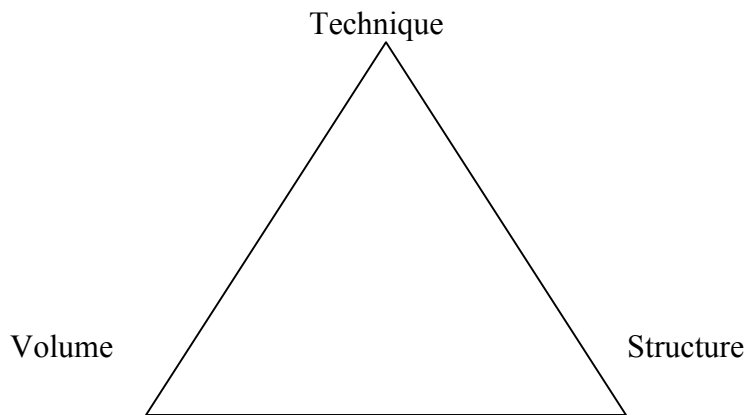


Three Keys to a Faster Swim

I have this talk every few months with athletes new to swimming. “How do I get faster?” They ask. I usually give them a generic answer - and then a specific one.

The generic answer is: Dedication, persistence, and consistency. That goes well on a poster board for a motivational speech, but hardly gives you a plan of action. People want specifics!

The specific answer is: Technique, training time (volume), and workout structure (intensity). You can view these as a 3-sided triangle. Technique goes at the top, because without at least a moderate amount of good swimming technique, training time and workout structure will only help a little bit.



To illustrate, imagine someone who barely understands front crawl or freestyle. They can swim every day (high volume) with detailed workouts with varying effort intervals (good structure). This will improve their overall cardiovascular fitness and muscular strength. But this swimmer will quickly hit a limit on improvements to speed because of poor technique. In swimming, it is very easy to use a lot of energy and make very little forward progress.

I am sure some of you reading this have already figured that out.

Technique

Without at least decent swimming technique, you will always be limited in your ability to go fast for longer distances. This is an absolute. By decent technique, I mean that more of your energy is directed to moving you forward rather than pushing you backwards, to the side, underwater, etcetera. Teaching yourself reasonably proficient and better



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technique is difficult but not impossible, especially with the advent of free movie websites like YouTube (search swimming technique), as well as more thorough instructional videos like our Powerstroke DVD. YouTube is free and most swimming DVDs actually cost much less than what you will pay for an hour of time with a competent instructor.

That being said, I strongly recommend finding a local swimming technique coach who can film you and then provide specific recommendations on what you need to improve. Your local masters group may also have a good coach on deck who is willing to spend a few minutes during practice giving you personal feedback.

The details of swimming technique are complex and beyond the scope of this article, but the two fundamentals are: a good forward reach or extension phase, and a technically correct and powerful catch and pull phase. Without these two fundamentals driving your stroke, you will need a great kick to be fast. And kicking uses a lot of leg energy...not good for triathlon racing!

Volume

Don't be scared, I am not going to suggest you start swimming twice a day, five days a week. Not unless you're planning to swim in college, that is. For triathlons, and for improvement for most working adult age-group triathletes, three times a week is what it really takes. Four or five swim sessions per week are even better if you are serious about becoming a faster swimmer. But I am aware that time is at a premium, so you should prescribe to a plan that is realistic.

Two times a week does not cut it. Athletes that come from a strong swimming background can get away with this as a way to maintain most of their form and a lot of their speed. However if you are new to swimming, you are going to have to put more time into it than they currently do.

The person you are watching swim laps effortlessly at a fast pace at your local pool has put hundreds of hours into the pool, and you are witnessing the end result of all that work.

That's at least three times a week, and ultimately, you want each session to be an hour or more (roughly 3,000 yards or meters). You can ramp it up in the winter when it gets cold and you are not spending long hours on the bike.

Remember, this article is about how to swim *fast*, not how to swim, period!



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Structure

Just jumping into the pool and doing laps until you get bored or tired just became what you used to do. You're now going to graduate to structured workouts, like real swimmers use. Almost every swim workout you do should be structured, and each week should include workouts that target various systems like an aerobic workout (longer), a muscular endurance workout (mid-distance and moderate hard).

The exceptions to pure structured workouts are steady open water endurance swims or non-stop simulation swims in the pool, and those are structured in the sense that they're included in the top level organization of your training.

A typical swim workout should include the following components (example provided)

- 10-15% easy warming up (4 x 100 easy on 20 seconds rest)
- 10-20% drills and kicking (8 x 50s as alternating 1 drill, 1 kick on 15 seconds rest)
- 40-70% main set (6 x 200 on 30 seconds rest OR 12 x 100 on 15 seconds rest)
- Optional additional drills
- 5-10% cool down (100 easy)

The main set is the meat and potatoes of the workout. Each main set should have a specific training goal: Endurance work (longer swim intervals), Speed work (short, fast intervals), and muscular endurance work (medium length intervals at moderate-hard effort levels).

If you're training for an Ironman, doing nothing but long, slow intervals *will* prepare you to swim – albeit long and slow. Short and fast will help you become a faster swimmer, and that speed does flow through to longer distances in swimming.

Marty Gaal, CSCS, is a USA Triathlon coach who lives in Cary, North Carolina. He and his wife Brianne coach triathletes through their company, One Step Beyond. Marty has been swimming in ocean competitions since 1986 and racing triathlon since 1989.

One Step Beyond recently produced the *Powerstroke®: Speed through force and form* freestyle technique DVD, intended to help new to intermediate triathlon swimmers become faster and more powerful in the water. You can read more about their coaching services at www.osbmultisport.com and the DVD is available at www.powerstroke-dvd.com.