

Take the Plunge

By Robin Brew.

Some simple training and attention to technique will improve your swim stroke beyond recognition.

Traditionally the first of the three disciplines, swimming is often the biggest cause of concern to triathlon newcomers. The good news is that applying some simple but effective training and paying a small amount of attention to technique will improve your standard very quickly. There is no restriction on the stroke you must use during a triathlon event.

Breaststroke and backstroke are perfectly acceptable, but front crawl is a faster and more economical stroke when performed well. After your initial introductory training periods, you should give more consideration to your front crawl stroke technique. Working on some of the points below will help you organise your stroke and allow you to breathe more efficiently

Planning Training Routines

Before looking at ways to improve your swimming, it is important to establish a routine for your training. Improving a swim stroke technique relies heavily on fitness in the water. By initially doing interval-type training for 15-30mins about two or three times per week, you will gradually improve your fitness. An example of interval training is swimming six sets of 100m in 2:30mins, where 100m takes you 2mins with 30secs rest in between. After three weeks of interval training, you should feel slightly more balanced and more comfortable in the water.

Jargon Buster

Interval training involves following a routine of short pool-based training session two or three times a week in order to improve fitness

Pullbouys are floats that are of great assistance during training for keeping your hips high in the water Recovery is the part of the stroke where the hand exits the water

When in the water, your body position should be as flat as possible. The shoulders, hips and heels should be in a straight line at all times. To obtain the correct head position, point the chin downward at an angle of 45°. The oncoming water should make contact in the middle of the forehead. Keeping your hips high is crucial to maintaining a good body position. If your hips constantly seem low in the water, use a float (also known as a pullbuoy) placed high between the legs. Allow the legs to move slightly up and down even though you have the float in place.

Arm Action

The hand should enter the water no wider than shoulder width and shouldn't cross the centre line of the body. The hand enters the water approximately 30-60cm in front of the head and slides forward in a streamlined action just below the surface for a further 20-25cm. The fingertips should be the lowest point as the arm reaches full extension. Flex the wrist, tense the elbow, press briefly downwards and then pull backwards with the leading hand, following a thin S-shape pull pattern. Directly under the body, the hand should be about 60cm with a slight bend at the elbow.

Don't forget about the back part of the stroke. The hand exits the water when the thumb is alongside the thigh, then travels forward smoothly around the side. This part of the stroke, when the hand exits the water, is known as the recovery. At this point the arm should be as relaxed as possible.

Coordination

The timing of the front crawl is the key factor when implementing the breathing and coordination of the arm action. The correct timing is when the leading hand passes the chest underwater, the other arm (the recovering arm) enters the water in front of the head at hand entry point.

The timing for breathing also fits in with the timing for the arm action. If you normally breathe to the right, then as your right hand enters the water you can begin your exhalation into the water. As the right hand reaches the end of the stroke, you can turn to the right side and breathe in. The same applies for those who breathe to the left. It's simply a matter of applying recommended timing to your preferred breathing side.

Kicking Off

Leg action contributes significantly to the timing and balance of your stroke. Maintain a steady rhythm with your legs, keeping them close together. Kick to a depth of around 45-60cm. A relaxed, smooth action is all that's

Top 10 Swim Tips

Establishing a training routine will help fitness and consequently swimstroke technique

Attempt to keep your body as flat as possible in the water

Pointing your chin downwards at 45° will help you to obtain the correct head position

During the stroke, your hand should enter the water 30-60cm in front of your head

During the recovery, the arm should be as relaxed as possible

With the front crawl, timing is the key factor when implementing the breathing and coordination of the action

A smooth and relaxed leg action will help to reduce the consumption of valuable energy and oxygen

The quickest way to improve your technique is to work on short repetitions

Rest is important, particularly in early sessions. Take lots of rest, keep the distance down, but maintain the pace and technique

It's beneficial to combine the timing for breathing in with the timing of the arm action during the stroke

needed. Don't work the legs too hard as they consume a great deal of valuable energy and oxygen. The quickest way to improve your swim is to work on short repetitions, concentrating on your stroke technique. Rest during your early sessions is important. Also remember to take lots of rest, keep the distance down, but keep the pace and technique up.

Better Breathing

If you're having problems with your timing and breathing, then try to work on the fail-safe 'catch up' stroke.

Leave one hand extended in front of the head until the other arm completes one whole stroke and arrives alongside the extended arm.

Now repeat the process again for the opposite arm.

For ease, a float can be held out in front of the head with the left hand while the right arm completes a stroke. Once the stroke is completed, the right hand will take hold of the float, leaving the left arm free to complete another stroke.

Example Session

Warm Up (600m)

100m front crawl
50m front crawl legs only (kick)
100m front crawl catch up
50m front crawl legs only
(Repeat warm-up set)

Build Set (100m)

4 x 25m front crawl with 30secs rest (try to get faster with each length)

Main Set (450m)

25m front crawl with 20secs rest
50m front crawl with 30secs rest
75m front crawl with 45secs rest
50m front crawl with 30secs rest
25m front crawl with 20secs rest
Swim easy back to the start, take 2mins recovery and then repeat the main set.

Warm Down (150m)

Swim easy 6 x 25m another stroke with 10secs rest

This training programme should help you to complete the swim section of your first

triathlon. Remember that it is only a guide that may seem simple to experienced swimmers and conversely may seem difficult to someone who doesn't have so much swimming experience.

Eight week swim training schedule

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Week	Session 1	Type	Session 2	Type	Total
1	1000m - 1200m	Mixed	1000m - 1200m	Easy	1800m - 2200m
2	1200m - 1500m	Pace	1000m - 1200m	Easy	2000m - 2500m
3	1000m - 1200m	Mixed	1000m - 1200m	Mixed	2500m - 3200m
4	1500m - 2000m	Pace	1000m - 1200m	Speed	2500m - 3200m
5	800m - 1000m	Easy	1000m - 1200m	Mixed	2300m - 3000m
6	1000m - 2000m	Pace	1000m - 1200m	Easy	2500m - 3200m
7	1000m - 1200m	Easy	1000m - 1200m	Mixed	2500m - 3200m
8	1000m - 1200m	Pace	1000m - 1200m	Race	1000m - 1200m

Key

Easy - Low-effort session. Keep the distance moderate, short rest intervals, mainly front crawl.

Mixed - Steady session with arm pulls using a float and leg-kick intervals. Also include other strokes.

Pace - Moderate/hard effort. Take good rests, try to check times, use good interval sets.

Speed - Easy warm-up. Small main set to include very hard effort over short distances, lots of rest.

Comments

Use this session as a guide to the type of training you should be doing.

Avoid swimming continuous long, easy sessions as these tend to affect your stroke technique and do little to develop your speed.

Try to work out some interesting sessions that fit in with the distances and goals for your triathlon event.

After the race it's a good idea to do some more pool based triathlons to build up your confidence. You might want to step up to the more widely recognised Olympic-distance events which start with a 1.5km swim.
