3 x 3 Essential Swim, Bike And Run Sessions

What's this all about?

One question commonly asked coaches and top triathletes is "What are the three most important swim/bike/run sessions that triathletes should do if they can only do three sessions a week?".

Although there obviously is no one single right answer to this question, there are some common practices many subject matter experts agree upon.

What I wanted to do for this guide was not only to answer this question again, but to do it in a structured way that all triathletes can use, regardless of fitness level.

So I racked my brains to come up with the following **adaptable workout structures** and/or descriptions, followed by very specific examples of implementation.

What this means in practice is that after reading the structure/description of the workout and learning its purpose, and then looking at the example, you should be able to change the workout to be appropriate for your current level of fitness.

Finally, we'll discuss what to think about when **implementing** these essential sessions **into your own training program**.

1. Swim

1. Speed or threshold session

Structure/description:
A weekly speed session is essential for increasing your speed on race day. There are a few different types of speed training, emphasizing different aspects of speed, power and endurance in different proportions.

Very short intervals at maximum speed (25 m, long recoveries) are great for improving both power and technique. Short to medium distance intervals at a very high pace with medium recoveries move slightly away from the power side of the spectrum to the aerobic capacity and speed endurance side. Finally, medium length intervals at threshold pace with short recoveries emphasize endurance even more, and are also often close to race-pace for many triathletes.

Example:
200 m warm-up, 10 x 25 m fast (with focus on technique) with full recoveries, 3 x 100 m anaerobic zone (rate of perceived exertion, RPE 8-9) w. 30 s recoveries, 3 x 300 m threshold zone (RPE 7-8), 15 s recoveries, 200 m easy cool-down.

2. Aerobic endurance session

Structure/description:
The main set should consist of continuous swimming in the aerobic zone. The duration of the main set can vary from as little as 15-20 minutes during off-season maintenance up to or beyond your goal race swim split. This session is especially important for long-course triathletes.

Example:
200 m warm-up, 400 m with alternating 50 m of technique drills/kick/pull, 30 min aerobic zone (RPE 5-6) with focus on technique, 100 m easy cool-down.

3. Technique and power session

Structure/description:
The focus of this session is on your technique and power. What aspects of swim technique to work on is very individual. Focus on your weaknesses, but keep some maintenance drills in for other focus points too. The power set consists of short intervals with long recoveries at maximum effort. Paddles can be used as well, but be careful not to do too-much-too soon, since this could easily lead to overuse injuries.

Example:
100 m warm-up, 4 x (50 m kick, 50 m pull, 50 m body position drills), 12 x 50 m max with 1 min recoveries alternating with and without paddles, 200 m easy cool-down.

2. Bike

1. Strength

Structure/description:
This session builds muscular strength through bouts of high power output, either as hill repeats outdoors or using an indoor trainer. Your cadence should be significantly lower than your normal cadence. Over-gearing is the name of the game.

Example:
Indoor trainer workout. 15 min warm-up. 6 x 3 min hill reps at 4 % gradient. Over-gear so your cadence is around 70 rpm. Intervals are at 120% FTP (functional threshold power) with 3 min recoveries. If you don't know your FTP, go by an RPE of 8-9. 10 min cool-down.

2. Threshold

Structure/description:
This workout consists of longer intervals and improves power and speed at threshold intensity. Short-course athletes should aim towards the higher end of the functional threshold range with slightly shorter and faster intervals and longer recoveries, whereas long-course athletes can be more conservative and go for the lower end ("sweet spot") of the same range with longer intervals and shorter recoveries.

Example:
30 min warm-up, 4 x 10 min at functional threshold power with 4 min recoveries, 15 min cool-down.

3. Long ride

Structure/description:
Essential for building aerobic endurance, increased glycogen storage and fat oxidation and, if you're a long-course triathlete, getting your muscles accustomed to the demands of a long day out. Ideally you should mix up long rides on your Tri-bike in the aero-position for specificity, and road cycling group rides for bike handling skills, reduced risk of overuse injury and great fun! The duration is obviously very dependent on your goal race.

Example:
2-4 hour (short-course) or 4-6 hour (long-course) ride in aerobic zone.

3. Run

1. Fartlek run

Structure/description:
Great session for building and maintaining speed, efficiency and if you make it intense, for increasing VO2max. Can be done anywhere (no track needed), intervals can be time-based or just based on feel if you're just getting into your program or want to include some light quality in your offseason.

Example:
15 min easy jog, 4 x 20 s strides with very easy jog recoveries, 6 x 3 min at just under VO2max heart rate (2 min recoveries). 10 min cool-down.

2. Brick run

Structure/description:
Running off the bike is an essential skill in triathlon, and quite separate from running as a stand-alone activity. Run off the bike once a week as part of a brick session. Build up to
close to race intensity (short-course) for the last part of the bike, and go straight into either a short, continuous race-intensity run followed by a cool-down, or into a few short intervals at race intensity, followed by a cool-down. For long-course athletes, go into a continuous run at or slightly below race intensity after a longer ride, followed by a short cool-down.

Example:
Short course - Last 5-10 min of bike at close to race-intensity. Then 4 x 3 min run at race intensity (2 min recoveries). 5 min cool-down.
Long-course - Longish ride, followed by 20 min at race pace and 10 min cool-down.

3. Long run

Structure/description:
Builds aerobic endurance and strength, increases glycogen storage and fat oxidation, and is important for all triathletes, but especially for those targeting long-course events. Start easy (e.g. standalone marathon pace +20%) and build up to a steady pace for the second half (standalone marathon pace +10%). You should aim to negative split these runs.

Example:
2 hour run of at a pace that is relatively easy. Run the second half slightly faster than the first. Ideally, choose a course with a somewhat soft surface, like gravel roads or trails.

How to implement in your own training

So how do you implement this into your training? First of all, mind rules number one and two. **Don't get injured, don't get overtrained**.

You can't just go out and do all of this in any given week unless you’re properly conditioned for it.

Most of these sessions include some sort of quality, and there has to be a balance between quality, easy recovery sessions, and complete rest. Unless you're able to also dedicate a lot of time to recovery sessions and rest, don't go out and do just these sessions.

Include a few of them every week, sprinkled in amongst easier sessions.

Also, the sessions should be **adapted to your current fitness level**, which often has a strong correlation with the time of year. Once you approach your A-race, you will be able to do a lot of quality work, whereas in the off-season it's great to include some form of light quality, but keep the volume of high-intensity work modest, and don't go overboard on the total volume.

The amount of quality and overall session intensity can be adapted through workout length, interval and recovery duration, speed or pace and so on.

Finally, this is by no means an exclusive list of training sessions.

You should do other types of workouts as well (in addition to the already mentioned easy/recovery workouts), depending on your current fitness level, the time of season and your goals.

However, the sessions can be varied in many different ways, so these nine "workout skeletons" can actually give you **a whole arsenal** of specific sessions.

If you're still unsure about how to go about implementing these workouts into your schedule, or how to structure your schedule to begin with, get in touch directly by emailing me at mikael@scientifictriathlon.com with your questions.

Good luck, train smarter and race faster!