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20 Tips Learned from Doing 19 XTERRA Worlds 1999 to 2019

This Sunday Lorenn Walker from Oahu will race at the XTERRA World Championship for the 20th time, and as you might imagine, she's learned a thing or two through the years. Here, she gives us her top 20 tips on how to excel at off-road triathlon's greatest day.

1. Learn how to mountain bike before you do XTERRA Worlds. The bike course for my first XTERRA Worlds in 1999 went from Wailea up Haleakala Crater's south side. These trails were very rocky with some steep downhill sections that were way outside my skill level. It was before tubeless tires and the trail was littered with sharp kiawe thorns notorious for punctures. Many bikers had to fix flats (bonus tip: know how to fix a flat). My antidote to Wailea's kiawe and flats that worked every single year was high air pressure. My tires were pumped up to 45-50 pounds! Weighing about 120 pounds I held on for life as I was banged up and down on my used, size L, Marin hard tail. Having finished about a third of that first race's bike segment, when I went around a downhill corner too hard and fast, slammed on my front brake, and flew over the handlebars. Brushing myself off, and after twisting my front wheel back around into its correct direction, something felt weird. I looked down and saw my right hand middle and ring fingers sticking out to the side. I'm right-handed and didn't know how to use only a front brake. It wasn't painful but I felt devastated, stuck out in the middle of nowhere, unable to ride. I had trained a couple months and my whole family was waiting for me at the finish (the first and about last time that happened).

Crushed, but not willing to quit, I grabbed my bike and ran with it. At least I was moving, and frankly, I was relieved not having to ride the steeper trail sections that scared me. After running my bike to the run start, and finishing the run, I got my fingers put back into their proper places at the medic tent. Only eight women age 40 and over entered the race that year and only two of us finished. I went home to O'ahu, got a smaller bike, and practiced riding on dirt trails with rocks and steep down hills.

2. Do what you can with what you have. Don't just quit when your bike (or fingers) break. Try to finish what you start even if you're last. When the time comes that you cannot finish move on to something else you can do. We all face defeat, failure, and eventual demise. It's doing whatever you can that matters, regardless of outcome or failure that can lead to wisdom. We each have the power to decide what kind of meaning we find in adversity. Consider the unexpected and loss as part of the process and the thrill of doing XTERRA! At the Lake Garda, Italy XTERRA I ran alone in a forest during a cold, dark, and crazy loud thunderstorm. It was one of my scariest, yet one of the most memorable races to date and I was second to last to finish.

3. Use tubeless tires and get some race wheels you don't train on. Riding on 18 or 20 pounds of air compared to 45 or 50 pounds makes a big difference in control! Thank you David Duncan, awesome person and fast biker who told me to use race wheels only for racing, and to always train on training wheels. I love my EVOs!



4. If you crash a lot on dirt try using your back brake only on trails. If you notice that you crash for unknown reasons on trails, don't use your front brake at all off-road.

5. Practice on technical sections of mountain bike courses. Even if you live far from ideal single track challenging courses to prepare for Maui, find a small section of a trail that you can't do well and practice it repeatedly until you can ride it.

These are tips for amateurs. Please remember too that you are the best expert of yourself. These tips here are simply what worked or didn't work for me. Also consult a health care provider for any health issues and don't rely on my wholly unprofessional advice. I assume no liability for any negligence that I might exercise in sharing these tips with you, which I learned from ages 46 to 67 training for and going to the XTERRA Worlds every year from 1999 to 2019.

6. When stopping on the bike course don't walk your bike up the middle of the trail. We all get tired, but remember other people are biking behind you. When you stop biking stay on the side of the trail (on the hardest side to bike up please) and out of the way of other riders.

You will be loved for this.

7. Learn how to swim in and out of shore break. The “shore break” is where the waves slam into the beach and where you can get picked up and tossed around like a ragdoll in a washing machine. When there’s shore break, wait for a lull in between waves before you start swimming out. As more waves break, and come toward you, dive under them (usually a couple of feet is fine). As you feel the wave go over you come up quickly. Keep swimming under the broken waves or ones that are about to break until you get outside them. When you come in look behind you and if you see a wave is going to break on you, swim down under the water. If a wave broke already and there’s white wash coming behind you, stick your arms out in front and body surf the wave onto the beach. DO NOT stop swimming when you can stand up. Do not try to walk through strong shore break to the beach.

8. NEVER switch from freestyle kicking to breaststroke frog kicks, especially around buoys. Remember there are other swimmers around you that you can’t see. When you change your kicking position from freestyle to a breaststroke you can hurt people. If you need a break from freestyle kicking, just stop kicking, your legs will float and your arms will propel you forward (an amazing man without any legs beat me at Kona Ironman’s swim one year!).

9. If there’s surf, wear two swimming caps. When there’re waves bring an extra cap to the start and put one cap on with your goggles over it. Put a second cap over the goggle straps, which will help prevent losing your goggles.

10. Get a speed suit and if you get foggy goggles leave a tiny bit of water in them. Speed suits work—get one! Often it’s suggested to rub your goggle lenses with the Spit product (mahalo great athlete Mimi Stockton for lending me some on Mo’orea!). Some also find Naupaka leaves, a Native Hawaiian plant that grows along shorelines, helpful. Neither of these prevents my goggles from fogging. A few drops of salt water in my goggles though can clear out the fog with a simple headshake while swimming. Mahalo XTERRA competitor who taught me this! Only use a few drops of water, and practice this, along with ANYTHING NEW you do before a race.

11. If the Kapalua bike course is muddy like 2017 & 2018 bring a tool to scoop mud out of your frame. My brilliant friend Barbara Peterson taught me to bring along a tool like a small butter knife to get mud out of frames. Be CAREFUL and keep it in a safe place until needed.

Don't impale yourself with your tool if you crash! Another bonus tip: expect to crash and fall on the bike, and the run too.

12. Remember Worlds is an international race and some competitors don't speak English. Don't get all huhu (upset) when someone doesn't understand you. And sorry too, but some of us are dyslexic and don't automatically know left from right. By saying anything like "left," "track," or "I'm over here," most will know you're there, and should move over.

13. Malama da 'aina! Respect the land and the ocean. Don't litter gel packets or the tops that you rip off, etc. Take your trash with you. Also don't touch the honu (sea turtles) and never break live coral off reefs to take home with you. In Hawai'i you can collect shells and take some sand, and yes, even small volcanic rocks. It's not illegal, like it is in Sardinia, Italy, but be respectful. And that story you maybe heard about Madame Pele torturing you for taking volcanic rock off the islands was made up by a tour bus driver

https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/yp3kkg/hawaiis-cursed-lava-rocks-are-driving-national-park-staff-insane (https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/yp3kkg/hawaiis-cursed-lava-rocks-are-driving-national-park-staff-insane). But don't touch that little patch of black poky looking coral because it's probably vana (sea urchin) that stings badly. Beware too of Portuguese man o' war! They look like little blue bubbles on top of the ocean that often come in with onshore winds. Their tentacles under the water burn and sting horribly. Research shows <https://gizmodo.com/science-reveals-the-right-way-to-treat-a-man-o-war-jel-1794880485> (<https://gizmodo.com/science-reveals-the-right-way-to-treat-a-man-o-war-jel-1794880485>) no amount of pee will relieve the sting, but vinegar and warmth can help.

14. Have aloha and kokua (help & kindness) for others. Please be nice. When you think of others first instead of yourself you're actually happier. There is nothing worse than obsessing about what you want, what you're not getting, or that you're getting something you didn't want—all of which can make you feel awful. If you see someone with a flat, and you have an extra tube, give it to them. Share your gel if someone needs one! One race in Wailea when I was bonking and out of food, I asked a woman for a gel. It was toward the end of the bike course, and she had a lot of them in a nice little box on her handlebars. She grumpily snapped, "No, I might need it." She looked miserable. In my experience, sharing supplies while out on the course can actually make you feel better.

15. Run with short strides, wear trail shoes, and do your intervals! My wonderful friend and training partner Laurel Dudley, who rides and runs circles around me, taught me to run with short, not long, strides. Long strides can injure you <https://www.playmakers.com/good-form/good-form-running/> (<https://www.playmakers.com/good-form/good-form-running/>). When running off road use trail shoes with treads that work A LOT better than road running shoes. Do your running intervals, for biking too! Ray Brust, one of O'ahu's master bikers (fast runner too) taught me to do one minute hard and one-minute easy intervals biking on a steep hill for 20 minutes for a couple sets to train for Worlds. Don't let the lure of LSD (long slow distance) rob you of increased speed and health that comes with intervals.

16. You can recover from plantar fasciitis (PF) & lower back pain. I started getting PF around age 40. Once my whole tendon ruptured 6 weeks before Worlds. I stopped running, let it heal as much as possible, and did the race. It was fine! A couple years later I learned about zero drop and started using Altra brand running shoes and Vionic slippers (aka: flip flops outside Hawai'i), and have had no PF since. I also suffered from chronic lower back pain since I was 25 when I worked as a busgirl at The Beach House restaurant in Poipu on Kaua'i. My back has been pain free for almost a decade since my beloved Hale'iwa physical therapist Kevin Fowler turned me on to Dr. Eric Goodman's free 12 minute "Foundation Training" video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4BOTvaRaDjI> (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4BOTvaRaDjI>) "Do it everyday and no back pain ever," just like Eric says.

17. Weigh the pros and cons of surgical repairs. Such as, if you're older and can still run and bike without an ACL, reconsider repair! In October 2018, on the first lap of O'ahu's 24-hour mountain bike race, I crashed hurting my knee. I was able to finish the race and do Worlds a few weeks later (where I crashed more). Learning my exterior ACL was completely torn from the joint and consulting with doctors and PTs, I decided to forego surgical repair for now. My sister has no ACL from a snow skiing accident 50 years ago and she managed to do Cross Fit, continue skiing, etc. I'm 67 and if my ACL was repaired, I would lose a season of snowboarding, surfing, trail running, etc., which isn't worth it to me at this point.

18. If you fall 2 days before XTERRA Worlds, you can't lift your arm above your head, and a bruise develops on your bicep, don't do the race because you probably broke your shoulder. In 2014 I was pretty well trained (thank you incredible John Henderson). Two days before the race, I did the bike practice course then showered in my rented condo. I slipped in a puddle of water. To stop the fall, and prevent bashing my head into a toilet, I stuck my arm out to

the side grabbing the wall, which hurt badly afterwards. The next day the Worlds' dearly loved and retired race doctor John Mills, who's stitched up and taken care of many of us over the years, examined me. I was willing to do the race with one arm (like Amy Bennett Eck amazingly did once with her arm casted), but John talked me into going home. "You might have to have surgery if you hurt it more racing," he said. Flying home from Kapalua in a little airplane on race day I cried seeing the bikers on the trial. Thankfully I didn't do the race. My shoulder was cracked in two places. Today it's perfect, and that's another free tip: shoulders can take a long time to heal. Mine took about 3 years to feel 100% again.

19. Get some sleep! Relax! Try and get a good nights' sleep two days before the race. Accept that the night before the race you may feel anxious and can't sleep. It's fine. You can simply lay in bed and rest. You can do XTERRA without sleeping much the night before. Try this short free video on yoga for cyclists to relax: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YWzRE1BiAvw> (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YWzRE1BiAvw>)

If you normally have difficulty getting to sleep you might also consider melatonin <https://www.consumerreports.org/melatonin/study-questions-ingredient-levels-some-melatonin-supplements/>. Smaller doses of melatonin like 1 gram or less work best. Be careful buying melatonin because it's a common counterfeited product <https://www.consumerreports.org/melatonin/study-questions-ingredient-levels-some-melatonin-supplements/> (<https://www.consumerreports.org/melatonin/study-questions-ingredient-levels-some-melatonin-supplements/>) One more free tip: if you are interested in the science of how the mind and body work, and I'm not talking about The Secret, check out Jo Marchant's *Cure: A Journey into the Science of Mind Over Body*. Marchant has a PhD in microbiology and provides recent research on placebos and how we can psychologically condition ourselves for better health.

20. Have fun and be grateful that you can race because someday you can't. Worlds are fun partly because the training has gotten you fit and, like all races, it requires mindfulness and focus on what you are doing in the moment. Be grateful you have the material and the physical resources to do a race in Hawai'i. A guy I was running with a couple years ago at Worlds in my age group (love those numbered calves), ran into an aid station with me. He greeted the kind station attendees with: "Great! I need some water to take my heart

medication!” I love that guy’s attitude. Life is short. Enjoy it and as we say in Hawai‘i: I Mua <https://www.ksbe.edu/imua/history/> (<https://www.ksbe.edu/imua/history/>) (move forward) as long as you can.

Lorenn Walker is from Waialua, O‘ahu. She’s a 19x XTERRA Worlds finisher who’s podiumed 18x placing first 6x in her age group. She is author of Aging With Strength and her day job is working to improve the justice system (www.lorennwalker.com & (<http://www.lorennwalker.com>)www.hawaiiifriends.org (<http://www.hawaiiifriends.org>)). (<http://www.lorennwalker.com>)