



## What is a “Real” Race Experience?

It is well known that multi-sport competitions come in a variety of distances and levels of difficulty. In the October 2008 issue of *Inside Triathlon* magazine, a letter-writer said, in part “Some time ago, I participated in a sprint-distance triathlon. The race took me a few months to prepare for, was a lot of fun, and got me excited about multi-sport...here’s my problem: [Some say] that I didn’t really do a triathlon and that I’m lying whenever I tell people I did, even though I always use the ‘sprint-distance’ qualifier. [Some say] that only the Ironman distance counts as a real triathlon. Am I misleading people, including myself, when I say I did a triathlon if the race was only a sprint?” The sentiments to which the letter-writer was responding are repeated on a regular basis to this day in the world of multi-sport racing.

Is there some absolute standard for what qualifies a particular race as “real?” As of this writing, I’ve been racing for 32 years and have competed in 242 triathlons and duathlons, and I don’t think there is any such standard. I’m sure the person who told the letter-writer that the only “real” triathlon is an Ironman was speaking from personal beliefs and not scientific evidence. After all, when someone labels a race as “real” or “not real,” aren’t they simply stating their own personal thoughts?

When you participate in a race, whether long or short or in between; on a hot, cold, windy, calm, or in between day; hilly, flat, or somewhere

in between; is the experience real for *you*? Was getting to the start and then crossing the finish line (whether you went fast, or slow, or in between) real for you? That’s all that matters. Then for you it was a real race and a real experience. In the recent running of the Boston Marathon, each participant had to endure the weather conditions, regardless of how fast or slow they ran the course. I bet even the slowest of slow runners knew, without a doubt, how real the marathon was for them that day.

How about doing a sprint triathlon or a standard-distance duathlon that the quoted letter-writer put down? Are none of the folks who compete in them “real triathletes/duathletes?” What does that make those age-groupers who compete in the USA Triathlon Sprint or Duathlon *National Championships* or the *International Triathlon Union* Sprint Triathlon or Duathlon World Championships, both events now held every year? Over the course of my career, I’ve raced up to the Ironman distance (started five, finished three, and ran out of time on the marathon in the other two) as well as several ITU World Championship triathlons at both the Olympic and sprint distances. I usually finish in the far back and as I get older, I seem to be getting even slower, but the finish always feels like a real accomplishment.

Regardless of your finish time or the length of the race, if you’ve had a good time while participating and feel good about yourself after the race, then you are a real runner or competitor in the du or triathlon.



Dr. George Sheehan, the 1970s guru of running who many of us had the privilege of knowing, put it this way, “Excellence is being the best George Sheehan I can be.”

If you did the best that you could do on any given day and didn’t happen to finish, as USA Triathlon Hall-of-Famer Dave Scott said a long time ago, “I encourage all...triathletes to reach for their goals, whether they be to win or just to try. The trying is everything.”

Go well,  
Dr. Steve Jonas

*This column is drawn from my publication by this title on the USA-Triathlon Blog, for which I write a monthly column Talking Tri-/Duathlon for Ordinary Mortals® at [www.usatriathlon.org/news/blogs/ordinary-mortals/4\\_071613.aspx](http://www.usatriathlon.org/news/blogs/ordinary-mortals/4_071613.aspx). It is used with the permission of Jayme McGuire, Senior Manager, Editorial and Digital Media.*

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