



Becoming a Triathmom

Author Kelli Wheeler, friends Michelle Phipps and Molly Conger, after their first Tri 4 Fun in 2004.

Give it a "Tri"

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AUGUST 24
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Don't hate me because I do triathlons. Blame my friend Michelle—she's the one who got me into them.

It started simply enough, a group of moms with babies in joggers trying to get the weight off. Then to stay motivated, we began entering "fun runs." It was a great reward to complete a race together after all the long miles we had put in.

My husband thought "fun run" was an oxymoron. "The only good reason for running is if someone's chasing you," he liked to point out. Well, someone was chasing me. My old self.

I used to be an athlete. I used to be thin with actual discernable calf and thigh muscles and no dangling arm fat. I used to be a competitor with a taste for winning. I used to be a lot of things before I became a wife and mother.

It's easy to lose track of yourself when you're constantly focusing on someone else's needs. It's hard to find time even to get in a few squats to that ol' Buns of Steel video, let alone a workout that can go toe-to-toe with that order of chili cheese fries and come out ahead.

But one of the most valuable pieces of advice any friend ever gave me was to make time for myself. Whatever your passion might be—tennis, shopping, volunteering, scrap booking, working the New York Times crossword puzzle—taking the time to indulge recharges your personal batteries so that you have more to give. So my passion (among others, but we don't need to bring raw brownie mix into this) was to have enough time alone with my thoughts to maybe shake off a few pounds and get back in shape.

And, like I said, if it weren't for my friend Michelle, I would've been content jogging the paths of the American River bike trail. Having to stop to let the occasional rattlesnake pass by was excitement enough for me. Then one day she upped the ante.

"What about a triathlon? My husband Mike has done a few in the summer out at Rancho Seco and I think we could do it, too!"

My answer? "Have fun. Let me know how it goes."

She kept working on me, though, feeding me more information and trying to drag me down with her. They were called Tri 4 Fun, put on by Total Body Fitness. They weren't the Ironman length I was more familiar with: They were called "sprint distance" where the participant got a little taste of each sport—a half-mile swim, a 16-mile bike ride and a 5k run. This event was held once a month in June, July and August, the day before the Tri 4 Real series (Olympic-length triathlon) in a relaxed, no-pressure, fun atmosphere with music and plenty of first-timers.

"It sounds like it hurts," I hedged.

"You did give natural birth," she countered.

"That's a lot of things to do all at once."

"So is balancing the wants and needs of a family of four."


"An open water swim? I'll be the last one out..."

"You'll catch them and pass 'em on the run."

She was shamelessly stroking my competitive nature—but it was working.

I started to believe that with a training buddy at my side, just as we tackled the hurdles of parenthood with joint commiseration, we would conquer our first triathlon together. Plus, we recruited another sucker, I mean gamer, our friend Molly. To get ready, she decided she could add a pool workout to the spin class and treadmill jogs she was already doing at the gym. We gave ourselves 4 months to ramp up training by adding swim laps at the gym (I actually swam in my backyard pool, initially) and borrowing road bikes from husbands to get some mileage in. We continued to run together, swapping mommy tales among our pack of jogger-pushing friends.

Come July and a successful Tri 4 Fun completion, my competitive nature resurfaced and I surprised myself with a respectable finish time of 1 hour, 47 minutes and 25 seconds, with my friends right behind me. Molly checked that success off her list of accomplishments, but Michelle and I set our sights on the Luna Bar Women's Triathlon a few months later. We haven't stopped in 4 years.

As mothers, we wear many different hats to make sure our families are taken care of and thriving. It just so happens that a swim cap, bike helmet and baseball cap are on my shelf to make sure my needs are taken care of, too. 

KELLI WHEELER is a full-time mother of two, columnist and freelance writer, currently training to stay ahead of Michelle.