

# are we paying too much for our RACE FEES!

There's nothing particularly cheap about being a triathlete. All the gear required will certainly whittle away the balance of your bank account and, once trained, the races and events on offer are not dirt-cheap either. It's not like being a runner. They splash out on a pair of shoes and the race fees seem laughable in comparison to what triathletes are forking out. But what constitutes a reasonable race entry fee – and are triathletes being fleeced by organisers keen to live in luxury?

Many athletes arrive at the start line of a race and do a quick calculation in their heads where they multiply the race entry fee by the estimated number of people that have pitched for the event. Based on this they are quick to believe that race organising is a lucrative business and that a race organiser receives ample remuneration for a what appears to be a day's work.

Some years ago, at the back of Stellenbosch in a small dam in the Idas Vallei, a group of offroad triathletes would converge for an "event" that cost something in the region of R20 every Friday afternoon during the summer months! There was no real transition to speak of; no bike racks and certainly no marshals. I am not even sure that there were even lifesavers or medical crew on hand in case of an emergency.

Of course there were more expensive and more well-organised events, but the truth is these were not exorbitant either.

So in a current landscape where a sprint distance race can cost up to R120; where one Olympic distance race organiser is charging R425 to non TSA members, and where the ultimate aspirational race on our calendar can cost up to R4000 – are triathletes being ripped off?

It's a difficult question to generalise over, but it is interesting to note that in some cases those races with the higher levels of sponsorship support are also the ones with the highest entry fees. Makes you think doesn't it? Admittedly these are also generally the better-organised, more sophisticated races that do not scrimp on infrastructure, safety and prize offerings.

A quick look at one or two of the major online entry sites shows that there are a few local cheap races on the calendar to choose from.

These are generally off-road events and organised by communities and not major commercial event organisers.

## Value for money

I've always believed that there is a distinct difference between value and value for money.

If you consider that Ironman races can be equated to Levis in a world of knock off's and Mr Price affordable jeans – then you can understand that they charge top dollar for their races. It's all about value. And not value for money. For as humans we give value to things that are essentially valueless. We achieve this through clever and protracted marketing; and consequently through supply and demand.

That does not mean that the "knock offs" or more affordable races are lesser achievements. Indeed in some cases an Ironman-distance race offers the triathlete an even more challenging race and better value for money.

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# triathlons?

These races cannot rely on the brand name, and have to be sure to ensure that all their participants leaving the race will agree that it was worth the money spent.

How does one evaluate value for money? In the world of jeans we believe that the high-cost Levis will last longer than the R99 denims we buy from the bargain stores. We don't complain when those low cost clothing items fall apart within a year of purchase; but would consider a letter of complaint if the same were true of the more expensive brands.

So how does one evaluate the value for money element of a race? For me its more than just what's in the goodie bag. It's about the full race experience. Was registration and race briefing handled well – and did it add rather than detract from my experience as an athlete?

It's about what's on the course that actively assists me complete the race. Most Ironman athletes that I speak to complain about the race fee and point to the rather dismal goodie bag offering at the South African race, but one pointed out that if he added up all the free energy gels and nutrition that he consumed during the race; he had almost recouped the cost of his event.

Then what about the prizes? Do these really add value to a race? With the majority of athletes on the field, not in contention for a prize – just how important is it to provide loads of cash? This is, of course a whole other area of debate.

So race value for money should be determined by the overall race experience; the goodie bag offerings; the additional nutritional substances found on the route and the depth of prizes at prize giving.

## The real costs of organising a race

It's not a simple equation. And it's not a one-day affair. Race-day represents a culmination of a number of months of co-ordination. Factor in telephone calls; after hours work solving problems for athletes; travelling to meetings; marketing efforts and you can agree that it's not a one-man job!

As athletes we are almost blind to the costs associated with putting together a safe race. Because, if the organiser is doing a good job, you wont notice the real effort behind the event.

Consider the following. Each metre of fencing that you see at a race represents money; each marshal you see needs to be fed and sometimes paid if they are not volunteers; each referee comes at a cost; each water sachet that you drink represents part of the cash flow. Everything from the lifesavers right down to the race numbers are costs that add up very easily. Hell, even Triathlon South Africa puts its hand out to claim a portion of the race fee for sanctioning costs - and then there is the admin fee taken by online entry system providers.

Guaranteed some race organisers are making more money than others. Guaranteed some do a better job than others, but as professional as well as commercial entities, race organisers should be encouraged to make a fair living – because it simply is not sustainable to rely on a system of volunteers to host races week in and week out. The sport has already treaded this path and in most cases suffered as a result.

Ultimately we need the big cash races, but we do need to find a way of bringing back those "training-type" events that can draw people together at as little cost as possible to enjoy our three disciplines.

But one thing you can be assured of the next time you are tempted to multiply the race entry fees by the number of participants - it is unlikely that some lucky sod is getting that amount transferred into his or her bank account!



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