

# 5 • PHYSICAL EDUCATION CURRICULA

## 5.1 TRIATHLON EVENTS AS POSSIBLE ACTIVITIES FOR YOUR PHYSICAL EDUCATION PROGRAM

One possible way to measure the success of school physical education and sport programs is to look at high school graduates several years later to see if they are staying physically active and keeping fit. Research shows that many Americans do not stay physically active years after graduating from high school and/or college. In a recent report, it was pointed out that, "Approximately 300,000 adult deaths in the United States each year are attributable to unhealthy dietary habits and physical inactivity or sedentary behavior ... Nearly two-thirds of U.S. adults are overweight" (Overweight Teen, 2007). Potential health problems that are caused from being inactive and overweight include coronary heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, liver disease and diabetes (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2007). Sedentary lifestyles have become the norm rather than the exception. It appears that America has turned into a nation of spectators rather than participants.

### *Team Sport Orientation*

Several years ago the main focus of physical education classes in schools was to teach team sport skills by providing sport skill instruction through the use of lead-up games (Darst & Pangrazi, 2006). This approach to physical education developed excellent team sport athletes and recreational team sport players. However, very few students continued to play team sports into adulthood with many becoming physically inactive adults.

### *Well-Rounded Curriculum*

School physical education classes have moved away from being dominated by team sport skill instruction. They are now more well-rounded and offer a diversified approach to developing human movement skills (Pangrazi, 2007). For

example, movement education, fundamental motor skill development, manipulative skill development, rhythmic movement activities, gymnastic skills, cooperative skills, individual lifetime sports, and game skills are important components of today's physical education classes, particularly at the elementary grade level.

### ***Fitness and Individual Lifetime Sports***

Over the past two decades, many school physical education programs have moved toward offering fitness and individual lifetime sport activities with the hopes of maintaining an interest in keeping students physically active after graduation. Aerobic dance classes, spinning classes, exercising on fitness equipment, and instruction in lifetime activities such as golf and tennis can be found in many middle school and high school physical education programs. During the past five years, a number of high school physical education programs have started to offer lifestyle sports and adventure activities. It is not uncommon to find climbing walls, ropes courses, orienteering activities, and adventure racing being offered within physical education classes.

### ***Lifestyle Sports and Adventure Activities***

Recent articles in the *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance* (Moorman, Schlatter, and Hurd, 2007; DeJager, 2006) describe situations where adventure activities are finding their way into communities across the United States. In a number of instances, these activities are being offered in school physical education programs. For communities that offer adventure activities, it appears that students now have a choice. They can learn about physical activities that offer participation and fitness possibilities for a lifetime. The importance of selecting a healthy lifestyle through proper nutrition and physical activity choices is being taught within these physical education classes. Traditional team sport skills are still part of the physical education program offerings but they are being offered along with a number of lifestyle sport and adventure activities.

### ***The Sport of Triathlon***

The sport of triathlon is a lifestyle and lifetime activity that has tremendous potential for physical education programs. Research (Case, 2001, 2004) has shown that triathletes generally start participating in triathlons after they leave high school or college. They select triathlons as a lifestyle choice because they prefer to stay active, healthy and fit. Triathlons provide various levels of competition while individuals participate in running, cycling and swimming events. Duathlons, 5K races, 10K races, half-marathons, and marathons also provide opportunities to stay active and fit while competing against oneself, nature and others.

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Most triathlons attract participants with varied skill levels ranging from novice to intermediate to expert or advanced. Triathletes enter races for various reasons. Some triathletes enter competitions for the exercise, challenge, competition, and/or fun (Case & Branch, 2001). A number of triathletes would admit that one of the major benefits of participating in a triathlon relates to the training process that must precede the actual event. This is where several hours are devoted each week to training that involves running, cycling and swimming activities.

Although a direct connection between triathlons and physical education seems distant or remote, triathlons can serve as an excellent vehicle to teach lifetime fitness concepts and practices. The remainder of this article will describe how two triathlon events were used to teach youth about the importance of lifetime fitness.

Two National Youth Sport Programs (NYSP) were used as pilot programs to introduce triathlon activities to economically disadvantaged youth ages 10 to 16 years. Certified physical education instructors were hired by the Old Dominion University NYSP programs in Norfolk and Virginia Beach . A class schedule was developed that was similar to the rotations used in a typical middle school. The main difference was that classes and lesson units were specifically developed to teach and emphasize the skills needed for a triathlon event. For example, bicycle safety and riding techniques were taught in a cycling unit. Another class taught personal fitness techniques that were connected to running and cycling. Stationary bicycles were used in a fitness room to improve cardiovascular fitness levels. Other components of fitness (e.g., flexibility, agility, muscular power, strength, endurance and motor skill development) were included as part of the fitness class.

Swimming instruction was provided to the participants. Lessons were geared toward a modified triathlon event. Swimming safety, stroke techniques, starts and turns, and endurance were emphasized. Each participant was eventually tested to make sure that he or she reached certain pool safety and swimming proficiency levels before competing in a modified triathlon event.

Proper running techniques and styles were included in another class. Instruction focused on how to run on different terrains and surfaces at different speeds and distances. Understanding running safety and the importance of adequate hydration while competing were additional topics covered in the class. Inviting local triathletes to be guest speakers and showing actual video footage of triathlon races proved to be educational and exciting for the students.

Nutrition as well as drug and alcohol classes were already being offered in the NYSP curriculum. The triathlon event provided opportunities to discuss

proper nutrition for competitive events. It also opened the door for discussions on inappropriate drug usage in sport. Anabolic steroids, blood doping, and the illegal use of supplements were discussed. Again, this presented a great chance to invite local triathletes to class in order to talk about proper nutrition and the importance of saying no to drugs.

### ***Triathlon Event***

Finally, all the instruction and training involving triathlons led to the actual hosting of a triathlon event. This was a time when participants and their families gathered to enjoy the sport of triathlon. A festival type atmosphere was created with music, food and beverage available to the spectators. The triathlon event was organized as a team event with three race segments provided in order to accommodate all the participants. A dry run or rehearsal of the event was practiced a few days before the actual event. The course layouts for the running and cycling segments were strategically planned and clearly marked. The distances used were not regular triathlon distances; they were modified and shortened. An indoor swimming pool was used for the swimming segment of the event. Students enrolled in the Norfolk NYSP program competed against students from the Virginia Beach NYSP program. Individual and team awards were presented at the end of the event.

Bicycles, stationary bicycles and helmets used in this event were provided by the Xterra Foundation and swimsuits were donated by Speedo. The cost of equipment should not be a deterrent to conducting triathlon events. A number of organizations are willing to provide financial support or equipment donations for such events. Sometimes local Police Athletic Leagues (PAL) will donate bicycles that have been previously discarded.

The Old Dominion University NY SP triathlon event was offered in a summer sport program for economically disadvantaged youth. There is no reason that such activities can't be offered within the context of school physical education classes. It will require a significant amount of risk management planning, patience and creativity--but it can be done. If a school does not have access to a swimming pool, then a duathlon can be conducted where the running and cycling components of the event are offered and the swimming segment deleted.

### ***Conclusion***

The real winners of this triathlon event were the students who participated. They were involved in a lifestyle sport activity that can be pursued for a lifetime. More importantly, the participants had fun and enjoyed the activities. They realized that fitness is not just something to talk about but something that can be lived everyday. They also learned a little something about

themselves. They learned that teamwork and hard-work are important and that self-confidence goes hand-in-hand with teamwork if one hopes to succeed. As one 10-year-old female participant told a reporter, "I didn't realize how tough it really was ... I had to reach down deep in my heart. And now I know just how strong I really am" (Painter, 2005, p. 134).