

TriEMAC

A Case Study For Building a Club Triathlon Program Leveraging Single Sport Athletes in Affiliated Sports

The following case study presents the evolution of TriEMAC, a triathlon club based in Emmaus, Pennsylvania. This case study draws inspiration from the insights and experiences shared by Mandy Lovett, who is the Director and Head Coach. Throughout six seasons, TriEMAC has grown from a youth club of twelve into a club of sixty, which now includes both youth and high school divisions. By growing out of a USA Swimming club, incorporating the expertise of a USAT certified coach and growing from a base of passionate coaches and volunteers, the team has cultivated a community that represents a positive culture and racing that is fun for all the kids who are part of the program.

1. Background/Context

In early 2018, Doug Cornish, CEO of Emmaus Aquatic Club (EMAC) approached a part-time assistant coach with a triathlon coaching background (Pat O'Connor), and a parent with an extensive triathlon background (>150 triathlon races spanning two decades – Mandy Lovett), and asked about the possibility of creating a triathlon division within the club. His vision was to give swimmers who did not want to compete for EMAC in the long course season an alternative within the club. Traditionally, those swimmers had left EMAC for the spring and summer to compete with their summer league swim teams. By creating a triathlon team, the CEO posited he could keep younger and/or less serious swimmers engaged in the team -- which ultimately over time would be proven correct.

In its first year the team had 12 members. Currently in its sixth season, the team has grown to 58 athletes. Of note, while the majority of our triathletes have come from the swimming program, the team has also attracted athletes from other individual sports (primarily middle/high school runners).

After the first season coaches Pat O'Connor and Mandy Lovett acquired USA Triathlon Level I coaching certification. As the team grew, Mandy Lovett attained Level II Certification with Youth and Junior Focus, and became Head Coach and Director. Pat O'Connor left to pursue other career opportunities.

2. Roles/Responsibilities

a. Mandy Lovett – Director and Head Coach

- As Director, Mandy provides all big picture planning – team triathlon race schedules, special events, social events, etc., and orchestrates their logistics.
- Coordinates race day travel, equipment set up, team tent, and team meals.
- Manages apparel, kits, and other team-related items.
- Organizes team banquet.
- Mandy is responsible for all team communications through parent emails, Team Snap, team calendar, and social media (primarily Instagram).
- Mandy utilizes our USA Swimming team's existing structure for specific aspects of the triathlon team administration. The administrative assistant (Lynn Williams), and registration platform (Team Unify) are utilized for various administrative tasks (insurance, team registration, waivers, billing). The triathlon team's swim workouts are held at our indoor short course and outdoor long course pools.
- Parents are responsible for each athlete's USAT registration and race registrations.
- As Head Coach, Mandy designs and implements the seasonal training plan and supervises day to day training sessions. Sessions are held five days per week from April

through August. Mandy is also responsible for the hiring of a staff of assistant coaches, who help implement workouts.

- Assistant Coaches include: Pat Marzi, a cycling specialist, Maddie Consuelos, a recent grad from University of Michigan's club triathlon team, Mary Kay Krause (triathlon and swimming) (April through June), Rett Fisher (running specialist) (June through August).
- Volunteer Assistant Coaches: Jeff McCary (cycling specialist), Brian Lovett (triathlon and swimming)

b. Parent Involvement

Parents and alumni contribute their assistance in various capacities. Specific roles vary each year based on availability and talents of the parents. The coaching/administrative staff handles most tasks but delegates responsibilities to parents and alumni whenever they are available and willing. Examples of parent volunteers and sponsors include:

- Coordinating special event apparel
- (Amateur) bike mechanics
- Manpower and equipment for setting up team races
- Chaperones for road rides and cycling workouts
- Donating team dinners or ice cream socials for team bonding events
- Sponsoring and providing a moving van for our team race
- Volunteering at team race
- Photography/videography
- Examples of Alumni involvement include:
- Former members return as assistant coaches once they graduate (limited)

3. Facility Availability/Usage

The Emmaus Aquatic Club (EMAC) is a long-standing USA Swimming club, established in 1983. It is a non-profit organization with board oversight, and a CEO. EMAC owns its own training facility, known as "the HIVE", which is a 25-meter (formerly outdoor) pool now covered with a permanent ClearSpan building structure. This allows year-round indoor swim training at a basic but completely club-owned facility. EMAC also trains some groups at the local (Emmaus) High School during winter months. This combination of the HIVE and Emmaus High School pools allows more water time availability for different training groups. In the summer, EMAC also trains at an outdoor, long course (6 lanes of 50 meter; 6 lanes of 65 meter) facility located at Emmaus Community Park. This facility allows the triathlon team to have access to water and an adjacent park in which to train.

Due to its non-profit status through EMAC, TriEMAC is also able to obtain permits at County parks to be able to train on closed park roads. All Wednesday riding sessions are held at the Bob Rodale Cycling Park, which is a closed 1-mile loop course dedicated specifically for cycling and running (adjacent to the Lehigh County Velodrome, which hosts world-level track cycling events). TriEMAC also uses EMAC's insurance policy, which allows additional insureds to be added for training in privately owned open water (in addition to athletes' insurance through USAT).

4. Growth and Development of the Team Model

The team started with 12 athletes. In its second year, membership more than doubled to 30 athletes. By the third year, we had 40 athletes. Years four and five saw approximately 50 athletes. Year six began with 60 rostered athletes.

Several factors contributed to TriEMAC's rapid growth. First, the team started at a time when the USA Swimming club was losing members in spring and summer months to our local

“summer league” swim teams. (Many athletes swim for both EMAC and summer league teams, but some forgo EMAC practices through the summer in favor of the more relaxed summer league environment). In order to retain members within the club during summer months, EMAC was happy to promote the triathlon group as an alternative to the (perceived) more serious long course swimming option. Second, COVID prevented our USA Swimming team from practicing in person during the spring and summer of 2020. TriEMAC was able to hold virtual trainer rides, outdoor runs, and brick workouts during this time. Cross-training opportunities were seemingly more attractive during this time. Third, although met with resistance initially by some members of the club, triathletes returned to fall and winter swimming very fit, and continued to swim very well during the primary winter swim season. Parents took note, and much of the initial resistance subsided. TriEMAC is very visible at local triathlon races (particularly due to throngs of kids in matching team race kits, at some races). We also now host a local youth race (this year, two races).

The triathlon team coaching staff focuses on three priorities, of which the athletes are acutely aware:

a) *Safety*. Coaches emphasize the importance of keeping our team safe. Strict bike helmet, safety, and handling rules are stressed.

b) *Team/family ethos*. Coaches emphasize the importance of supporting one another and treating each other with respect. We aim for a family (rather than just team) dynamic. Coaches rotate athletes as leaders in different capacities at various practices. Coaches enforce spoken rules against negative group behaviors (e.g. eye rolling or grimacing when placed onto a team with others).

c) *Fun*. Our young athletes have much pressure on them in multiple arenas (school, home, outside individual sport teams e.g. cross country running, track, or other sports). Coaches want the kids to come to practice because they desire to be there. The team does train hard – but we feel the positive social environment fosters athlete engagement that keeps them coming to practices regularly. Coaches consistently aim for encouragement and constructive criticism (while avoiding unnecessary negativity directed towards these young athletes). We regularly disguise “sneaky” hard training in what otherwise may seem like “fun” training days – e.g. bike/run brick relays, gladiator bike handling drills, and even timed/scored scavenger hunts involving lots of running. This formula has worked well. We aim to make everyone feel welcome and to provide a space in which kids want to work and grow. Of note, the triathlon team does *not* have a mandatory attendance policy – but sessions are nevertheless very well attended. We feel this is due to our fostering of a safe/fun training environment for all athletes.

Until and including this season, our entire team trains at the same time. We divide the group into sub-groups based on needs, speed, and abilities, but the athletes report that they love being in the big group dynamic and training altogether. (We suspect this may be a result of the COVID years, when they were forced to train in small groups and/or online). This dynamic is one that may need to change as the team grows both in age and size.

5. Race selection/attendance

TriEMAC athletes’ abilities span a wide range. The team includes nine and ten year-olds riding “hybrid/cruiser” bikes as well as serious high school athletes on carbon fiber bikes racing to try to win their age group (including a couple age-group winners at (non-drafting) USAT Youth/ Junior Nationals). Some of our athletes are most interested in the camaraderie of the team and general fitness; they might only race once per year. Other athletes on the team race numerous

times throughout the season and attend age group nationals. Balancing this wide span of ability/interest has been challenging, and guides our priorities when choosing races. The following is a list of factors we consider when choosing races:

- races that have short distances or varying distance options for different ages
- one race per season that has a pool-swim; but generally a preference for open water
- races that enable our entire team to race, including parents and coaches
- races that do not require overly burdensome travel for the parents
- races that do not conflict with our single-sport athlete's seasons, particularly our parent club's long course swimming season (an issue that has become increasingly challenging)

As such, the team's race season is carefully curated. One issue that repeatedly arises, however, is a dearth of youth races. TriEMAC coaches created a youth race at the HIVE during Covid (2020) to allow the team to race. The team race was held a second year (2021), and TriEMAC invited other youth teams to race with it. The race was lightly attended but successful. That team race discontinued after the second year. But the same year (2021), TriEMAC coaches added a race at a different venue (with open water) hosted by the team but open to the public. That race has continued for three years, but low youth participation from outside of the club means the races loses money in production, so many not be sustainable. This season, TriEMAC has added yet another race at the same venue, which is a super sprint for both youth and adults. By including adults, the team is hopeful it will increase youth participation. So far, registration numbers are low.

The team carefully waited to attend its first draft-legal event until year six. The coaching staff wanted to make sure the athletes were ready, able, and willing to take the necessary steps towards this intense style of racing. Upon reflection, the team could have headed in this direction sooner; however, establishing a strong base was important to the team leaders. From a wide base, the point of the triangle can grow higher.

6. Obstacles

The benefit gained from being a triathlon team based in a long-established USA Swimming club may also be one of its biggest obstacles. EMAC promotes the triathlon team as an alternative to spring and summer swimming. There is built-in recruitment. EMAC is a club of 200 competitive swimmers (and a few hundred more younger kids in swimming lesson/development programs) that understand triathlon is a sport available to them.

Ironically however, the greatest resistance the triathlon team currently faces is from our single-sport swim coaches within the EMAC club. This resistance manifests itself primarily when athletes reach the high school level, at which point senior group coaches begin to require more serious commitments from their older swimmers. At the elementary and middle school level, coaches seem to agree that cross training and diversification is beneficial for an athlete — particularly when some of these younger swimmers may only be swimming three days/week anyway. Regardless of the club's outwardly stated support for our triathlon division, once athletes reach the high school level, our swim-only coaches want single sport commitment. This places some of our athletes — who are simultaneously serious triathletes *and* serious swimmers — in an awkward position. Our swim-only coaches tend to see only “lost swim time” with little regard for gained cross-training time or averted “burn out”. [Of note, we employ a “hybrid” triathlon training option for our most serious swimmers in which almost all their swim training is done with their single-sport swimming peers. They then join the triathlon group for bike/run sessions. They do miss a couple of swim-only sessions per week — thus invoking the ire of their swim coaches].

TriEMAC's model is athlete-driven. The team promulgates individual *athlete* decision-making regarding their own development/training. By not having a mandatory attendance requirement, an athlete is allowed to balance triathlon with their other activities as they see fit. We feel this is the healthiest model for young athlete development. The Director also consistently works to schedule practices and races around the demands of the other sports. If the predominant sport competing with the team is swimming or cross country, the team tries to accommodate those athletes so that they may participate in their other sports first. TriEMAC does have a core group of athletes that consider themselves to be triathletes first, but the most successful athletes on the team must also answer to one or more other "masters" in other/single sports. We do note the value of participating in these other school-based team sports.

The feedback we receive from our triathletes and their parents is overwhelmingly positive. We suspect this is primarily related to the aforementioned factors: fostering individual decision-making, maintaining a safe/welcoming environment, keeping feedback positive, and keeping training hard but fun. In cases where athletes do decide to exit the team, most commonly this is related to increasing demands from their single-sport teams. Parents and kids are almost always grateful for the opportunities provided in the TriEMAC environment.

We aim to provide our young triathletes opportunities for personal growth rather than subject them to burdensome training demands. We want to foster fitness and fun rather than add stress to their already busy lives. We observe that athletes overly subjected to coaches' expectations — rather than their own individual goals — tend to lose interest all together. TriEMAC's policy is always, always to celebrate the athlete. At our end of the season banquet, every single athlete is recognized for their individual contributions to the team.

6. Conclusion

The TriEMAC youth triathlon team has successfully and fairly rapidly grown from its origin out of a long-standing single sport swimming club. Development has been organic based on the evolving needs of its athletes and the changing role/prominence of the triathlon group in the larger context of the whole swim club. The triathlon team (and the swim club as well) has necessarily had to adapt to meet overlapping (and at times seemingly competing) goals of each program. Overall, parent and athlete retention is high — we feel related to an emphasis on individual athlete needs, positivity, and a structured yet supportive team/family environment. Anticipated continued growth of the team will likely hinge on proactive scheduling, supportive coaching, team flexibility, and an openness to occasional concession-making according to the needs of the swim club at large. Our passionate coaches care about providing great experiences for the athletes; hopefully this emphasis will afford future positive expansion of the team.