



Future Dreams

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Kick should be an essential part of swim training, whether or not you are training for Ironman. An efficient kick is central to your leverage system in swimming. If you neglect this swimming fundamental, you will leave a glaring gap in your swimming skills and diminish your overall performance in the water.

Every time you take a stroke in the water, logic dictates that you are attempting to produce as much forward movement as possible. To maximize the propulsion you achieve from each stroke, you need to understand how the leverage system between your arms and legs works in the water.

When you look at a very accomplished swimmer the most prominent feature is the glide that that swimmer seems to effortlessly achieve with each and every stroke that he or she takes. This is the critical element that allows the swimmer to take full advantage of each stroke – they seem to glide on the lead-arm until their recovery-arm has almost completely caught up. That is, they are almost doing catchup drill. The aspect that baffles most of us is how to achieve this long glide and the answer lies partly with the kick and its timing.

Every time you slide your hands into the water to catch and then pull, your kicking action will produce one of two results, one being beneficial to your leverage system (therefore speed) and the other being detrimental to your speed and energy output.

Result beneficial to speed

When your kick is timed properly with your stroking and is both fluent and relaxed, you will experience an increased amount of forward momentum.

What you need to feel is this: a strong burst of kick that begins at exactly the same point as each lead-arm begins to catch and pull. With correct stroke-kick timing, each arm that pulls back through the water will be effectively stabilised and anchored by your kick - this will allow you to feel stronger with each armstroke. You should also start to feel much more water on the pulling hand when you have identified the correct stroke-kick timing.

Another beneficial factor you will begin to notice, when you get on top of this concept, is that your recovery-arm shoots forward, as your lead-arm pivots you around as you pull. This fires that recovery-arm (which has now become the lead-arm) into extension, setting you up to glide out long again as you



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take full advantage of the propulsion derived from the previous pull and kick.

This increased kicking efficiency can best be achieved by swimming extremely slowly at first, as you experiment with the new concept. You will learn faster by swimming as slowly as you can, because your awareness of what you are actually doing in the water will be dramatically heightened. Only when you feel you have a better grip on this timing should you speed it up.

Result detrimental to speed

If you are the owner of a weak, inflexible and uncoordinated kick, you will know that your kick provides little beneficial impact on your stroke and speed. Probably the only thing you will have noticed yourself or have had other people tell you, is that you have a large scissoring action happening every time you rotate to breathe. As you may know, this can be worse than merely experiencing zero benefit from your kick, because this scissoring action will actually produce drag and that will slow you down - not really desirable! The scissoring action is your body's natural attempt to correct a fault in your balance, that is, to stop you falling over backwards as you breathe (another story).

FLEXIBILITY

Most triathletes (especially from running backgrounds) will discover they have limited ankle mobility, which instantly reduces the effectiveness of their kicking action.

There are two quick tests to find out how flexible your ankles are. (Important note: please be careful of your knees doing these stretches.)

ONE

Sit down on the floor with your knees, shins and the tops of your feet flat on the ground (ie, point your toes). It is also important to feel your heels right under your butt, not out to the sides.

Aim: to be able to push the top of your ankles into the ground easily.

TWO

A basic squatting stretch for your Achilles: try to sit down (bend your knees) and balance by squatting on the balls of your feet, while keeping your hands off the ground.

Aim: to get your butt onto your heels while still sitting comfortably and balanced.

If you find that you lack comfortable movement in either or both of these stretches, then this is great – it means you have the potential to increase the effectiveness of your kicking action by a means other than working hard in the pool. As you improve your mobility levels with the two stretches, you will experience noticeable improvements in both your relaxation and leverage



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systems in the water. The result should be increased speed.

HOW TO KICK - FOUR QUESTIONS

As it has been made clear, your kick is an important part of your swimming stroke. However, most of us still do not take the time to think about how we kick or, more importantly, how we should kick.

There are four quick questions you should periodically ask yourself, to assess whether your kicking action is helping to drive your propulsion system or weaken it.

- Big or small kicks?•
- Slow or fast kicks?•
- Relaxed or tense• kicks?
- Bubbles or no bubbles?•

The answers to these questions are, briefly, small, fast and relaxed kicks, that only just break the surface and result in small bubbles.

Those small bubbles are important because they give you a 'cue' for locating how deep your feet are in relation to the surface. If your feet are slapping the water, then you know your feet are too high. To correct this, you'll need to bend your knees down a little more each time you kick. An excellent metaphor to use is to kick with "jelly-legs". This is guaranteed to remind you to relax your legs and especially your ankles. The muscles used in kicking are confined to your thighs and hamstrings, which should flick on and off extremely fast. Your thighs are responsible for the down-sweep of the leg and the hamstrings recover each leg, bringing them back to kick down again with the thigh. If at any time you have both these muscle groups tensed, you'll fail to produce any kicking propulsion and therefore affect your arm-stroking effectiveness to the same degree.

As you kick along easily, ask yourself if you can feel your calves or shin muscles tensing. If you feel either of these working then relax them immediately: you should not be using them to kick with, but this is a very common mistake made by triathletes. Your feet need to feel as if they are flapping around in the water like little fish tails. Try the different effects of kicking with tense feet (pointed or hooked) and feeling the lack of propulsion, then relaxing again and feeling yourself speed up.

An easy way of feeling exactly what you are doing, is to stand on one leg by the wall at the shallow end and kick slowly forwards with the other leg. You will learn more if you do this slowly and start the kicking leg right underneath and behind you. All you have to do is feel whether or not your ankle actually stays relaxed. Many of you will find that there is a great degree of tension in there, of which you were unaware and which will display itself as cramp in a long kick set. Get it right and that will disappear. The lesson as always is - relax!



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SOLUTION

Kicking is definitely important, because it affects your leverage system. If your kick is strong, relaxed and fluent, you will get more benefit from your arms. The answers to your kicking problems lie simply with increasing your flexibility by stretching and then programming some structured kick into your workouts, with the aim of improving your timing and coordination. Even vertical kicking at the end of the pool can achieve good results, by highlighting what you actually are doing.

The good news is that kicking problems are relatively easy to fix, but you do need to invest some time in stretching and in some structured kicking work within your sessions. The easiest method of increasing your ankle mobility is corrective stretching in front of the TV while you eat dinner, which takes your mind right off the exercise. Simply spend 2 x 3 minutes sitting in each stretch every night for four weeks and you will feel the difference in the pool. Just make sure it does not hurt when you start and never push your stretches too far.

Good luck with all your training programs and remember... your technique sets the upper limit to which your fitness can take you.

Cheers,
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