

How to Swim Faster by Marty Gaal • USA Triathlon

I have this talk every few months with athletes new to swimming. They ask: "How do I get faster?" 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 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 bit.

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To illustrate, imagine someone who barely understands front crawl or freestyle. He can swim every day (high volume) with detailed workouts with varying effort intervals (good structure). This will improve his 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.

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Swimming 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 backward, to the side, underwater, etc. Teaching yourself reasonably proficient and better 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. However, 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 also may have a good coach on deck who is willing to spend a few minutes during practice giving you personal feedback. Without good fundamentals driving your stroke, you will need a great kick to be fast. And kicking uses a lot of leg energy, which is not good for triathlon racing.

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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 to see improvement in 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 follow a plan that is realistic.

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Two times a week does not cut it. Athletes who 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!

Structure

Jumping into the pool and swimming laps until you're tired or bored just became how you used to swim. 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 percent easy warming up (4x100 easy on 20 seconds rest)
- 10-20 percent drills and kicking (8x50s as alternating 1 drill, 1 kick on 15 seconds rest)
- 40-70 percent main set (6x200 on 30 seconds rest or 12x100 on 15 seconds rest)
- Optional additional drills
- 5-10 percent 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) or 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.** Improve your swim with a masters swimming program.