

Training & Strategy For Competitive Open-Water Swimmers ©

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“Feel” The Water

Due to the fact that technique is so important to efficient swimming ... swimming, perhaps more than any other sport, is very much a “feel” sport. By nature we are land animals, not water animals. We don’t have to think about breathing, or think very much about walking when we’re on land. We just do it. Good swimmers get as comfortable in the water as they do on land, becoming amphibians. This takes time and practice. Even if you don’t always have time for a lengthy workout, make sure you swim often to develop and keep the “feel” for the water. Develop an awareness for the water pressure you feel on the palms of your hands, forearms, tops of your feet, ankles, the top of your head, and the feel of the water rushing past your sides. Being in tune with these feelings will lead to greater efficiency (more distance per stroke).

Use caution when it comes to doing drills and utilizing workout equipment. Various drills are good for beginners and the occasional “refresher” for the advanced swimmer (i.e. kickboard & flippers for practicing your roll, fist swimming with forearm paddles to develop your stroke, fingertip drill for recovery), but don’t overdo it. For all of the benefits gained from drills and equipment, there is a definite down side. A drill is different from actual swimming, and therefore develops a different feeling. Likewise, equipment develops a “false feeling” of propulsion, buoyancy, and/or resistance that may alter your stroke, kick, and/or body position.

Train Smart and Efficiently

Simulate as closely as possible ANY conditions you MIGHT encounter in your event. This means getting out into the open water when conditions are at their worst (taking all life-saving precautions of course). You need plenty of practice in the open water to become experienced in rough water, currents, cold water, weather, swimming without lane lines, and swimming when fatigued. This serves as both physical and mental conditioning. You do not want to encounter an unexpected obstacle for the first time on game day. Plan and prepare for obstacles. “Hope for the best, but prepare for the worst.”

Budget and equip yourself with the time and tools you need to be your best and stay healthy. Invest in yourself.

What about investing in a wetsuit? In deciding what type of wetsuit, or whether or not to even wear a wetsuit, weigh the advantages of added buoyancy and warmth that a full or partial wetsuit provides, against the drawbacks of decreased mobility (to varying degrees), possibly carrying extra water weight, possible chafing, and longer transitions in a multi-sport event. When buying a wetsuit, finding a proper fit is critical for optimizing the positives and minimizing the negatives associated with wearing a wetsuit. The length of the swim and the temperature of the water may sway your decision on what to wear.

Multi-sport athletes: Practice your transitions. Practice getting out of your wetsuit (if applicable) quickly when tired. Note that a “shorty” wetsuit is easier to get in and out of than a full wetsuit.

Marathon swimmers: Practice swimming through sleep deprivation. Use a body lubricant on all high-friction areas and/or wear a form-fitting under garment for your upper body under your wetsuit to reduce chafing.

Perfect Your Freestyle (See “Freestyle Swimming Technique”)

If the swimming involved in your sport is strictly in the open-water, there is no reason to spend any of your time perfecting any stroke other than freestyle. Being able to change your stroke in the open water for the sake of resting should never be your objective. Your objective should be to get to the point in training where you don't need “to change it up”, and can stick with the fastest and most efficient stroke ... freestyle. Perfect the other strokes if you are training for an applicable pool event, or are a fitness swimmer (it's a well-rounded workout).

Flexibility

Don't stretch a cold muscle. Jump right into your training, but start slow and stretch out as you go. Before an event, use your warm up to stretch.

It is most important to keep your shoulders flexible. Having difficulty with your “recovery” position is a telltale sign that your shoulders are not flexible enough. While not needing to perfect the backstroke, incorporating this stroke into your training regimen along with your freestyle and traditional stretching exercises (I maintain a 4:1 freestyle to backstroke ratio in training), will help with flexibility in the shoulders, chest, upper back (lats), and triceps, and help prevent developing a muscle imbalance. This upper body flexibility will improve your freestyle stroke. Other areas to stretch include your ankles and calves for maintaining the proper position on your kick (especially important if you are also a runner) and obliques (for twisting at the waist during your roll).

Strength Training

When strength training for endurance sports, including swimming, often the best use of your time and most efficient muscle-specific workout is to incorporate resistance training into your actual sport. Whether you choose the water or the weight room to strength train, be sure to conduct a balanced workout by strengthening your abductors as well as your flexors (exercising in reverse of the actual movement for the sport). Use a full range of motion to maintain flexibility and to prevent developing a muscle imbalance. Use the same amount of weight or resistance for both your forward and reverse movements, varying just the amount of repetitions. As a rule, I always maintain a 4:1 flexor to abductor ratio in strength training, when it comes to repetitions or distance. If the aforementioned is too much weight for your reverse movements, change the amount of weight or resistance, and keep the amount of repetitions the same.

For good upper body strength training, swim both freestyle and backstroke while pulling an underwater bucket (a parachute works too), and also tie yourself to an immovable object with bungee cords and swim in place. Use hand paddles and forearm paddles to move more water and create more torque. The level of resistance will increase exponentially with how hard you swim. Swimming in place is a great pure strength workout that allows you to accomplish a lot in a relatively short time. Swimming with the bucket allows you to monitor your form while fatigued, as you will actually be moving through the water. To add variety to your open water strength swims, you may pull a weighted raft or boat.

To strengthen your lower body, use a kickboard and wear flippers while pulling a bucket. Then, without using the bucket and flippers, isolate your kick with the kickboard for a good “burn” exercise (also a good way to practice your kicking form). In all kicking exercises, keep a balanced strength workout by kicking both on your stomach and back. Lower body strengthening in the pool is not as important if you are a multi-sport athlete who is getting plenty of lower body strength training through running and biking.

Due to the fact that swimming is such a “feel” sport, the use of resistance, propulsion, and buoyancy equipment in strength training should be offset by distance and speed workouts free of such devices.

If you spend time in the weight room, conduct a very balanced swimming-specific workout. Use one hand on the lat bar and simulate BOTH your freestyle stroke and backstroke. A pulley system with a handgrip may be preferred (if available). Remember to keep your elbow rolled on top in simulating your freestyle stroke. Then resist the weight by letting the bar or handgrip slowly return to its starting position. Reverse your lat bar or handgrip pull/push downs with dumbbell raises to simulate BOTH your freestyle stroke and backstroke in reverse (leading with your elbows on your freestyle). To work your legs, use a pulley system with ankle strap or elastic band to execute forward and reverse leg-raises. Like your kick, leg raises should originate from your hip, and you should flex your knee just to the degree that you do with your kick, with your toes pointed. Traditional quadriceps and hamstring bench workouts only isolate movement from the knee down, which does not simulate your kick. Generally, using lighter weights and doing higher repetitions is best for endurance sports.

When strength training in a pool, do not flip or duck under your wake and push off when making your turns. Constantly breaking your momentum with each turn, and re-accelerating through your wake assists in strength training.

Speed Work

The focus of speed work for the open water is very different from that of swimmers training for pool events. As an open-water swimmer, your goal is to increase the aerobic pace you can hold for a long period of time. Mixing anaerobic elements (i.e. sprints) into a continual workout (easy, hard, easy, hard, etc.) will help you increase your “cruising speed,” while no longer being a slave to the time clock when training in a pool. Sprints (25, 50, 75, and 100 yards) should be mixed into a continual swim without stopping to rest on the side of the pool (you don’t have this luxury in the open water). When doing your 25’s, follow each 25-yard sprint with an easy 25, before sprinting again. Swim an easy 25 after each 50, and swim an easy 50 after each 75 and 100. You must learn to rest while under a workload. Work to keep up your normal distance training pace and concentrate on keeping good form during your “easy” lengths when recovering from a “hard” segment. This is highly beneficial, as a swimmer’s technique tends to fall apart when fatigued, especially if you do not specifically practice this way. Generally, anaerobic elements of a speed workout do not translate into much of an aerobic speed gain (which is what is important for open-water swimming) just in and of itself. Usually, the greatest aerobic speed gains are realized by maintaining your “cruising speed” when fatigued, (such as on your recovery lengths, or when pushing a faster-than-usual continual aerobic pace at the end of a workout). Over time, you should be able to increase your “cruising speed” on your recovery lengths. You can accomplish the same type of speed workout in the open water by swimming between specific points of reference or by counting in your head.

Periodically finish a distance workout with a shorter distance at a faster aerobic pace as a “burn.” Sprinting with tight muscles following a strength workout however, can more easily result in injury, and is not recommended.

Check your progress by gradually increasing your speed during distance workouts while staying aerobic, within your target heart rate ... on the edge of your comfort zone.

Due to the fact that speed work is an exercise in cardiovascular fitness, you should execute flip turns and push off when doing speed work in a pool. This minimizes any breaks in momentum which alter your breathing rhythm.

Distance Training

Increase your distance gradually until you peak at 100% or more of the total distance of your event, then begin your taper (a period of frequent, but shorter and easier swims). In preparing for marathon swims, you don't want to peak at much above 50%, as you don't want to put your body through that kind of rigor twice, then allow 1.5 - 2 weeks to taper. In preparing for shorter swims, you may want to peak at anywhere from 75% to 125% of your total distance, depending on how accustomed you are to that particular distance and how full your race schedule is. For shorter events, the taper may be shortened to as little as 1 week. These taper periods reflect my preferences. For the most part, tapers are a very individual thing based on how quickly a person regains his/her strength. Over time you will figure out your most ideal taper.

When training for a distance swim, it is suggested to conduct two distance workouts per week while ramping up your distance. Designate one of your weekly swims as your "long" swim, with your other weekly distance swim being a "half" swim. While each of your distance swims should increase in distance each week, your shorter swims should not exceed about 50% of your long swim. Generally, you should increase your distance in smaller increments at the beginning of your training, when increases represent a greater percentage of your overall distance.

Distance training should be done predominantly in the open water. If however, you are doing a distance swim in a pool, do not flip turn or push off from the side of the pool (you do not have this luxury in the open water). A good push-off from the side of the pool can reduce the actual distance you are swimming by more than 20%. When training for distance, you need to swim (not glide) the entire length of the pool.

The Workout Mix (especially for multi-sport athletes)

Incorporate all of your sport's disciplines into each workout. Get used to training in all of your sport's disciplines consecutively. You may designate each entire workout strictly for strength, speed, or distance, or designate separate disciplines or muscle groups for strength, speed, or distance workouts. At least once a week, complete a distance workout for all of your disciplines in the order that they occur in your event. Depending on how close you are to your event, you may want to focus more on certain types of workouts, and less on others. For example, in training for a marathon swim, you may choose to divide strength, speed and distance workouts evenly during the off season, but only do one strength and speed workout per week (as compared to two distance workouts) during the season.

Frequency of Training / Days of Rest

Just like a good night's sleep, days of rest are very important. Your body needs to rebuild itself following a workout ... into a stronger machine. Frequency of training is a very individual thing. A single training schedule might be over-training for one person, and under-training for another. Some athletes need very little recovery time, and benefit from frequent workouts. Others gain more by training a little less. You may choose to schedule a day of rest between strength, speed, and distance workouts; complete one or two cycles of strength, speed, and distance workouts before taking a day of rest; offset your toughest workout by sandwiching it between two days of rest; or schedule two consecutive days of rest for a longer recovery.

Nutrition / Feeding

Good nutrition is extremely important, and is an ever-changing landscape. While there are many basic truths, new innovations continue to enter the scene. Many theories and opinions (sometimes conflicting) are always present. My best advice is to consult with one or more nutritional professionals. Then through experimentation, tweak your nutritional plan to best fit the unique chemistry set that is you. One size does not fit all when it comes to nutrition.

When it comes to nutritional intake during events and training, swimmers often find that they must limit themselves to liquid nutrition or gels, as it is more difficult to digest in a horizontal position (especially when exerting). Acid reflux medication may remedy this problem, and allow you to eat solid foods, but may also limit absorption of nutrients. Experiment to see how your body handles digestion while swimming.

For supported marathon swims, where nutrition is needed in the open-water, the swimmer must be able to feed while treading water. The feeding procedure should be practiced well ahead of your event. Sports bottles taped together (one for water, one for sports drink, one for meal replacement drink for longer swims) with a clothes pin attached (for a pre-opened packet of energy gel) is suggested. This apparatus should be attached to a long rope on a spool (like for electrical extension cords) so you can drift freely while feeding, and a crew member can reel it in after use. If supplements in pill form are needed, they may be dropped into your hand by a crew member. Having a compartment for them on your feeding apparatus does not work well after it is wet, unless the compartment is replaced after each feeding and thoroughly dried for future use.

Although often a challenge while treading water, some marathon swimmers who do not experience acid reflux, may prefer occasional solid food closer to that of a meal, as opposed to frequent sports bottle feedings. Food items may be placed in your hand by a crewmember, hot liquids and soups in an insulated cup may be attached to your rope with a carabineer in place of the regular feeding apparatus, and food items may be eaten off a hand held skewer (keep your goggles on when feeding from a skewer, so you don't poke your eyes out in the waves). Nalgene bottles containing items such as crushed crackers, nuts, cereal, and dried fruit allow you to just pour the contents into your mouth. Nalgene bottles work great for any self-sufficient event ... especially running, biking and paddling. I personally prefer one Nalgene bottle of something salty, and one Nalgene bottle of something sweet.

Experiment with what you eat/drink, amounts, and frequency of feedings well before game day. We are all chemistry sets with similar but different chemistry. The ideal nutrition, amounts, and frequency will vary from person to person. At first it is probably best to follow a feeding schedule. Over time however, as you get to know your body well, you may prefer to rely on your body to tell you what, when, and how much to eat/drink as opposed to following a schedule. Experience will tell you that ultimately you need to eat/drink something that you like, at a time that you want it, and in the quantity that you desire. This is much better than force-feeding the highest octane fuel that you can't keep down.