

Training For The Triathlon Swim

Is there a better way?

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Participants ready themselves for the Whitefish Lake Triathlon. Photo - Greg Elizondo

"How good is your worst repetition?"
-Stephen Widmer

"Keep doing what you've always done, and you'll keep getting what you've always gotten."
- Unknown

By the time many of you will be reading this article, most of the triathlon season in the Northern Hemisphere will be in our rear-view mirror. At this time, you may find yourself thinking about the off season and how you can train differently to be even faster in 2009. When it comes to swimming easier and faster, most traditionalists feel there is only one way: swim, swim, and swim some more! While there is inherent value in paying your dues with frequency and volume in the pool, there may be a better, more efficient way. In this article, I will share some thoughts and offer a slightly different perspective on how to optimally prepare for the swim.

In March of 2007, I gave a presentation at a USA Triathlon Coaches clinic entitled "Training for the Triathlon Swim Using the Vasa Ergometer." The presentation gave me the opportunity to share some discoveries I had made over the previous year and a half about the most effective ways for the age-group triathlete to prepare for the swim. While the presentation was based primarily around using the Vasa Ergometer, the concepts I presented weren't exclusive to it.

When it comes to swim training for triathlon, I believe many triathletes have either lost their way or are misguided. There is so much conflicting information out there about swimming for triathlon that it is easy for a person seeking guidance to become confused and not know who or what to believe.

Triathlon Swimming For the Age-Group Triathlete

The typical age-group triathlete spends anywhere from six to fifteen or more hours per week training for all three sports, and of that, a large percentage is often spent driving to and from the pool and logging swimming yardage. If you are one of those athletes who swims three times per week and drives 20 minutes to your local pool, then it's possible you could be spending as much as four to six of those six to fifteen hours per week focused only on swimming. If this describes you, and you are finding that your time is limited, or that you are not improving, this is even more frustrating.

When I go to my local pool, I am often dismayed as I watch many triathletes hammering away yet not improving - especially considering the huge time commitment they are making. As each of us looks to 2009 and considers how to most effectively divide our training time among three or four sports, there are three important questions I believe we all need to ask with respect to the swim:

1. Where should the focus of our swim training be?
2. Are we getting the maximum benefit from the time we are spending to specifically prepare for our races?
3. Is there a better, more efficient and effective way?

Likewise, in my experience, for many who are trying to improve, there is often too much focus on these factors:

1. Accumulating yardage to make our training diaries look good, without regard to building effective strength, flexibility, and quality stroke technique, just because it's "what we do."
2. Chasing the pace clock or making

an interval, even when form is deteriorating, which only reinforces poor technical habits.

3. Gliding longer and "perfecting" body position without enough focus on increasing stroke rate and building specific strength, which is key to being able to take control in the open water environment, rather than the other way around.

Similarly, for those who do not have a long-term swimming background (the majority of AG triathletes), there is too little focus on developing the necessary upper/total body flexibility to swim correctly. If there's one thing I've learned in my years as a swimmer and coach, without high levels of flexibility in the arms, upper back, shoulders, and ankles, there is very little chance of swimming effectively and efficiently!

What Are The Challenges We Face?

As a triathlete, you race in the open water, which can present a variety of difficult challenges including physical contact between swimmers, as well as wind chop, currents, and swells. Performing well requires you to put pressure on the water repeatedly without fatiguing. If you are attempting to make progress in as short a time as possible, I believe this progress comes, in part, from training to achieve increasing levels of "swim specific" functional strength and coordination using a variety of mediums such as stretch cords, swimming that includes band / paddle work, and tools like the Vasa Ergometer. As a last piece of the puzzle, training to hold a higher stroke rate for our goal race distance is very important. The bottom line: How effectively you train to prepare to meet these challenges head on will determine how successful you will be in the swim and, consequently, on the bike and in the run.

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Where Should You Focus Your Swim Training?

Despite our different levels of swimming experience and the numerous components of swimming that contribute to a triathlete's speed in the water, dealing with these challenges and learning how to effectively put pressure on the water repeatedly without fatiguing comes down to generating more propulsion via a "high elbow" catch, known in swimming circles as an Early Vertical Forearm (EVF). An EVF is one of the most important keys for developing a powerful swim stroke, particularly for triathlon—conditions are often difficult, and you want to kick less, not more. Also, for those who don't come from a deep swimming background (or who come from a running background) and may not kick very effectively, developing an EVF and training to hold a higher stroke rate is even more important, because without these two components, you can't put effective pressure on the water and are left to struggle trying to move forward. The Early Vertical Forearm (EVF) An EVF is among the very first skills that I introduce to beginning swimmers, even if they are still learning to become comfortable in the water. While they won't be able to master it yet, I want them to understand and accept this concept early in the learning process. The graphic below, which was shared with me by noted swim coach and triathlon swim specialist Haydn Wooley, shows a direct comparison between a dropped elbow catch (incorrect and very common among triathletes), a straight arm catch (also incorrect and the cause of many shoulder injuries), and a high elbow Early Vertical Forearm: table shown

- Used with permission from Haydn Wooley – *Future Dreams Swimming*

Assuming you feel you have room to improve your swim training (and who doesn't?), here are some ideas you may want to incorporate into your swimming plan to help develop a more effective EVF, so you can swim easier and faster in 2009!

1. Shift from a mindset of accumulating yardage to one of swimming quality yardage.
2. For the majority of your swimming, avoid chasing a pace clock to make

an interval if it means your form deteriorates as a result.

3. Commit to improving your upper body flexibility. If you can, even a little, you will hold onto water more effectively and be more relaxed.

4. Depending on your developmental level, decide if a Masters program is the right choice for you. Very often these workouts include too much kicking and too much high intensity swimming—at the expense of building correct strength and technique.

5. Start incorporating various dry-land strength training ideas using tools like stretch cords and even the Vasa Ergometer and Vasa-Trainer to effectively build the functional strength and flexibility you need to apply the EVF.

6. Haydn Wooley produced an excellent CD where he personally demonstrates, in fast and slow motion and with pause, correct EVF technique in all strokes and drills. Information on this CD and how to get it can be found here: <http://coach-al.com/products/products1.html>

7. There is no more effective tool for assessing your stroke and improvement than underwater videotaping! Pictures are worth a thousand words! E-mail me if you would like to learn how I use the latest in motion analysis software to review strokes. Visit: <http://coach-al.com/coaching-services.html>

8. I was fortunate enough to attend the USA Triathlon Coaching Conference in

March of 2006. Here, noted swim coach and author Ernest Maglischo made a startling presentation about triathlon swim training, particularly as it relates to stroke rate, front quadrant, and EVF. While it has been two years since that presentation, I believe his ideas are as valid as ever. To read my NOTES from that presentation, go here: <http://www.coach-al.com/maglischo-talk.htm>

9. To receive a FREE DVD of the presentation I made to the coaches CEU clinic in Boston on training for the triathlon swim using the Vasa Ergometer, go to the VASA homepage and click on the link for the DVD: <http://vasatrain.com>

As you approach this off season and begin to think about 2009, remember this quote: "if you keep doing what you have always done, you'll keep getting what you've always gotten." Best of luck as you work this off season to make the changes you need to go faster, easier, in 09!

Coach Al Lyman, CSCS, has developed an easy-to-follow, comprehensive program called Runner-CORE that is a fast, effective, and time saving strength and flexibility program for triathletes and runners of all ability levels. For more information go to <http://runner-core.com> <[http://runner-core.com](mailto:runner-core.com)> . <<http://runner-core.com>> . Coach Al now also offers online video running form analysis and also offers a myriad of training plans for both running and triathlon using Runner-CORE. For more information, go to <http://coach-al.com>, or email Coach Al at: coachal@coach-al.com <<mailto:coachal@coach-al.com>> Also, at <http://coach-al.com>, you can sign up for Coach Al's e-newsletter, the "Endurance Scoop," which is produced bi-monthly and filled with tips, inspiration, and articles for endurance athletes of all abilities.

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