



From Start to Finish
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7/13/2001

This article (presented in two parts – this is part TWO, check out the sidebar for a link to part one) has been written as a useful overview covering the main points that any triathlon beginner may initially fall prey to regarding the triathlon swim. We hope that it allows you to more fully enjoy your introduction to the world of triathlon swimming.

4. GET THE PLAN!

You've got the goal, got the coach, got the gear and now you need to actually do something about it – start training! So what should you do, when, how, with who, and arghhhhhh – too much to think about! You just want to do it, right? Well, the coach needs to come back in at this stage and sit down with you to work out the progressions - you need a PLAN.

First, you need to assess where you are now. Get into the pool and work out these 4 statistics...

- Endurance – longest continuous swim in time (mins) and distance (m)
- Speed – the fastest times you can swim for 25 m, 50 m, and 100 m
- Strength – your fastest average pace for 20 x 50 m, 20 secs rest after each
- Efficiency – average stroke count for 16 x 25 m, 15 secs rest after each

This is your starting point and it includes information that you and your coach should re-assess every month. Both of you need to make a commitment to each other that you will meet at least once every 2 weeks to update, re-assess and re-plan. Things do change but a plan still serves a guide.

The overall plan that you need is called a periodisation plan. In it's simplest form, this will be a chart that maps out how far you will swim, how many times you will swim, and at what intensity, for each of the sessions, weeks and months ahead of you. It gives you a clear overview of what you will focus on at different times of your build up to a race. The keys for success in this plan are that it must be progressive and it must include variety.

IN THE BEGINNING

You will need to start slowly, easily, with short reps, easy technical work and low volumes. The main indicator that you are improving will simply be how far you can swim continuously – aim at 500m to start with, then 1000m. Gradually you will be able to vary the intensity more, and also make the technical work more challenging (eg: 1500m continuous, 50m hard, 100 easy... with a streamline push-off underwater on every single length). When you do reach that point you need to factor in recovery weeks as well.



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Whatever does result, make sure that you and your coach do change things from time to time. Once a month is usually a good time frame. You will get stale, mentally and physically if your program does not have any variation in it. By ensuring that there are challenging progressions present (you need to be motivated by them), you ensure your body's continued physiological adaptation to the different stresses you are placing on it. And that brings speed, endurance, and also technical improvements.

VARIATION IN PACE

A good triathlete is one who trains all the various energy systems, thereby having a very big pace difference between their hardest and easiest times (per 100 m). It shouldn't all be hard, or easy either. You need some short reps, some long reps, some short weeks (2 sessions of 30-45mins), some long weeks (3-4 x 60mins), some wetsuit swims in the sea, mostly pool swims, all the while remembering that swimming is primarily technical. Even if you start to get quite fit in the water, speed will never come unless you know how to both pull water, and also slide through it.

It is important to re-iterate that you should keep varying your technical work. Your swimming only improves when you ask something different and challenging of it regularly. It is very common to get stuck in that rut where all you do is train hard all the time but not improve.

A link to an earlier article of mine on Variation in Pace is in the sidebar, follow this for a more detailed discussion of these points.

INCLUDING TECHNIQUE

Technique is one of those things that can be easily overlooked in swimming, especially when doing it all by yourself (ie, no squads). A good technical coach can be invaluable to your progress but you do need to keep regular contact with that person. Always remember that it is technique that sets the speed level in the pool to where your fitness will take you, not the fitness itself. So keep that ceiling-level ever improving and avoid the speed plateau by committing to technical improvements.

LONG & RELAXED

The best description of what a good technical swimmer looks like is one that is both long and relaxed. Long refers to the water they glide over before pulling, and the relaxation refers to energy conservation – as little wastage as possible. Whenever practising technique in training make sure the reps are short, with relaxed arm movements (except perhaps for the pull) and with a fast kick (provides stability helpful to learning). An example set could be 8 x 25 m, 20 secs (½ one armed freestyle and ½ swim). Always look to identify faults during the stroke-work and make it a goal to correct them.

SLOW IT DOWN, THEN SPEED IT UP

As you gain better control of your technique from slowing it down, you need to speed the improved technique back up and still be in control of it. This refers to arm turnover. Your technique aims to improve how much water you



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will pull with every stroke, which is referred to by swimmers and coaches alike as DPS (distance per stroke eg: 1m per stroke). If you multiply this with the speed of your arms turnover then you arrive at your speed. So by simply knowing this, you can set intermediate goals for both technique and also arm-turnover,

eg: DPS of >1.5m AND > 60 strokes per 60 secs SQUADS

Squads can be an important part of your training arsenal. Squads provide motivation to train, and they also help to push you on 3 fronts

1. Volume (to get the session done – can be hard sometimes on your own)
2. To push yourself (intense sessions can be difficult to swim when alone).
3. Technically – you can see others and what they do).

One drawback though, is that squads can sometimes serve to cement whatever your current habits are making them very hard to change (unless of course there is a good technical element to the squads). It only takes trust to hold a better technique 80% of the time, even if on easy sets it may slow you down slightly. Overall your progress will occur faster by concentrating on technique rather than by ignoring it.

Anyway, as soon as you know you are swimming 100m reps regularly under the 2min mark, then you should start looking seriously at squads. They will help you take it your swimming to the next level fitness-wise, and you'll meet some good new friends.

5. GET THE RACE!

The best advice that comes in this arena is race, and race regularly. The more you race, the more you learn. But the couple of things that will help you most for the triathlon swim are ...

- Start behind someone who you believe is only just faster than you and draft them. It's legal so do it. If you can conserve energy due to someone else doing the work, then full points to you. You just have to feel comfortable with swimming hard up against (but not touching) someone else's feet and you'll be in their slip stream – an easier place to be. Also means you don't need to lift the head to navigate as much which wastes energy and slows you down.

- Start taking your wetsuit off as soon as you hit the beach. As soon as you stand up in the water, start looking for that zip and yank it down hard. Pull the sleeves off quickly so they do not have a chance to stick to you and also pull the torso of the suit down to your waist level, all while running to the bike.

- Keep the strokes long, even if they are fast. Often when swimmers hit the sea they ignore their length of stroke and become quite inefficient. Make sure you can feel the water before you pull it.

SUMMARY



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The biggest mistake that we all make is to treat our sport too seriously. All joking aside, the most important thing you must do that will lead to improvement, is to be consistent! Progress WILL happen if you just stick to the plan, so don't stress too much. Just learn to enjoy the people, the training and the journey.

Best of luck (and a well designed plan).
Haydn



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