

## GEARING TOWARDS THE HALF IRONMAN AND LONGER

### SWIM, BIKE AND RUN

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What can I do to improve my swim, bike and run skills over the next few months with all the big races just around the corner?

Triathlon is such a diverse and complex sport that one will never/can never stop learning or trying to improve on one's performance. Even the professionals will always have a desire to go one step better and faster.

This time of year is ideal to hone your skills and improve on the smaller things that make a big difference once summer comes around again. If you leave training and the trying of new tricks till it gets warmer and closer to the start of the season, you lose out on valuable experimental time. Now is the perfect time to try new techniques/drills/skills as a way of improving your triathlon/multi sport performances once the summer season truly gets going.

There are a number of things you can try in all three disciplines. I will highlight a few that you can try in each discipline.

#### The Swim Discipline

There are loads of ways to improve your swimming performance, especially when you have plenty of time. That is why the next few months should not be looked on as downtime but rather as an opportunity to either fix up your stroke or make some radical changes in your approach to the training process. The start of the tri season does not present an opportunity for experimentation but rather a time to get fit and race ready. So by utilising your time wisely, we can look at the following areas in detail and get you onto that road to swimming faster.

- strength training
- dry land training
- video swim analysis
- swim pool drills

#### 1. Strength Training

A great deal of a pool swimmer's time is spent in the gym. They need massive amounts of power and explosiveness for their particular events and so concentrate on doing strength conditioning right throughout the year. A triathlete is a little different in that we have to juggle 3 disciplines around our work, family and play. A triathlete's approach to swimming should be completely different to that of a competitive pool swimmer (especially when we are talking age-groupers). Apart from the basic stroke arm pull which is pretty much universal, triathletes differ from pool swimmers in that we:

- compete in the open water and not a single lane with anti turbulence features
- we swim predominantly in wetsuits that do, contradictory to the manufacturers spec, hinder the free motion of the arm stroke
- we swim with our heads up in the air and have a mound of other swimmers to contend with all fighting for the same swim line

## What Can We Do To Improve Our Strength?

More muscle means more weight we need to carry. So we need to look at overall strength gains and not so much at power or mass gains. After all, aerobic work (swim/bike and run training) will always compromise muscle gain. What that actually means is you can go and work yourself silly in the gym trying to build muscle volume but the minute you set foot out the door and go for a run, those gains are essentially reduced to a certain degree. What we need to do is focus on specific muscle groups that produce sustained strength suited to an endurance sport like triathlon

### Specific Muscle Groups

It is quite obvious what the benefits of working the back (lateral) muscles, shoulders and arm muscles are in terms of swimming. There are many exercises one can do within these specific muscle groups and any gym or personal trainer can show you some combinations that will go a long way to improving your general swimming strength. Upper body workouts are important to swimming faster.

- Do upper body workouts using arms, shoulders, triceps and biceps at least 3 to 4 times per week in the off season. Do this either just before you swim or just after. You can cut down time spent in the pool over winter and instead spend this time doing some extra strength training.
- 30-40 minutes is all you need in the gym, so don't overdo your stay. Keep it short and sweet.
- Limit the heavy weights and instead do more repetitions per set, and at a lighter weight.

#### 1. Dry Land Training

This is a really effective way to improve on one's performance without having to spend hours in the pool. One of the best forms of dry land training has to be stretch cords or some other similar type of resistance swim training aids. As long as the proper technique is applied when using them, they are a great way to increase stamina and strength. They also serve a useful purpose as a warm-up tool before a race.

If you have some money to burn, then swimming simulators (triton/vasa/halo) can also be a big help in preparing for a summer of long pool sessions.

#### 2. Video Swim Analysis

A number of coaches will offer this service. If you can swing it, I would suggest you make the time to go and get your stroke analysed - especially if you're a weaker swimmer looking for an extra edge. You cannot fully observe your own stroke motion to see if it's on the right track whilst swimming. Even a coach from the poolside deck will battle to see what's going on underneath the water surface. A video analysis of your current stroke motion will show up any defects in real time and allow you to see for yourself where you may be going wrong. A similar follow up session after a few weeks will show the improvements and do wonders for your self confidence in the pool.

#### 3. Swim Pool Drills

There are a number of drills you can incorporate into your weekly swim sessions. I would set aside at least 1/3 of your time spent in the pool during the winter months on swim drills. By drills I mean the following;

- one arm stroke pulls ( e.g. 25m left arm, 25m right arm)
- double arm catch-up (1 arm pull at a time with a delay before you take the 2<sup>nd</sup> arm pull)
- water polo drills (lifting the head out the water and swimming with a high shoulder action)
- swimming with fists (forces you to grip the water with the forearm as opposed to just the hand)

You can also use various swimming training aids for this purpose

- paddles (for strength training and stroke correction)
- fins (great to strengthen the legs which are normally lost along the way when it comes to a triathlete's swim program)
- snorkel (made by fins, this tool allows you to do some major hypoxic breathing exercises as well as giving you an opportunity to view your own swim stroke without having to move your head from side to side)

## The Bike Discipline

This time of year is probably the only time when riding outdoors becomes more of a chore than an actual passion. I for one hate riding in the cold and the wet and prefer the sun to be shining with a nice dry road ahead of me. To keep the fires burning, we need not grind out daily rides in less than ideal weather. There are a number of options open to us that will not only allow us to keep our fitness but quite possibly improve our cycling prowess as well.

First things first;

### 1. Bike Fit and Equipment Overhaul

If you want to upgrade the bike or change some components, this is probably the best time to do it in. Winter allows you time to tweak and adjust so that when racing does start, you need not hassle about bike set up then and you can just concentrate on actual fitness gains

All the bike/tri shops run bike set-up programs, especially when it comes to selecting a new bike. Some things to look at and get right when changing your steed are as follows:

- Crank length and chain ring size (this may affect your riding style and power output depending on what sort of rider you are and what size you measure in terms of height)
- Changing pedals, shoes and cleats often affect saddle height position, so make sure you get them right. An incorrect saddle height could quite possibly bring on injuries such as hamstring problems, lower back pains and sore knees to mention but a few
- The toss up between road bike angles and tri bike angles. Make sure you get this right from the outset. The use of tri bars on an existing bike may also affect the stem length, so check that thoroughly.
- If you are going to buy secondhand, make sure it's the right bike for you and not just a matter of saving some hard earned cash. Those few dollar savings could end up costing you a lot more than just some spare pocket money. You're investing a lot of time, money and effort into training and racing, so the correct bike choice is definitely a priority.
- Some bike technicians also offer video analysis of your current riding style and they may be in a position to alter that and create a much more efficient riding style.

## 1. Indoor Cycle Trainer Sessions

Bad weather does not mean you have to lay off the bike. The wind trainer is a great tool that you can use to ride indoors and improve your cycling ability at the same time.

- cycle trainer drills

Quite often, we have a strength imbalance between our dominant leg and the other leg. A one legged cycle drill can assist in correcting this imbalance. Cycle with one leg clipped into the pedal and the other resting on a foot chair. Use the one leg with repeat drills and then swap over vice-versa.

You can also try and improve your cycling fluidity by concentrating on the various stages of the pedal action (i.e. the 4 stages of the circular motion)

- 1) push down,
- 2) the pull-up
- 3) the two stages between and after the above mentioned

Try some drills by concentrating on a certain section of the pedal action i.e. 15 seconds each per stage, increase this to 30 seconds each and so forth. A more fluid cycle motion style will definitely benefit your riding ability and allow you to “spin” more freely.

You could also consider upgrading your bike by adding power wattage meters and/or power cranks. These work wonders on the indoor trainers and are a lot more scientific in their approach than the normal interval based training that rely on heart rate and maximal efforts. They do come at a cost but are an exact measure of one’s true training workloads.

## 1. Strength Work for Lower Body (Flexibility and Core Body Strength)

You are going to need some lower body strength to improve your overall riding ability. Two gym sessions per week during the off season where you concentrate specifically on the lower legs will go a long way to transforming you into a better cyclist

These are some of the cycle specific exercises you can try when you hit the gym

- leg extensions
- leg curls
- leg press
- squats
- plyo metric jumps

Once again, do not spend too much time in the gym. You need only set aside 30 minute per session to get in an effective workout.

You can also incorporate

- core muscle workouts (sit-ups/crunches/abdominal work)
- greater flexibility and stretching exercises
- yoga
- spin sessions

## 1. Base Conditioning Work

If you're fortunate enough to live in a warmish climate that allows for outside winter riding, you may want to consider long, slow rides during the winter months. A big base before the season starts can put you miles ahead of the competition. So often once we jump into the season, we don't have time to ride "slow". A handful of long (I mean really long) rides of up to 6hrs (1/2 x per week) are an ideal way of setting yourself up for a successful summer of racing.

If you live in a colder climate, then use the wind trainer for long rides. What you can do is reduce the time limit (3hrs+-) as well as increase the resistance and intensity slightly.

The base phase is the laying down of a foundation to any successful triathlon season. These next few months present an ideal time in which to think long term.

## The Run Discipline

Running is great sport in that it is pretty much all year round. All you need is a pair of running shoes and away you go. You'll probably want a few extra clothing layers when conditions dictate them, but all in all, one need never stop running in pursuit of fitness and athletic gain.

### 1. Cross Country/Trail Running

Try a few off-road runs if they present themselves in your area. Not only will they make you stronger (running in sand and over rocks require a great deal of concentration and added strength) but they can potentially invigorate your run training and keep you motivated.

### 2. Duathlon

There are many duathlons both road and off-road to keep you busy in the build-up phase towards the start of the season and the longer races that await you. Nothing beats racing against competition and it is ideal preparation for you to improve and run faster. Duathlon adds a different dimension in that you run really hard before biking, unlike a triathlon which has a swim section at the start of an event. This will teach you to pace yourself properly on the run portion and the experience gained during these training races can only enhance one's performances over the longer multisport run distances.

### 3. Correct Shoe Fit

Make sure you get some expert advice on what shoe is best for you before the start of the longer run sessions. An injury will set you back big time and sometimes, a simple change in running shoes can cause huge problems for you down the line.

Set yourself some long term race goals during the summer months and use this to get you through the next couple of months using the above as guidelines to improving your swim, bike and run disciplines.