

Go, Team!

Participating in an athletic event as a family - from a fun-run 5K to a full-on Olympic triathlon - can improve your fitness, and your bond with each other.

By Kara Douglass Thom

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Having a partner who provides motivation and accountability makes achieving your fitness goals all the more likely. But what about partnering up with those living under your own roof?

That's what David Henderson (not his real last name), 45, and his son Scott, 15, did in 2006. Together they trained for and finished RAGBRAI (Register's Annual Great Bike Ride Across Iowa), a seven-day cycling event. (For more on this Iowa tradition, see "**RAGBRAI!**" in the July/August 2008 archives.) When they returned to their home in Maryland, their passion for cycling spread to David's wife, Anne, and their youngest son, Christopher, 11.

Anne, 46, liked the idea of getting back into shape, but her primary reason for picking up the sport was to create some quality family time. "[David and Scott] would be gone three and four hours at a time training together," she recalls. "We felt left out."

Since their RAGBRAI challenge, David and Scott have finished seven century rides (100 miles), and Anne and Chris have joined the team to complete several bike rallies together. This fall, the family plans to participate in a century and duathlon.

Training for and participating in athletic events as a family is an ideal way to spend time together — and foster a love for fitness in the process. Whether it's a leisurely walk for charity or a punishing triathlon, these competitions can create lifelong memories. Indeed, the competition component isn't even necessary — what matters most is being active together.

Sign Us Up!

There's nothing quite like registering for an event to make a fitness goal come to life. And, because there are so many events to choose from, the biggest challenge may be getting the family to agree on what to do.

Julia Sweet, author of *365 Activities for Fitness, Food, and Fun for the Whole Family* (Contemporary Books, 2001), recommends choosing an event that involves an activity the family is already doing together for fun. "Look for events open to a wide range of ages, like all-comer track and field meets, ski events, or martial arts," she says.

Most running and cycling events are designed for various ages and abilities, and they often feature shorter "fun runs" for youngsters. Running, cycling, triathlon and adventure races can have relay components that allow family members to team up. And orienteering, a navigation sport, is another good way for families to compete together as a team.

You can even treat the family vacation as an "event" that sparks an appreciation for fitness. Try to include sightseeing with an activity, such as hiking, cycling or cross-country skiing. But be sure to select vacations according to interests. "Everyone has to want to do it," says Sweet. "If you plan a cycling trip in Ireland and two members of your family don't like to bike, it won't be any fun." Consider the conditions, too. The more extreme the weather, the more likely younger children will not enjoy the experience (and then neither will you).

Families in Training

Once you decide on the big event, develop a training plan that will prepare each family member for the challenge. Barbara J. Moore, PhD, president and CEO of Shape Up America!, offers these tips to get everyone up to speed (find more at www.shapeup.org):

- **Schedule a regular time throughout the week for physical activity together.** Try to get everyone in the family together at least once a week to train for your event.
- **Take turns selecting an activity** for the family to do as a group each week. Even if you're preparing for a specific event, you may have different training approaches. Pick from a list of activities that are part of your training regimen or develop a training plan together.

- **Start a fitness log for each family member.** While you may prepare for the event together, you'll likely have separate workouts and fitness levels. Help each family member chart his or her progress. Studies indicate that keeping a log helps people meet their exercise and diet goals.
- **Adapt activities** to suit those with special needs and preferences. Most children's events offer scaled-down versions, whether it be a shorter course, mini-me equipment or lax rules. While parents compete in the adult version, tykes don't have to get left behind.
- **Help everyone to find something that makes him or her feel successful.** "Parents have to be open to what children are into and figure out how each child will shine on his own," Sweet says. "And children *do* need to shine."

Sweet also advises families to schedule adequate time to prepare and to train consistently, "so it's not a brutal experience." Plus, she adds, "The fun is in the training."

Fit Families Win

With the ultimate goal of making fitness a family priority, these events offer many ways to "win," even without a finish line. "You don't have to enter a conventional, paid-for event," suggests Sweet, who says you can turn most any activity into a family-friendly competition. With her husband and children, Marja, 17, and Noah, 8, Sweet says they have played, practiced and competed in everything from knee hockey (a scaled down version without ice) to aerobics. "Go bowling, play ping pong or throw a Frisbee. Just make it a challenge."

Eric and Chris Schneeman, 44 and 53, respectively, of Mendota Heights, Minn., along with Chris's brother-in-law, Arnie Gough, 51, of Hinsdale, Ill., have redefined the family reunion since 2002 by gathering each year with parents, siblings and grandchildren to compete in the Life Time Fitness Triathlon in Minneapolis. As many as 25 Schneeman family members (which includes seven siblings and 38 grandchildren) have competed together in the triathlon, after which follows a family dinner.

"We had a close family already, but there were generation gaps," says Gough. Before his family began competing in the triathlon, he says, the grown-ups tended to talk to other grown-ups, teenagers cliqued and smaller children kept to each other. "Now, everyone is talking about times and race transitions," he says. "It's a shared experience."

Kara Douglass Thom writes frequently about health and fitness. Her three daughters are already familiar with race numbers.

Sweat Together

What can you do to get active as a family and promote team spirit? Plenty.

Fun at Home: Consider a driveway obstacle course, treasure hunt, neighborhood relays or any yard game. Look for facilities close to home, such as courts, swimming pools, trails and fields. Check out Julia Sweet's *365 Activities for Fitness, Food, and Fun for the Whole Family* (Contemporary Books, 2001) for ideas.

Good Times: For many competitive events, the goal is just finishing. Check with your local running, cycling or orienteering clubs for events that you can finish as a family. Also, search www.active.com for events near you.

For a Reason: Added motivation can come from competing for a cause. Check out events such as the Breast Cancer 3-Day (www.the3day.org), a three-day walk with a traveling campsite to raise money for breast cancer research. Need something shorter? Enter a 5K Race for the Cure (www.komen.org).

Against Thy Neighbor: For added motivation, issue a neighborhood challenge against other families. Or, at your next block party, add events and games that get everyone moving. Make it as simple as a hopscotch contest or as detailed as a homespun triathlon (which could be any three events, such as hula hoop, jump rope and a short sprint). Don't forget the awards ceremony

Bragging Rights: Certain races have an allure and reputation for being tough but fun. Check out the Muddy Buddy race series (www.muddybuddy.com), a combination trail-running-and-mountain-biking adventure race. A triathlon of any distance is a worthy challenge. Life Time Fitness offers an indoor triathlon series and kids' triathlons, and sponsors an outdoor triathlon series in Minneapolis, Los Angeles, New York, Chicago and Dallas (www.lifetimefitness.com).

Training to Travel: Unofficial family fitness events can bring you together when you hit the road. Need inspiration? Check out *The Family Fitness Fun Book: Healthy Living for the Whole Family* by Rose R. Kennedy (Hatherleigh Press, 2005), *Frommer's Family Vacations in the National Parks* by Charles P. Wohlforth (Frommer's, 2004) and *Adventuring with Children: An Inspirational Guide to World Travel and the Outdoors* by Nan Jeffrey (Avalon House, 1995).