

Triathletes are not known for deferring their goals to a later time, but people interested in giving a triathlon a go might be hesitant, unsure, possibly intimidated by the physical requirements.

There's good news for those who are interested in giving a triathlon a shot. Fleet Feet of Roanoke, Cardinal Bicycle and the Gator Aquatic Center have teamed up to provide a new training opportunity called "Are You Ready to Try a Tri?"

The eight-week program culminates with the Smith Mountain Lake Sprint Triathlon on May 6.

Matt Thompson, the new owner of Fleet Feet, welcomes everyone to join the group training.

"The training program is for people who have been interested in triathlons, but might have had reservations about doing one. We created this to remove the mystique and give people a safe place to learn and ask questions," Thompson says. "We take people throughout the program, so you can join anytime. It's for people new to triathlons or for people who may have entered a few and want to get some advice. Others are just looking for a group to train with. Triathlon can be a lonely sport."

"Swim, bike, run" are the foundations for triathlons, so the grouping of Fleet Feet, Cardinal Bicycle and the Gator Aquatic Center is a natural partnership. Designing it to coincide with the Virginia Amateur Sports' SML Triathlon is perfect.

Swim instruction meetings are Wednesdays at the Gator Aquatic Center and coached by Conner Kinkema, a professional triathlete who is an assistant coach at VMI.

"The SML Tri is a great early season race," Thompson says, noting that his first triathlon was in the SML event. "It's a sprint so the distances are manageable. shorter and it's a perfect starter. It's good for the beginners to dip their toes into the chilly springtime water."

As a sprint triathlon, the length of each leg is less intimidating to beginners. The swim is 750 meters, the bike race is 20 kilometers, and the run is 5k, distances that require training, but significantly stepped down from the traditional Ironman triathlon distances of 3.9k swimming, 142.2k biking and 40.2 (marathon distance) running.

By May 6, the water won't be exactly icy, but it's hardly warm. Still, Thompson says that after training in the lake since late winter, it will feel warm by comparison. Participants in "Are You Ready to Try a Tri" will be privy to discounts at all three participating businesses.

The people behind the business marquis are what makes the program happen. Thompson says he's worked with Whitt Ellerman at Cardinal Bicycle for years as they discussed a training program. Cardinal's Karen Talley Mead has been instrumental in coordinating schedules and outlining a good program for beginners.

Morgan Richter, the head coach at Gator Aquatic Center, brings the swimming aspect of training to the forefront.

Thompson says he started running as a fitness hobby but now considers himself a triathlete.

“Or maybe it’s ‘try-athlete,’” he says as a joke. “The old line is ‘Why suck at one sport when I can suck at three?’”

Thompson, who doesn’t suck at triathlon, was a happy customer of Fleet Feet since it opened almost 20 years ago, eventually working as general manager and admiring the work and community involvement in owners Robin and Blaine Lewis. When they decided to retire in 2022, Thompson bought the business.

“I’ve been a customer almost since they opened, and I always appreciated Robin and Blaine.” Thompson says. “The business and how it’s grown, from the spot that used to be in Townside Plaza to where it is now in the building (on Franklin Road in front of Lowe’s). They’re pillars in the community. I want to keep that and maintain that.” Those interested in being a part of the “Ready to Try a Tri” group can learn more at cardinalbicycle.com.