each age group. This data was then compared against the Ironman World Championship results from 2006 / 2007, once again, the top 10 finishers from each age group were taken into account. The researchers averaged and compared the finish times for each age group and also compared swim, bike and run times across age groups.

Results

Decline in Olympic distance performance V decline in Ironman performance in relation to age

Going against common opinion, there was a more significant drop in performance with age during ironman triathlon competition as opposed to Olympic distance events when expressed as a percentage of the fastest times.

Decline in swim, bike and run performance in relation to age

Swim performance declined with age at a similar rate for both Olympic distance and Ironman competitors. Run performance declined with age for both Olympic distance and Ironman competitors but declined more in the Ironman event. Cycling performance declined in both but clearly declined the least amongst the 3 disciplines.

Discussion

1. Choosing longer events as you get older (and 'because' you are getting older) may not be the sensible choice for performance. The opinion that going longer as you get older is not supported by this research.
2. Swimming declines at a similar rate for both short and long distance racing but running declines more in longer distance (Ironman) events. Once again, the opinion that going longer as you get older is not supported by this research.
3. The age related decline in cycling performance for both short and long distance events is not as significant as the decline in swimming and running performances, this suggests that the physiological requirements for cycle performance differ to those of swimming and running.

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