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See Jane Run, Bike and Swim

By SARAH BOWEN SHEA

EVEN though her son and daughter were on year-round swim teams, Alison van Diggelen of San Jose, Calif., had reservations about letting them sign up for a children's triathlon. Would they have the stamina? Would the other children and parents be too competitive?

Then she attended the Silicon Valley Kids Triathlon, one of the largest events of its kind, in which 850 children — ages 3 through 15 — swim, bike and run. For 11- and 12-year-olds like the van Diggelen children, the race involved swimming 200 yards (four laps in the pool), biking 6 miles, then running 1.25 miles (five laps around the track).

Ms. van Diggelen concluded that the distances “seemed very reasonable” and that “the triathlon was about family support rather than winning or getting a medal.” Her children tried it in 2008, enjoyed it and wanted to sign up again — but could not. Before they could register, the 2009 race had sold out (despite the cap being raised to 1,000 children).

Triathlons for children have become tremendously popular, drawing participants as young as 3 years old (who probably did not come up with the idea themselves). USA Triathlon, the sport's governing body, said that in 2008 it had about 23,500 members who were under 18, up 36 percent from 2006. Adults, too, have been flocking to triathlons, and not without controversy: risks include [dehydration](#), injury, heat exhaustion and even, occasionally, death. Doctors warn that people of all ages need to approach triathlons gingerly, lest they attempt more than their bodies can handle.

“At less than age 7, parents should be cautious,” said Dr. Kevin D. Plancher, an orthopedic surgeon who teaches at the [Albert Einstein College of Medicine](#) in the Bronx. “There's not enough information for what these events can do to the growth plates in children's shoulder, arms, pelvis, knees, ankles and feet.” He said that parents should consult a pediatrician to assess if a child is ready.

Indeed, say “children's triathlon” to many parents, and they might think you're kidding, given the widely reported death of a competitor in the New York City Triathlon last year. Nevertheless, the sport has been gaining in glamour, particularly since 2004, when an American, Susan Williams, won the bronze medal in the Olympics. More recently, triathletes have appeared regularly on Wheaties boxes, perhaps introducing the sport to youngsters.

Distances vary from race to race, but children's triathlons are still a step up from, say, a half-mile fun run. At the Silicon Valley Kids Triathlon, for example, children 6 and under are asked to swim 25 yards, then bike one mile, then run a quarter of a mile.

“When people are looking to start their children in triathlon, it's important to stick to age-appropriate distances,” said Sharon Osgood, an owner of Monterey Bay Multisport, a triathlon coaching business in California.

Some races let children as young as 3 participate, using swim floats, training wheels or even tricycles. “If you want to start a child when they are really young, understand they aren’t doing a whole lot,” said Ms. Osgood, who said that she considered age 8 or 10 a reasonable age to start.

Robert Jones, race director of the Silicon Valley event, got an e-mail message two years ago from the mother of an 18-month-old, asking if her child could take part in the triathlon. He refused. The first 3-year-old participant in the Silicon Valley race’s 6-and-under division was the daughter of professional triathletes, he said.

This year, in response to the rise in popularity of children’s races, the big daddy of triathlons — the World Triathlon Corporation, parent of the Ironman series of endurance triathlons — reintroduced the IronKids series, which has eight races for children ages 6 to 15.

“I think kids’ triathlons could spread like wildfire — we’re on the brink of something big and extraordinary,” said Michelle Payette, the director of IronKids. “This is the new generation. We need to start them young and get them involved in the sport.”

But doctors warn that involvement in any sport too young can lead to psychological burnout. “If you start at age 4, you can easily run out of gas,” said Dr. Dan Gould, director of the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports at [Michigan State University](#).

Steve Kelley of USA Triathlon agreed. “We don’t want to push kids into it too early,” he said. “As coaches and as a federation, we need to put the brakes on it a little bit.”

While children’s triathlons share some features of the adult versions — children get their race numbers, called body markings, written on their arms and legs with black markers — there are many differences. The transition areas used between disciplines are closed to parents, but volunteers help youngsters tie shoes and hop on bikes. (Another distinction: It’s not uncommon for the children to strip naked between the swim and the bike segments.)

A triathlon “combines three things kids like to do: swim, ride their bikes and run around,” Mr. Kelley said.

Volunteers also help in races with open-water swims to keep the children safe. Instead of the swimmers starting en masse, the children start in waves, based on age. “Safety is foremost in everyone’s mind,” said Mike Kanute, a lawyer in Chicago whose three sons, ages 12, 15 and 16, compete in triathlons. He is also an organizer of Multisport Madness Kids’ Triathlon in Geneva, Ill.

The swim stage is the most dangerous phase of any triathlon, according to a recent study by the Minneapolis Heart Institute Foundation. Of the 14 deaths in USA Triathlon-sanctioned events from January 2006 to September 2008, 13 occurred while swimming, the study found. While all the deaths were in adult competitions, the same risks — of being knocked unconscious, or having a [seizure](#) — are present at any age.

For children in particular, there is also an issue of psychological readiness. Race organizers seem aware of the pitfalls and emphasize participation over competition. Some children’s triathlons are untimed. Everyone at the Silicon Valley Kids Triathlon gets a participation medal, “even the kids who freeze up on the pool deck and don’t get in,” said Mr. Jones, the organizer.

He added that while his race “is not a killer triathlon like us adults do, that doesn’t stop some kids from being competitive.” In 2008, the Silicon Valley triathlon included, for the first time, a 20-person elite wave for young teenagers. “They like to compete with each other,” he said.

Going faster is one thing, going longer is another. Karen Mann, a race director of the Conway Kids’ Triathlon in Arkansas, said that she has “gotten some pressure from a few diehard parents to increase the distance,” which tops out at a 100-yard swim, 4-mile bike ride, and 1-mile run for kids 11 to 15. “But we’re committed to keeping it shorter.”

Because triathlon involves three sports, sports medicine doctors don’t see as many overuse injuries from the races as they do from Little League or tennis teams. But there’s always the risk of overtraining. “The actual event might not be the harmful thing, but improper training could be,” said Dr. Joel Brenner, director of the sports medicine program at Children’s Hospital of the King’s Daughters in Norfolk, Va. “It’s all about moderation.”

Dr. Gould — whose son, now 23, did a triathlon when he was 10 or 11 — agreed. “The danger comes in when a child trains in all three sports every day. It’s up to adults to put realistic limits on the child.”

Sarah Giles of Sherwood, Ore., has three children, ages 5, 8, and 10, who took part in a local triathlon last summer and did no training. “They are active kids who do sports — we didn’t feel a need to have them train for it,” she said.

But before this year’s race, last Saturday, she had her children take swimming lessons. “I wanted to see them do the swim under their own power this year,” Mrs. Giles said. “Last year I carried the two younger ones on my back in the deep end.”