

Doing Good Works

The Ottawa Triathlon Club

What's the biggest single source of anxiety reported by even experienced triathletes?

Worries about the swim top the list and, with this in mind, the Ottawa Triathlon Club (OTC) launched a new swim angel program this season in cooperation with Somersault Promotions, which puts on a triathlon series in eastern Ontario. The program pairs up rookie try-a-tri participants with experienced swimmers. The volunteer OTC swim angel, who carries a styrofoam swim noodle, provides encouragement and swims beside the first-timer. If the participant needs to stop, the rules permit the swimmer to rest in place using the noodle.

"With this program, we are making triathlon fun and achievable for those who would otherwise scratch it off their list of possible goals," explains Gwyn Batchelor, the club's director of member services.

The OTC has approximately 200 members and its signature training initiative is a 32-week triathlon program for all levels. Club members swim at city pools, spin at the OTC cycling studio, and bike and run at various locations throughout the National Capital area. In addition to seminars and clinics for each discipline, the club offers yoga classes for triathletes and an annual three-day training camp in Lake Placid, N.Y. The club calendar also includes special events such as swim meets, a curling bonspiel, an aquathon (which involves lots of open-water swimming), a track meet and an anniversary party. This year the club will celebrate its seventh anniversary with a dinner and guest speakers.

The coaching team includes founder and head coach Geordie McConnell plus 14 others, ranging from an Olympian to a physiotherapist to a former national-level swimmer.

Hannah Jackson, 24, joined the club last spring and placed first in her debut try-a-tri in June. She says she particularly appreciates the club's open-water swim clinics, where participants do drills to help get accustomed to having physical contact with other triathletes in the water. "It was daunting, but I feel it really improved my swim this year. Instead of getting annoyed when people smack you while swimming, you learn to expect it, accept it, and move on."

Bryan Lemire, 33, joined the club in 2010, spurred on by the trouble he had doing a triathlon in Brockville the previous summer. "I ran competitive track in university, but there I was, one of the last tri-a-try participants out of the water, hardly able to walk a straight line. I had to rest on the ground for a minute or two until I had enough strength to hop on my bike." Now Lemire's favourite club event is the swim meet. "I get to see how much I've improved." He says the strength of the club is its inclusive membership. "There are members of all athletic backgrounds, speeds and goals, and we're all here to have a good time. I used to think you had to be an amazing athlete to be a triathlete, but it turns out all you have to be is motivated."

Batchelor says the club's mission, as well as improving the health and fitness of its members, is to contribute to good causes. The swim angel project is just one of many community initiatives of the OTC which, since its founding, has donated approximately \$20,000 to charities such as the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario, the Ottawa Riverkeeper (the custodial organization for the Ottawa River) and Sole Responsibility, an organization that collects gently used running shoes and sends them to organizations in Africa.

Rookie triathletes who enter a Somersault Promotions triathlon and want a swim angel don't have to be members of the OTC. For more information, please check out ottawatriathlonclub.com.—TW



Ottawa Triathlon Club members at the 2010 Riverkeeper Triathlon (now the Ottawa River Triathlon)

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