After starting her first job as a pediatric emergency medicine physician in Columbus, Ohio, Paula Kocken experienced the luxury of free time for the first time in years. Always fond of staying fit and active, when she saw a flyer for the city’s triathlon in 1987, she decided to give it a try.

Triathlons were still an emerging sport at the time, and the Columbus race offered only the Olympic distance—a nearly 1-mile swim, 25-mile bike ride and 10K run. (Today, many triathlons have a sprint of roughly half those distances.) Training for that first event was no small feat, but after finishing, Kocken was hooked.

Ever since, she has completed a handful of triathlons each year, finishing between 50 and 70 races total. (She hasn’t really kept track.) And although Kocken emphasizes that she’s not an elite athlete, her commitment to the sport while balancing a high-pressure job is impressive.

“It’s been a fun thing to have on the back burner,” says Kocken, who competed in triathlons in Minneapolis and Door County, Wisconsin, this summer and has done the Chicago and Cleveland races in previous years. “There are some ER doctors who are fantastic at triathlons. I’m not super-fantastic. I just really like doing them, and I think it gives a lot to you.”

Kocken splits her time 60/40 between clinical and administrative work. She practices pediatric emergency medicine at Children’s Hospitals and Clinics of Minnesota, primarily in Minneapolis, and at the WestHealth ER in Plymouth. She also is the physician lead for disaster preparedness at Children’s and medical director of Minnesota’s Emergency Medical Services.

For triathlete Paula Kocken, MD, biking is her favorite part of an event.
for Children, a federal program that promotes improved pediatric emergency services.

Kocken says biking is by far her favorite leg of a race, followed by swimming and then running. “I probably wouldn’t run if I wasn’t doing a triathlon,” says Kocken, who is married with two college-aged children. No one else in her family has adopted her tri habit.

Each season, she picks one discipline to improve. Already a strong swimmer, having competed in high school and college, Kocken took swimming lessons at the YWCA this year for the first time. The triathlon swim trainer told her to focus on swimming strongly with her arms, which saves her legs for biking and running. She says she now swims with much less exertion.

Kocken generally starts her training in the spring, with a goal of doing her first tri in July. She works out about five days a week, doing separate bike, run or swim workouts to build endurance, while working with a trainer once a week to build strength and flexibility. Then she adds brick workouts, which usually combine two of the disciplines in succession. Brick workouts are a key component of triathlon training, as they help an athlete switch from swimming to biking or from biking to running. In the off-season, she cross-country skis and runs.

Kocken enjoys the variety the sport offers and says the training offers stress relief and helps build endurance for long shifts in the emergency room.

“I think it helps me diffuse or get rid of a lot of the tension that comes from working in the ER,” she says. “With emergency room work, we never have organized breaks or downtime. You have to be constantly going for eight to 12 hours. Triathlon training helps you with that because you’re constantly pushing the whole time.” – SUZY FRISCH