

TRI-SUITS

If you're going to perform at your best, you'll need a tri-suit that works with you, not against you. **Andy Blow** tests 10 to their limits to help you find your second skin

Not all that long ago, the default race clothing for triathlon was a small pair of swim trunks (for men) and an even smaller running vest – usually fluorescent in colour. For the ladies it was either a one- or two-piece swimming costume, again in garish shades.

Anyone who has tried racing in such a get-up will attest to the fact that cycling in trunks or a high-cut costume is a recipe for extreme chafing. Even worse, it could do irreparable damage to your social status, should anyone you know witness the crime.

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Thankfully, as triathlon has grown from a marginal event to a mainstream activity, clothing designers have seen fit to rectify the apparel errors made by the sport's pioneers. The result? Specific tri-suits that are entirely suitable for swimming, cycling and running in.

These suits maximise performance in each discipline, minimising the amount of unnecessary flesh on show and being comfortable to boot. They're becoming ever more technical and specialised, to fill niches within the sport, so we're focusing on 10 of 2011's best to suit different events and price points. →

JARGON BUSTER

CHAMOIS Padding in the seat of a tri-suit to make sitting on the bike saddle more comfortable.

GRIPPERS Tacky elastic tapes sewn into the legs of a tri-suit. Designed to stop the shorts riding up when on the bike or running.

POCKETS

To hold gels and energy bars. They need to be the right size to stop items bouncing out.

SEAMS

These need to be smooth to ensure there's no chafing under the arms or in other high-friction areas.

HOW WE TESTED

The suits were tested back to back in a pool for their non-wetsuit swimming potential with intervals at race pace, and shortly afterwards on a turbo trainer (again back to back) for comfort on the bike. The suits were still wet at this stage to simulate the conditions you'd experience on race day. Run testing took place outside with two to three standard energy gels in the pockets of the suit (if applicable), to see how well they coped with the bouncing around that occurs on the run. The suits were also shown to a number of athletes for their views on the look and feel of the materials, and the overall design, to give a more balanced opinion on aesthetics.

ZIP Generally, the longer the zip the better, as it gives the option for more ventilation.

PAD Should be thick enough to provide some comfort on the bike but not be uncomfortable running. Some suits use a fleece material, while others have a more sophisticated mini-chamois.



2XU COMPRESSION

£130.00

www.2xushop.co.uk



This is one of seven suits released by 2XU for 2011. It's a 'go everywhere, do anything' suit that slots between 2XU's Elite suit (for ITU-style short-course races) and their long-distance Endurance suit, and incorporates ICE-X technology in the fabric to reflect infrared rays and keep the wearer cool. There's a substantial pocket for gels and other items. The 70D fabric is soft to touch and smooth against the skin, so chafing should be non-existent or minimal. The chamois pad is very comfortable on the bike and non-intrusive on the run, and there are leg grippers to stop the shorts from riding up. The only grumbles would be that the rear pocket is loose, allowing gels to bounce around on the run, and that the front zip could be longer for better cooling on hot days. Otherwise a great suit, if a little pricey next to Orca's 226 (overleaf).

VERDICT

Comfy, but would benefit from tighter pockets and a longer zip

220 Triathlon 80%

FUSION MULTISPORT

£115.00

www.fusionsportsuk.co.uk



Danish brand Fusion has been making steady progress in the UK for a few years now and has a high-quality line-up of swim, cycle and running apparel. The company's tri-suit for 2011 is very similar to its excellent 2010 offering and comes in a choice of vibrant colours, like the vivid red seen here. So you'll definitely stand out from the crowd, if only for the suit you're wearing! It's a comfortable, slim-fitting suit with a triple pocket on the back and a long front zip – perfect for increasing airflow on hot days. One nice feature seen only on this suit is the fleecy panel behind the pockets, to stop gel packets and bars rubbing your back on the run. The fleece pad in the seat does an okay job on the bike but could be improved with a proper chamois for long-distance events. Manufacturing quality is high, so the suit should last a long time.

VERDICT

Eye-catching and durable. Chamois could be added for long distances

220 Triathlon 86%

SUGOI TURBO

£77.99

www.sugoi.com



Sugoi's Turbo suit, like Fusion's, is little changed from its 2010 model. As before, the appearance and feel are excellent, and the colour scheme is unique and classy. However, the pockets on the rear could still do with being mounted a little lower on the back for ease of access. The absence of leg grippers means that the legs do tend to ride up some of the time, which can be annoying. The chamois however is excellent, especially for a suit at such an affordable price, and a generous front zip makes this a good suit to wear in the heat. It would be most suitable as a long-course suit. The Sugoi could well sell on first impressions alone – it feels great as you hold it in your hands. Again, the price also counts strongly in its favour, and in terms of styling it'll appeal to those wanting to stand out in something a little different from the rest.

VERDICT

Classy looks and quality feel, but lack of leg grippers is irritating

220 Triathlon 79%

BLUESEVENTY DISTANCE

£100.00

www.blueseventy.com



The Distance suit is aimed at the Ironman market, with features to make the 8-17hrs spent racing more bearable! The material is highly hydrophobic. Coupled with a low seam count and compressive fit, this makes it very fast (for a long-course suit) in a non-wetsuit swim. On the bike and run the athlete benefits from improved cooling from the ColdBlack fabric treatment, which reflects infrared light. The chamois is probably the best on test. The pocket on the rear has a flap to improve performance in the swim and stop items escaping, and leg grippers stop the shorts becoming hot pants on the bike. But the material is less breathable than a mesh or other lightweight fabric, and the zip could also be a little longer for venting purposes. Though aimed at the long-distance market, this suit's also great for short-course and non-wetsuit events.

VERDICT

Good all-rounder, but fabric is less breathable than most

220 Triathlon 85%

ZONE3 AQUAFLO

£75.00

www.racezone3.com



Sitting below the Aeroforce Nano and Elite, Aquaflo is this season's entry-level suit from UK tri specialist Zone3. It's well made with flat-locked seams throughout, a robust and well-protected zip, and an innovative foam chamois to reduce water absorption from the swim. Down the middle of the back is a silver 'Air Stream' mesh strip, which is said to increase airflow and cooling on the bike and run. It's hard to say whether it achieves this, but it certainly does no harm in trying. The two pockets on the back make it more suitable for wetsuit swims and long-distance events, but they would benefit from being a little tighter to stop gels slopping around when running. Overall, it's very substantial, and hence a bit heavier than many of the others on test. However, it also feels like it will last longer, so represents excellent value for money.

VERDICT

Great value, robust and well made, but pockets could be tighter

220 Triathlon **83%**

SAILFISH COMP

£99.99

www.sailfish.com



The Comp is Sailfish's entry-level long-distance suit for the 2011 racing season, and its vivid electric blue colouring should prove popular with those that like to make a statement. The fit is a little more generous than the other suits tested here, making it very comfortable on the bike and run, but if you're on the small side you'll need to be sure it's tight enough to be sufficiently hydrodynamic for non-wetsuit swims. The chamois is excellent and represents a significant step up from the same suit in 2010, which had a fleece pad. The pockets on the rear of the suit and on the lower legs mean it's possible to carry significant amounts of nutrition for a long run, although the ones on the back are a little high and getting items in and out takes a bit of practice. The absence of leg grippers on the shorts is a little bit annoying, though.

VERDICT

Roomy suit with leg pockets for long events, but no leg grippers

220 Triathlon **88%**

PEARL IZUMI SELECT

£79.99

www.madison.co.uk



Pearl Izumi has been producing quality sportswear for over 50 years. Originally a cycling brand, the company now makes kit for cross-country skiing, running and triathlon. This is its entry-level suit for 2011, featuring mesh panels under the arms for ventilation and silicone leg grippers for comfort on the bike. It's a fairly basic garment with no bells and whistles (not necessarily a bad thing) and simple monochromatic styling to match. The single pocket on the rear has a neat 'envelope' opening, to allow easy access but keep things contained on the run. The fleece seat pad is a little disappointing, especially from a company with such great cycling heritage, but this wouldn't be a problem for short-course racing. The sizing is quite generous and the front zipper is very long, which makes for good ventilation in hot conditions.

VERDICT

No stand-out features, but well made and competitively priced

220 Triathlon **79%**

ONE OR TWO PIECE?

We help you choose between an all-in-one and a shorts/vest combo

Selecting the most suitable race clothing for you depends on a few factors, notably:

- ▶ The race distance.
- ▶ Whether the swim is wetsuit or non-wetsuit.
- ▶ The weather conditions.
- ▶ Whether you need to carry anything during the event.

The race distance dictates whether you can get away with an aerodynamic one-piece that will be fast in the water and on the bike, but may not have the all-day comfort required for an Ironman. Typically a one-piece suit is favoured for shorter events, where saving seconds here and there is important, and needing a toilet stop is unlikely.

If the swim is non-wetsuit then a one-piece suit means you can complete the whole event without changing, saving time in transition. This can be quite a big advantage over wearing a two-piece, as pulling on a top when wet can be a struggle.

A suit without pockets will be best for swimming in, as pockets create drag in the water. If, on the other hand, the swim leg's in a wetsuit, you can wear whatever you like underneath – so for wetsuit events a two-piece for the bike and run is an option, if that's what you prefer.



ORCA 226

£99.99

www.orca.com



226 is the number of kilometres covered in an Ironman, so it's no surprise that Orca's suit has a number of features to catch the eye of long-distance athletes. It has a slightly thicker chamois for comfort on the bike, two pockets on the rear and one on the chest, and Tri-Enduro mesh in the upper body for ventilation and wicking. It fits snugly but also comfortably, as you'd hope from a suit that's to be worn for 8hrs-plus. The pockets have covers over the tops, to stop anything bouncing out on the run and improve the hydrodynamics if you swim in it. The mesh panels and long front zip make it a great choice for hot races. The Hydroseal leg hems stop the suit riding up when on the bike, but they do feel quite tight at first, and might be a little restrictive for anyone with quads of steel! All in all, an excellent product with a competitive price tag.

VERDICT

Great long-distance suit, packed with features and sensibly priced

220 Triathlon **92%**

ZOOT ENDURANCE

£96.00

www.zootsports.com



Zoot's Endurance suit is aimed at short course athletes, who need a suit that's quick in the swim as well as on the bike and run, and don't require any pockets for nutrition. The back zip should make the suit more slippery through the water, but the downside is that it's harder to ventilate on the run. The surprising thing about this suit is that, despite being for shorter, faster events, it's made from a relatively heavyweight material. Plus it lacks any hydrophobic coating or swim-specific fabric, which would help in a non-wetsuit swim. That said, once on it's a good-looking suit with excellent leg grippers and a nice snug fit. The lack of any zip on the front means there's no chafing at the neckline, and the fleece seat pad is adequate for the relatively short spell in the saddle required during a sprint or Olympic-distance event.

VERDICT

Well made and stylish, but could be slightly quicker in the swim

220 Triathlon **78%**

SPEEDO LZR RACER COMP

£75.00

www.speedo.co.uk



The LZR Racer Comp sits at the bottom end of Speedo's 2011 TriathELITE range, though it doesn't feel like a budget item. It's classy looking and fits closely, without being super-tight. The shorts have gel grippers and a decent foam chamois that's one up from a simple fleece liner, but a little way behind the pads in some of the more expensive suits. Two small pockets on the back hold a couple of gels each and red 'utility loops' (small elastic tabs around the waist) are there to hold more gels. They're a good concept but in reality it's difficult to add to them on the move. A mid-length zip gives adequate ventilation, but the top of the zip would benefit from a cover, as it can chafe your neck with extended wear. This suit would generally be better for wetsuit swims as, if worn alone, the pockets and utility tabs will increase drag in the water.

VERDICT

Comfortable entry-level suit, but the utility loops aren't that helpful

220 Triathlon **82%**

OVERALL VERDICT

As suit technology improves, it's a case of finding the suit for you

As tri-suits become more event specific, the best in this test will depend on what your intended usage is. The **Orca 226** would probably be our choice for long-distance/Ironman, particularly in the heat, as the mesh upper body is very cooling and the pockets are fantastically accessible and secure. Coupled with a decent pad for cycling and sensible pricing at just under that all-important ton, it's hard to see why you'd look elsewhere.

If you're racing in an unsupported event and need to carry lots of nutrition with you, the leg pockets on the **Sailfish Comp** will be invaluable. If you're swayed by appearance, the vivid red of the **Fusion Multisport** certainly stands out, and it won't let you down on quality either.

For short-course events, the **Blueseventy Distance** would be a good choice, with its hydrophobic fabric making for speedy non-wetsuit swims. The **Zoot Endurance** would also be in the mix, though there are perhaps better lightweight short-course suits out there if you want something super-fast.

As for entry-level suits, both the **Speedo LZR Racer Comp** and the **Zone3 Aquaflo** are fantastically well made for £75 and would be hard to beat at that price, though the classy colour scheme of the **Sugoi Turbo** will no doubt tempt a few athletes on its smart looks alone.