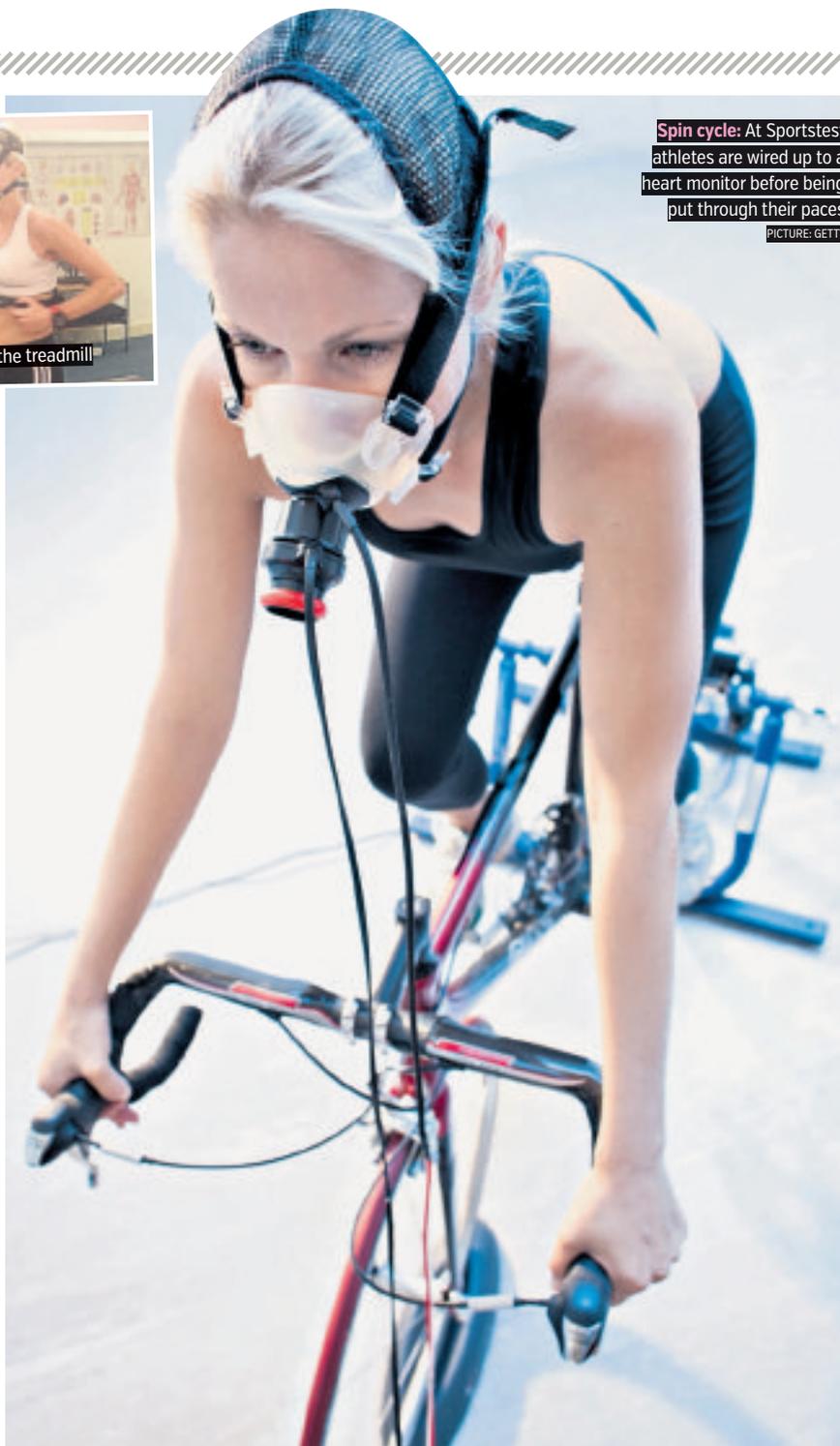


Trends Style | Wellbeing | Celebrity

My fitness tri-out for sports day



Maxing out: Helen on the treadmill



Spin cycle: At Sportstest athletes are wired up to a heart monitor before being put through their paces

PICTURE: GETTY

Preparing for next month's Triathlon World Championships, **Helen Croydon** put her heart through its paces at a sports lab

THINK fancy sports labs are only for elite athletes? Then think again. Competitive fitness fans are increasingly turning to hi-tech tests to get the edge over their mates. And, as the saying goes, if you can't beat them, join them. So, as a keen triathlete preparing for the Triathlon World Championships in Chicago next month, I paid a visit to Dr Garry Palmer at Sportstest in London (who has seen a 50 per cent increase in recreational athletes coming in over the past 12 months) to see if he could make a difference to my PB.

What's involved?

It's not for the faint-hearted: I am wired up to a heart rate monitor and an oxygen mask and told to run and cycle at various speeds and intensity, until I reach my maximum effort and can't go on any more.

What do they test for?

VO2 max reading: The oxygen mask determines the rate of oxygen I breathe in, versus the CO₂ I breathe out. As intensity increases, my body gobbles up more oxygen. But there comes a point when I just can't process the oxygen quick enough for my body's needs. That point is known as VO2 max. The fitter you are, the higher it will be and it's the most accurate measurement of cardio-vascular fitness. A 'good' VO2 max for a 30-year-old female would be around 30. An elite athlete can expect 70. Mine was 60.

Threshold heart rate: As you approach your VO2 max, your body starts to work anaerobically (you'll know because you won't be able to talk

any more!). It's the next step up from aerobic exercise and means you're not able to supply all of your energy needs from oxygen in your tissues. Your heart rate at this point is known as threshold heart rate, the point when your body starts to produce lactic acid (the stuff that makes your legs burn and everything hurt). By training at exactly your threshold heart rate you build your tolerance to lactic acid, allowing you to exercise at higher intensity for longer.

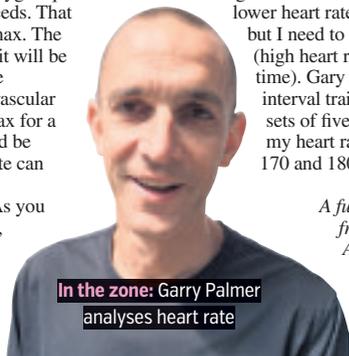
What does this mean for my triathlon?

From the tests above, Dr Palmer establishes my four 'heart-rate zones'. Training in each zone has a different effect on your body. If you are training for a marathon, for example, you'll need to work in the lower zones to increase endurance. If you're trying to increase speed for shorter bursts such as a 5k or for field sports, then you'll need to work in the higher zones. Many sports watches will estimate your heart rate zones, but they can only be accurately established with a lab tests like this one.

Verdict

I'm good at endurance (exercising at a lower heart rate for a long time), but I need to work on my speed (high heart rate for a shorter time). Gary advises I do more interval training, such as ten sets of five-minute bursts with my heart rate sitting between 170 and 180 bpm. Ouch!

A full test starts at £175 from sportstest.co.uk. Available in London, Milton Keynes, Birmingham and Stafford



In the zone: Garry Palmer analyses heart rate

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TeamGB.com/sport-profiler

AN ONLINE tool launched this month to mark the one-year countdown to the Rio Olympics. Answer some simple online questions and you get to see which Olympic sport you'd be most suited to. I came out as an open-water swimmer, which is encouraging since I'm a competitive triathlete.

Free, teamgb.com



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