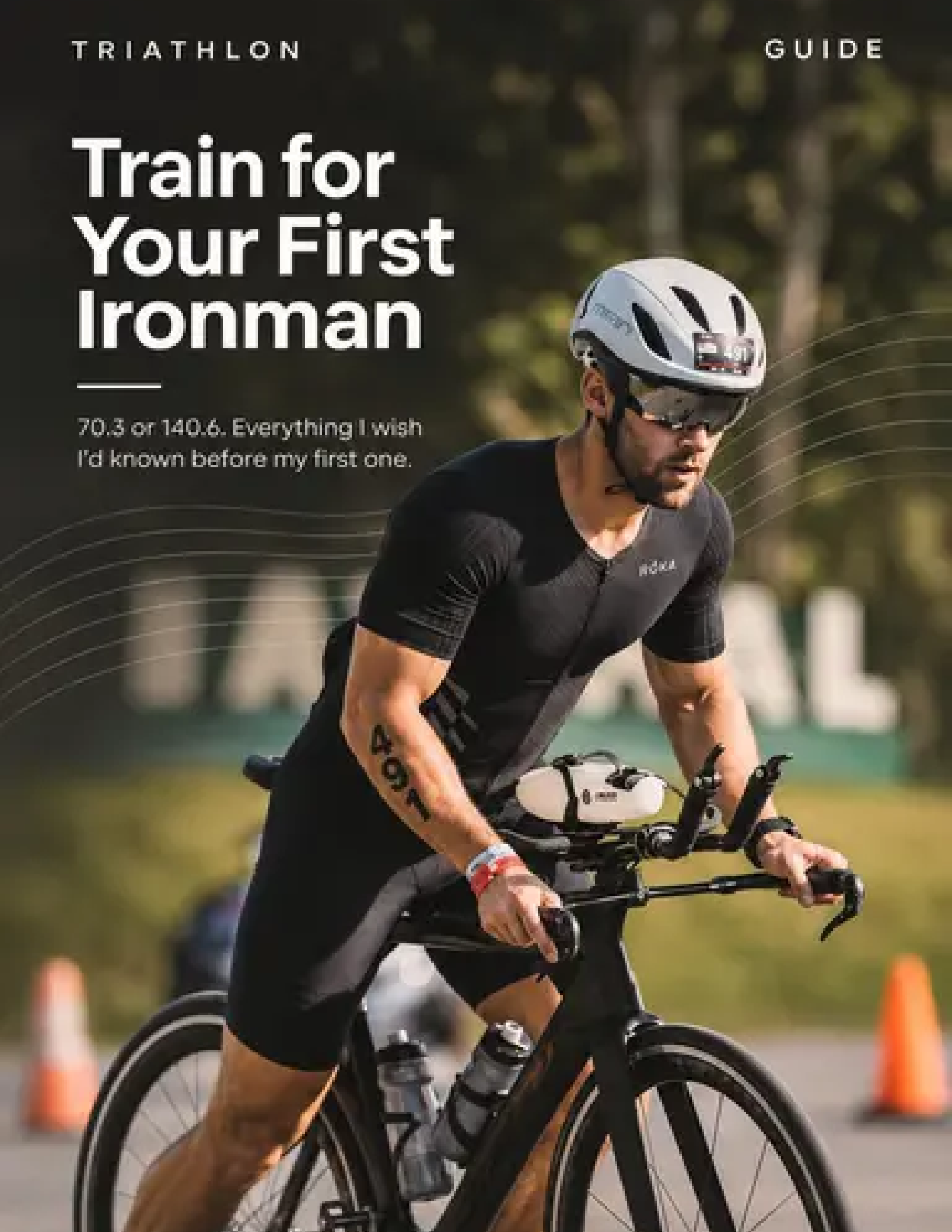
TRIATHLON GUIDE

Train for Your First Ironman

70.3 or 140.6. Everything I wish I'd known before my first one.



Who this guide is for

- You've thought about doing a 70.3 or full Ironman but have no idea where to start.
- You're already training, but you're not sure what you're doing will actually get you to the finish line.
- Or you've done one before, swore you were "one and done," and now you're quietly stalking race calendars again.

If any of those sound like you, you're in the right place.

Introduction

When I signed up for my first Ironman, I couldn't swim 50 yards without stopping. I had less than six months to train and figured I'd just "get in shape" and figure it out along the way — which, in hindsight, was optimistic and borderline stupid.

This guide exists to help you skip some of the "learning the hard way" part. It's everything I wish someone had handed me before my first race — a clear, experience-backed reference covering how to train, fuel, and gear up without drowning in conflicting advice.

You don't need to be an elite athlete to finish strong. You just need a plan that actually makes sense — one that balances endurance with recovery, nutrition with reality, and structure with flexibility.

How to use this guide:

- **Training Overview** — how to structure your weeks, track progress, and build endurance efficiently.
- **Heart Rate & Pacing** — how to train smarter using zones instead of just effort.
- **Nutrition & Supplementation** — what to eat, drink, and bring on race day, without overcomplicating it.
- **Gear Checklist** — field-tested essentials, and what's actually worth buying.
- **Race Week & Race Day** — how to taper, fuel, and stay calm when the cannon goes off.
- **Mindset & Execution** — the mental strategies that separate those who finish strong from those who fade late.

01 Training Overview

The big picture

Endurance training is simple — it's just not easy. The formula that actually works looks something like this: **consistency > intensity.**

Most age-group athletes make the same mistake: going too hard, too often. The real key is stacking weeks of mostly easy training with just enough intensity to spark adaptation — not burnout.

Think of your training like building a campfire. Zone 2 work is the wood — it keeps the fire burning. Speed work and threshold sessions are the gasoline — powerful, but useless if you have no base to burn it on.

The structure that works

- **Swim:** 2–3 sessions (technique, endurance, open water & sighting prep). Unless you come in with a strong swim background, learn *Total Immersion* — a style focused on gliding through the water to conserve energy. I hired a Total Immersion coach 7 weeks out from my first race and finished the swim in 1:08.
- **Bike:** 2–3 sessions (one long ride + one tempo/interval session).
- **Run:** 3–4 sessions (easy aerobic runs + one quality session).
- **Strength:** 2–3 short lifts per week (maintenance > maxing out).
- **Recovery:** 1 full rest day or active recovery (walk, yoga, sauna).

You don't need a 20-hour week to perform. For most working athletes, **10–14 hrs/week** is the sweet spot for a 70.3 build, and **14–20 hrs/week** for a full Ironman.

> **TIP**
>
> Comfort in open water is crucial, but races aren't won or lost on swim times. The swim is "getting to the race" — it's only a small portion of the day.

Example training week (Ironman 70.3)

DAY	SESSION(S)	FOCUS
Monday	Swim (technique) + Strength	Form & mobility
Tuesday	Bike intervals (1–1.5 hrs) + short brick run	Threshold + adaptation
Wednesday	Run (Zone 2, 45–60 min)	Aerobic base
Thursday	Swim (endurance) + Strength	Aerobic maintenance
Friday	Run (tempo or intervals)	Speed & control
Saturday	Long ride (2.5–4 hrs) + optional brick jog	Endurance & fueling practice
Sunday	Long run (75–90 min)	Aerobic efficiency

Adjust: training for a full 140.6? Extend the weekend long sessions and add midweek volume — not intensity.

Phases of training

1. **Base (8–12 weeks):** build aerobic fitness. 80% Zone 2, 20% light intensity.
2. **Build (6–10 weeks):** add threshold and tempo work, extend long rides/runs.
3. **Peak (3–4 weeks):** sharpen the sword. Simulate race intensity and conditions.
4. **Taper (2–3 weeks):** reduce volume 40–60%, maintain short bursts of intensity.

Miss a session? Don't panic. The body adapts to *patterns*, not perfection. One great week won't make you, and one bad week won't break you.

Data that matters

- **Sleep & recovery:** use Whoop, Oura/Ultrahuman, and/or Garmin for trends — not obsession.
- **HRV:** low = recover more; high = go hit it.
- **Resting HR:** a simple, underrated fatigue check.
- **Training load:** watch trends, not single numbers.

> **THE GOLDEN RULE**
>
> If you can't run your easy runs easy, you'll never run your hard runs fast. Zone 2 feels slow — borderline frustrating — but it's how you build the aerobic base that carries you through mile 20 when everyone else falls apart.

02 Heart Rate & Pacing

Your heart rate zones are the control panel of endurance training. Most people train in the wrong one — too hard on easy days, too easy on hard days. The goal: train your aerobic system (Zone 2) so it gets more efficient, while occasionally hitting threshold (Zone 4) to raise the ceiling.

1. MAF Method (Maximum Aerobic Function)

- Formula: **180 − your age = aerobic cap (Zone 2 ceiling)**. A 35-year-old → 145 bpm.
- Great for newer endurance athletes or base blocks.

2. Threshold-Based (preferred for precision)

- Perform a 30-minute all-out test on the bike or run.
- Use the *average HR from the last 20 minutes* as your Lactate Threshold HR (LTHR), then apply zone percentages.

ZONE	% OF LTHR	PURPOSE
Zone 1	<85%	Recovery / warm-up
Zone 2	85–89%	Aerobic base (long rides, easy runs)
Zone 3	90–94%	Tempo / steady state
Zone 4	95–99%	Threshold / race pace
Zone 5	100%+	VO_2 max / short efforts

Pacing by discipline

- **Swim:** train by feel more than HR (water compresses your HR response). Smooth form, controlled breathing — steady, not spiky.
- **Bike:** if you use power, pace by watts; otherwise HR is fine. Aim for a steady curve, avoid spikes on climbs. Bike HR usually sits 5–10 bpm below run HR for the same effort.
- **Run:** long runs in low Zone 2; tempo/threshold in Zone 3–4. If HR drifts up 5–10 bpm at the same pace, back off or hydrate.

> **REALITY CHECK**
>
> Race day isn't about hitting perfect numbers — it's about executing within your limits. Use heart rate as a guide, not a prison. Learn your body well enough to race by feel, with HR as confirmation, not instruction.

How to set HR zones on Garmin

1. Garmin Connect app → More → User Settings → Heart Rate Zones.
2. Choose "Based on Lactate Threshold Heart Rate" for accuracy.
3. Enter your LTHR or MAF number → save.
4. For multi-sport: bike zones ~5 bpm below run zones; set each sport under User Profile → Heart Rate Zones → Bike/Run.

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03 Nutrition & Supplementation

Endurance performance starts in your gut as much as your legs. Forget the diet wars — the goal isn't keto, fasting, or gimmicks. It's fueling for *performance*: enough carbs, protein, fat, and electrolytes to train hard and adapt fast.

Daily nutrition guidelines

- **Carbs:** 5–8 g/kg body weight on moderate days; up to 10 g/kg on big brick days.
- **Protein:** 1.6–2.2 g/kg to preserve lean mass and repair tissue.
- **Fats:** ~25–30% of calories from healthy sources (olive oil, avocado, fatty fish).
- **Hydration:** urine color = free hydration test. Light yellow = perfect.

When in doubt, eat real food 80% of the time and train your gut to handle what you'll race with.

Race-day fueling strategy

You can train your muscles all you want — if your stomach fails, the race is over. Baseline targets (customize through testing):

- **Carbs:** 80–100 g/hr (bike) | 60–90 g/hr (run)
- **Sodium:** 800–1200 mg/hr depending on sweat rate
- **Fluids:** 500–750 ml/hr (17–25 oz) in temperate conditions

> **TIP**
> Start practicing early. Use long rides to replicate race fueling — same brand, same mix, same intervals.

Example (bike): every 20 min, 1 gel (~25 g carbs) + 3–4 sips of mix; add 1–2 salt caps/hr if sweat rate is high.
Example (run): alternate gels and liquid carbs every 20–30 min; switch to cola or Red Bull late if caffeine helps you lock in.

My personal fuel setup

- **Gels:** GU Roctane (Salted Lime + Cherry Lime) → add link
- **Drink mix:** Precision Hydration 1000 → add link
- **Salt tabs:** SaltStick Caps (2/hr) → add link
- **Race breakfast:** white rice + honey + espresso
- **Caffeine:** 100 mg pre-swim, 25 mg/hr after midpoint
- **Supplements:** creatine, lion's mane, omega-3s, vitamin D, beta-alanine → add link

> **REAL-WORLD TIP**
>
> People will argue over the "perfect" carb mix forever. The truth: the perfect plan is the one *you've tested in training* and know your stomach can handle at race intensity.

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04 Gear Checklist

Buy what makes you faster, more comfortable, or more confident on race day — everything else is optional.

Swim

- Wetsuit (full or sleeveless depending on water temp); polarized, anti-fog goggles; spare silicone cap; anti-chafe for neck/wrists/underarms; optional swimskin for non-wetsuit races.

> **TIP**
>
> Practice open-water sighting every 2–3 swims — lift your eyes just enough to catch a buoy, not your whole head.

Bike

- A properly fit tri or aero road bike (comfort and position beat price tags); aero helmet with good ventilation; cycling shoes with wide straps for fast transitions; reliable power meter or HR monitor; tires balancing puncture protection and speed; flat kit (CO_2, tube, lever, multi-tool); bottle mounts you can hydrate from without breaking position.

> **TIP**
>
> Practice bottle grabs and swaps at race pace. Dropping one mid-course costs more than it seems.

Run

- Race shoes with 50+ training miles in them; lightweight socks, hat or visor, race belt for bib + gels; anti-chafe cream; short brick runs off the bike for rehearsal.

Race essentials

- GPS watch and HR strap; color-coded transition bags; bike nutrition storage (bento box or rear cage); sunscreen that won't sting your eyes; anti-fog spray or the baby-shampoo goggle trick.

> **TIP**
> Rehearse transition flow the week before — know exactly where everything goes before you get there.

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05 Race Week & Race Day

1. Taper the smart way

Race week isn't the time to panic-train. Your work is done — now you absorb it.

- Cut total volume by 40–60%. Keep a few short, snappy 1–2 min efforts to stay sharp. Prioritize sleep, hydration, low-stress mobility. Practice transitions once midweek — it's free speed.

> **TIP**
> You should feel restless and slightly "itchy" during taper week. That's how you know you're ready.

2. Race morning

- Wake ~3–4 hours before your start. Eat breakfast 2.5–3 hours before the gun: white rice or oatmeal + honey + banana, a bit of protein, espresso or small coffee.
- Pre-mixed bottles ready. Transition bag packed the night before. Body marked, chip on ankle, smile on face.

> **TIP**
> Keep a phone checklist titled "Morning of Race." Use airplane mode, but check it twice before leaving the hotel.

3. Race execution

- **Swim:** go out 10% easier than you think you should. Sight every 6–8 strokes — calm, long, smooth.
- **Bike:** aim for 70–75% FTP (Half) or 65–70% FTP (Full). Don't surge on climbs — power spikes = blown legs. Eat early, sip often, stay aero.
- **Run:** start conservatively. If it feels "too easy" the first 3 miles, you're doing it right. Stick to your fueling rhythm. Expect the pain cave — it's part of the contract.

> **TIP**
>
> Everyone slows down on the run. The goal isn't to avoid it — it's to slow down *less than everyone else.*

4. Post-race recovery

- **Immediate:** walk 5–10 min before sitting; fluids, electrolytes, simple carbs right away; get out of your kit quickly.
- **Next 48 hrs:** sleep, sodium, mobility. Wait 3–5 days before structured training. Mild inflammation and bloating is normal.

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06 Mindset & Execution

Training gets you to the start line. Mindset gets you to the finish. Endurance humbles even the fittest athletes — it's not who has the biggest engine, it's who stays calm when everything starts to hurt. The best athletes aren't fearless; they just recognize the fear, boredom, and fatigue faster — and keep moving anyway.

When you're 80 miles into the bike or 18 into the run, the question stops being "Can I do this?" and becomes "Am I willing to?"

Control the controllables

You can't control the wind, the waves, or the course. You can control your pacing, your fueling, and your attitude. Focus there and you'll race calm while others crumble.

> **TIP**
>
> Every time your mind drifts to what's hard or unfair, bring it back to something actionable: "What's my next task?"

Embrace the grind

There's no trick to staying motivated — you learn to enjoy the work. The early mornings, the long miles, the quiet hours no one sees. Fall in love with the process and race day becomes a celebration, not a test.

> *"This is what I signed up for. This is where I get better." — Pain becomes progress when you expect it.*

→ What to do next

You've got three good options from here:

1. **Use this as your blueprint.** Build your own plan around these principles. If you're the DIY type, scribble in the margins and go to work.
2. **Follow a done-for-you program.** If you want structure, I've built a 16-week 70.3 plan, a 20-week full Ironman plan, and standalone strength/hypertrophy programs that pair with endurance training — each periodized and written for real humans with jobs and limited time. → add program link
3. **Stay in the loop.** I send an occasional newsletter on training, mindset, and hybrid performance — plus race recaps and protocols I'm testing. → add newsletter link

Whatever path you pick, treat this race like a promise you made to yourself — and keep it.

Whether you're chasing your first finish or your fastest one — every Ironman is earned, not given. You're not just training your body. You're training your ability to keep promises to yourself when no one's watching.

If this helped, pay it forward: share it with a training partner, or help the next athlete avoid learning the hard way. See you out there.

— Chris Tomshack