

TRIATHLON SWIMMING FROM SCRATCH BY GLEN GORE

Intro:

It's official. The swim is the most daunting of all the three disciplines in the sport of triathlon. You are not alone. You have been thinking of taking up the sport of tri but are not too sure about the swim part of it. Anybody can learn to ride a bike and go for a run but the thought of having to swim in the open water puts the fear into you, right? Not to worry.

I have outlined 5 really basic steps to get you started on the swim from scratch. We are going to make it as simple as possible. You will be bombarded with triathlon and swimmers jargon from all quarters when you enter the sport as a newbie and the advice will come in thick and fast. Don't become overwhelmed and intimidated. If you stick to some of the basics outlined below, it becomes easy. As long as you can keep your head above water unaided and have some form of swimming style structure in place, you can complete the swim leg of any triathlon. Make sure you start with the shorter swim distance triathlon events first before setting goals on the bigger fish like a 1.5km Olympic distance swim or 1.9km and 3.8km IM swims. Take small steps first to build your confidence levels and then you can aim for much faster and further.

Step 1: Join A Swim Squad

For every one of you nervous wrecks out there trying to get your head around starting the swim training required for triathlon, there are a handful of others living just around the corner, thinking the exact same thing. Joining a swim squad is the easiest way to get into the swing of things fast.

Not only will you be coupled with swimmers of similar abilities but your comfort zone will be pushed on a regular basis. This all contributes to you feeling better about yourself in the water and ultimately, swimming better. Besides the added benefit of having a swim coach telling you what to do instead of having to think for yourself, the fun factor is so much greater when you train with like-minded people. If you're having fun and enjoying yourself, the swim training part suddenly takes on a new dimension and the fear begins to fall by the wayside. You need not join a swim squad all the time, possibly once per week to start off with. You can then increase to a maximum of two sessions per week with a third open water swim session on the weekends. You can do this until you become totally confident in your own swimming abilities after which you can switch to training on your own. Time constraints with work and family often make committing to a swim squad difficult. One month of squad swimming with a maximum of two squad sessions per week should be enough to see you on your way.

Step 2: Buy Some Swim Fins

If you have never experienced the thrill of swimming with fins, do yourself a favour and buy these training aids first. Even the weakest of swimmers will feel like a speed machine with swim fins on. Most swim programs and coaches discourage the use of swimming with fins too often. This does make sense as they give you a massive advantage in the pool over a normal foot kick - an advantage you will not have when you line up for a race.

Having said that, when you are new to the sport and your swimming is really poor, the fins will give you the boost in the pool that might be needed to spike your swim proficiency and motivational levels. A poor swimmer tends to drag their body through the water with most of the effort coming from the arms and upper body region. The fins will allow you to kick a little harder, streamlining the body and thus elevating the legs to a higher degree than when swimming without fins. This will naturally improve your swim speed through the water.

You can start off by doing all your swim training with the fins on. As you get fitter, you start doing a little less with them on and so on, until you are ready to drop them completely from the program. Most triathletes going forward will add an element of fin swimming or kicking into their programs but the majority of swim training is done without the aid of the fins. As a start from scratch swimmer, you have the opportunity to start off with the fins and then progress from there to normal swimming.

Swim Shorter Distances Faster:

If you're starting triathlon swimming from scratch, even a 25 yard stretch is going to seem like a long way. The best and easiest way to start swimming and training from scratch is to swim shorter distances but at greater speed. There is no direct benefit for weaker swimmers to plod along endlessly in the pool, length upon length. The preferred option is to swim shorter distances but with greater intensity. The rest period between intervals should also be extended to ensure adequate recovery time before you set off for the next one. An interval is the amount of lengths/yards you will complete at any one time without a rest period in between).

If you are just starting up with swim training, I would suggest keeping your intervals pitched at 25 yards. You can do these a number of times (eg: 20 x 25 yards) with a rest period of between 30 and 60 seconds after each one you complete. You now need to try and swim faster over that 25 yard stretch in the first couple of weeks. You carry on doing this until you see a significant improvement in your split times (the time it takes for you to complete 1 length). You can then progress to 50 yard intervals and do pretty much the same by swimming a number of these 50 yard intervals with adequate rest periods in between until you see a vast improvement in the split time. The theory behind this method of swim training for start from scratch swimmers is that it is easier to swim and improve faster over a shorter distance than it is to improve by swimming longer distances but at a slower pace.

Invest In A Good Wetsuit:

The number one shopping item on any new triathlete's list is the bike. Thereafter comes all the other bits and pieces that make up the required tools of the trade. The triathlon-specific wetsuit is an essential item but does not hold as much weight as a triathlon bike or race wheels for instance. What most novices tend to do when it comes to buying wetsuits is to start off with an entry level model in the hopes that they will one day progress to the top-of-the range model. Their train of thought is presumably that the entry level model will be more than good enough for their level of swimming ability. This is definitely a big mistake on their part that will cost them both time and money in the long run. Buy the best model you can afford right from the outset. The top range models are made of better quality materials, are made to be more flexible and in a lot of cases, are much more buoyant. A strong swimmer will not see a huge difference in swim times when moving from an entry-mid range wetsuit model to the top end model. The weaker swimmer, however, will notice a big difference in their swim times. Yes, they are more expensive but if you have the cash, invest in the best wetsuit your money can buy. You will not be sorry for it. As a start-from-scratch swimmer, you will be very happy with the choice to buy the best suit right from the start.

Video Stroke Analysis:

It sounds like some big words and lots of hard work but in reality, it's really quite simple. A specialist in the field of swim stroke analysis will take a video of you swimming when you start your training. They will show you in real time what your stroke looks like when you start swimming (both on top of the water as well as underneath) They will give you some pointers, then some drills to perform and then finally invite you back after a few weeks to film you once again. A comparison will then be done to see the exact difference (if any) between the before and after swim strokes.

Hopefully, by viewing yourself in action during the actual swim motion via video stroke analysis, you will be able to see the mistakes you are making, take some basic steps to correct those mistakes and then come back to see the improvements. Ideally you want to do this right at the beginning of your swim training. As mentioned previously, it sounds involved but in reality, it's simple, basic and functional. You need to see what you are doing wrong rather than being told what you are doing wrong. Two sessions (1 before and 1 after) and the start –from-scratch swim training will be made so much easier!