



NOVICE SWIM TRAINING FOR TRIATHLETES

We know swimming! Think of us as your expert resource on swimming tips, stroke technique, open water racing strategy, and holistic swim training. We'll give you the secrets you need to improve your swim, so that you can better tackle your next triathlon. This guide will give you a taste of our swimming knowledge to get you started on that journey. We recognize that you can't do this alone, which is why we're here to support you both in and out of the water. We've got hundreds of articles and other resources that can help you *own* the swimming portion of your next race. Join U.S. Masters Swimming today.

USMS ARTICLES

included in this guide:

Six Things Triathletes Wish They Knew

Open Water 101: Managing Feelings of Anxiety and Panic in Open Water

Safety Tips for Open Water Swimming

Breathing and Buoyancy in Open Water Swimming

Gimme a Break!

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Six Things Triathletes Wish They Knew

How swimming with a Masters Swimming club can give you an edge

Every triathlete knows how important it is to have the right shoes, the right bike, and the right nutrition plan. We buy power meters and carbon fiber water bottle cages, and we practice for hours to shave every possible second off our transitions. But many triathletes are missing a great opportunity to find extra speed.

You may have watched swim teams practice and thought, “That’s not for me—I’m never going to do flip turns or race butterfly.” But swimming with a Masters Swimming club *absolutely* will make you a better triathlete. Here’s why.

1. Technique is critical

Triathletes know how important aerodynamics are on the bike, yet hardly think about the fact that **water creates 1000 times more resistance than air**. A few minor corrections in swimming form reduce drag far more than a redesigned bike frame could. A Masters coach can show you how to go faster and save energy by minimizing your bodyline as you swim.

2. Swimming other strokes in workout pays off

Fast swimming requires **developing a “feel” for the water**. Swimming other strokes (with proper coaching guidance) helps you learn to instinctively adjust your hydrodynamics (body position, hand angles, etc.) so you know how to get around buoys, deal with waves, and get the most thrust from your freestyle pull. Olympic triathlon bronze medalist Susan Williams says, “Other strokes teach you to move through water efficiently, and balance muscle development to avoid injury.”

3. Training without a wetsuit makes you faster

A wetsuit’s buoyancy can mitigate some stroke flaws, but you’re better off if you actually *eliminate* those flaws. Learning to swim efficiently without a wetsuit means you’ll **use less energy on race day**. “I love swimming in my wetsuit,” says Haley Benson, age-group winner at the 2013 Boulder 70.3, “but I’m more efficient because I’ve learned to swim well without it.”

4. Lanemates make you stronger

Benson says, “If you want to swim faster, then you have to swim with fast people.” Not only does friendly workout competition make you work harder, but you can also **learn a lot about pacing, drafting, and race strategy** from swimming in an organized group. You’ll also make friends who will become great training partners.

5. It's good to have some fun

Triathletes do a lot of solo workouts, which requires mental focus that's tough to maintain throughout the season. It's a treat to delegate the planning and feedback responsibilities to your Masters Swimming coach, so you can just **immerse yourself in the workout** and enjoy it. A creative workout and a lane full of friends keeps swim practice from ever becoming boring.

6. Extra eyes mean extra speed

An online tri coach can write challenging sets, and a DVD might show you proper technique, but without direct feedback, you may not recognize your own energy-eating stroke flaws, much less know how to correct them. Williams says, "Small adjustments in hand angle or breathing can mean a minute or more in an Olympic tri swim. Swimming with a team helps you **identify and lock in the right improvements** to gain that speed."

With these advantages in the arsenal, Masters swimmers show up at the triathlon start line with the extra confidence to dominate the race from the beginning.



About The Author - Terry Heggy

Terry "Speed" Heggy has been swimming for more than 50 years. He won his age group in the 10K Open Water Championship in 2006, competed in the National Championship Olympic Distance Triathlon in 2014, and qualified again for USAT Nationals in 2015. He's the head coach of Team Sopris Masters in Glenwood Springs, Colo., and is a USMS-certified Level 3 Masters coach and an NASM Certified Personal Trainer.

Open Water 101: Managing Feelings of Anxiety and Panic in Open Water

Don't get overwhelmed in the unknown waters

Although open water swimming can be one of the most calming, cathartic, and tranquil sports you can take part in, not everyone feels comfortable in the open water. Even experienced pool swimmers sometimes find they experience panic while swimming in open water. Not being able to see the bottom and the feeling of being far from the safety of land can contribute to the anxiety some swimmers feel when swimming in open water.

So, what do you do if you start to feel panic in the open water?

- **Roll on your back.** Sometimes just flipping on your back and floating for a moment, where you can breathe as much as you want, can help you overcome the beginnings of a panic attack. One of the first symptoms of a panic attack is hyperventilation, so allowing yourself access to unrestricted breathing may help subdue your fear. Watch the clouds flitting by overhead, or just shut your eyes and focus on relaxing. This may be enough to get your head back into the “now” so you can continue swimming along.
- **Call for help.** If you’re swimming with a group, even just having a buddy come alongside to swim with you may make a big difference. Ask that person to stay with you as you head back to shore. If you have a kayaker shadowing you, even better. Wave them over and hang onto the kayak for a moment. See if you can calm yourself down and catch your breath. Just having a quick chat with someone may help bring you back from the brink. Once you’re feeling calmer, you can resume swimming.
- **Head to shore.** It’s OK to say you’re scared and get out. Especially if this is your first time in open water, getting out before you get into trouble is infinitely wise. Just remember, the best way to beat a fear is to face it head-on. If you have a difficult outing, don’t be scared to try again. Stay close in to shore where you can stand up if you need to, and just keep trying. Eventually, you can get used to it.
- **Talk to someone.** If your panic attacks are particularly scary, you might want to talk to a mental health professional. There could be an underlying issue contributing to the way you’re feeling, and exploring those concerns may help you learn to enjoy open water more with the added benefit of releasing whatever root problem could be at work.

The key is to keep the panic from getting the better of you. Easier said than done, perhaps, but regular exposure to open water—particularly when done safely in a group context—should help.

About The Author - Elaine K Howley

Elaine K. Howley is an award-winning freelance writer and editor specializing in sports, health, and history topics. Her work has appeared in numerous print and online publications including AARP.org, Atlas Obscura, espnW, and U.S. News & World Report.

Safety Tips for Open Water Swimming

Get out there and have some fun, safely!

I prefer open water to a pool any day. It doesn't mean I don't have a healthy fear of the critters below or other variables, I do. (I could go on and on about lifeguarding drills, feeling nudges in the water, seeing shadows while surfing, and so on.) But one thing is certain, it hasn't stopped me yet! I love the open water and you can embrace it, too, but not without sturdy safety practices and a few basics.

Here are some basic safety tips and key points to employ when you're planning a swim with some friends or heading to a race or event. This list is not exhaustive, but it's a place to start.

Even if you're participating in a race or organized swim, it's still best practice to remain aware of personal basic safety at all times. Just remember to have fun, keep calm, and create a positive atmosphere for you and those around you. Nature is unpredictable, but unnecessary swim-related accidents can be prevented.

Basic Safety for a Casual Swim with Friends

- **Never swim alone.** First and foremost, never under any circumstances ever swim alone. Did I mention never-ever? Would you SCUBA dive alone? Of course not! Whenever you're in the water, always swim with a buddy, even if there is a lifeguard. A lifeguard cannot be considered a buddy because his primary duty is to protect and prevent hazardous situations for all patrons, not just you.
- **Check water conditions before entering.** Is it safe for everyone to swim? Are there hazards not immediately visible, such as potential boat traffic? Is the water quality poor or dangerous? Are there any indications that signs could be missing? Could those have been signs warning of a "No Swim" area? Survey the area before you enter and know what to look for.
- **Have a plan for emergencies.** What is your plan should something happen to you or your buddy? Does someone else know where you're going? Will someone be watching from shore, ready to take action in the event you need assistance? Plan for everything and eliminate as much uncertainty as possible.
- **Understand currents, rip currents, and such.** Currents are another variable of open water swimming versus pool swimming. Sometimes you won't know how strong or which direction the current pulls until you get in the water. This topic alone warrants a whole article, but for now, keep the following tips in mind:
 - **If it looks quick, it is.** Be careful, exercise extra caution, and be smart about deciding whether to get in the water.
 - **Ride it 'til it weakens.** If you get caught in a rip current—strong columns of water that rush out to sea and can carry a swimmer a great distance from shore very quickly—your best bet is to ride the current until it weakens, then swim out of it, parallel to shore. Once you're past the rip, you can turn and swim back into shore. If you try to fight the current or swim against it, you will lose.
 - **Stay calm, be safe, and be aware.** Currents happen, and your best defense is to always remain calm and aware.

- **Know your surroundings.** Be acutely cognizant of your surroundings. Boats, swimmers, marine life, variable weather and water conditions, and a lot of other elements can threaten your swim. Stay vigilant and get out of the water if you feel threatened.
- **Watch the weather.** If the forecast calls for rain or thunderstorms, it's prudent to not swim. That said, meteorologists are rarely 100% spot-on and weather changes frequently. Double check credible weather forecasting services before you swim. If you hear thunder before or during your swim, get to shore and a safe environment immediately. You do not know how quickly a storm might be moving or where it's headed, so remove yourself from the water and take cover.

Basic Prep for an Open Water Race or Event

- **Always be prepared.** The more prepared you are, the more confident you are and less likely to be overly excitable. Pack the night before so you're sure to have everything.
- **Be confident.** We're all human and despite our feelings that some skills need work or that we're not perfect, this shouldn't stop us from exuding self-assurance. As Nike says: "Just do it!"
- **Go for it from the start but stay calm.** It's good to remember when you're getting in the water, either by a running start from the beach or an in-water start, to always remain calm. If you enjoy the crowd, then create a positive, confident energy other swimmers can contribute to and feed off of; it makes it more fun for everyone. If you're too nervous or just need to avoid crowds, then do your best to place yourself at a safe distance from the crowd. It might be hard to avoid if you're participating in a race, but remember to breathe and keep calm. Some folks feel more comfortable letting an official or someone affiliated with the race or event know that this is their first race or that they're new to open water. The official or volunteer might be able to offer something that could provide comfort, even if it's a few encouraging words. Some events also rely on "Angel Swimmers" to guide and assist nervous swimmers. They aren't at every race, but ask an official if you can have a dedicated buddy for your swim.
- **Remember to breathe.** If you're starting to panic or breathe faster than normal, rein yourself in by taking slow, deep breaths and thinking about something that calms you. If you're in the water when panic strikes, roll over and float on your back until you feel you're ready to engage again. Always keep an eye on land and be aware of your surroundings. You can also look around for a safety kayaker or other support crew and ask for help or a moment to hang on the boat until the panic subsides.
- **Know the drill when drafting.** Drafting is permissible in open water swimming, but it can be tricky to do well. You never know if the person in front of you is a good navigator or someone you'd rather not follow. You might catch up to them and get a hello from their foot in your face—ouch! Just be aware of your direction and those around you; it's OK to draft off another swimmer for a bit, but if you're getting too close, pass and move on to your next target.
- **Sight land and buoy targets carefully.** Know the buoys or the next point you're aiming for and adjust the frequency of your sightings based on wave and water conditions. If it's choppy and there's a current, then you most likely will have to sight more frequently than if it you're swimming in a calm lake or pond.
- **Talk to yourself!** Freaked out? Talk through the situation out loud—only the fish will think you're crazy. Sometimes just hearing yourself talk through the scenario gives you insight as to how best to alleviate the problem. You might even be able laugh at yourself, which is the best remedy. Channel Dory from Finding Nemo, when she reminds herself to "Just keep swimming. Just keep swimming." I have found this strategy to be helpful in a few situations.

- **Relax and play!** Got waves? Keep calm and do your best. You might even consider taking on the persona of a dolphin. But, above all, be sure you're safe. There is nothing wrong with heading back to shore if it's just too much. It's better to recognize what you might need to work on before getting into a situation that can turn what should be a joyous day in the water into a nightmare.

These are just a few of many tips for making your open water adventures safe and fun.



About The Author - Yvette McKechnie

Yvette McKechnie is a Level 3 Masters coach who has been a part of the popular DCRP Masters Swim team in Washington, D.C., since 2006. When not in the water, she can be found coaching a variety of athletes from first-timers to iron-distance triathletes.



Bonus Swim Workout #1

- 600 warm-up (200 swim/100 kick, repeat)
- 6 x 50s w/:10 rest
- 25 Tarzan Drill/25 easy (hold your head out of the water to simulate sighting during the triathlon swim)
- 6 x 50s w/:20 rest (25 sprint/25 easy)
- 2 x (4 x 50s) FAST!! w/:10 rest
- 200 easy pull recovery
- 2 x 150s w/:20 rest (50 free/50 non-free/50 free)
- 100 cool down

Total: 2400 yards

Breathing and Buoyancy in Open Water Swimming

A better way to combat sinking legs syndrome

Most triathletes who come from running and cycling backgrounds are well acquainted with "sinking legs syndrome," an imbalance in body position during swimming. With more muscle mass in the legs, it's not surprising that it's a struggle to keep the feet at the surface, especially in an open water swim where lifting the head to sight is required. The instinctive response to get the feet back to the surface is overly vigorous kicking. This, in turn, not only causes rapid fatigue, but also offers little in the way of balance correction and forward propulsion in anything but a sprint. Fortunately, there are other ways of correcting sinking legs and swimming with more efficiency. Body position can be better maintained through consciously controlling buoyancy through a steady breathing rhythm.

When we're swimming, our lungs serve a dual purpose: respiration and buoyancy. Some fish have swim bladders that serve to maintain their buoyancy in the water, even while the fish remains still. Unlike a fish's swim bladder, however, the percentage of air in our lungs must continually change as we breathe. It's worth noting that the difference in our buoyancy between empty lungs and full lungs is significant; fully exhaling will usually result in sinking to the bottom.

Seasoned swimmers control their buoyancy without realizing it, by rationing out smaller exhalations throughout the stroke cycle, rather than dumping air entirely or all at once, because they become in tune with the sensation of changing buoyancy. Fully exhaling and fully inhaling will not only create drastic changes in buoyancy and resulting instability in body position, but it can also lead to hyperventilation and even loss of consciousness. The key is to achieve as close to a normal resting/breathing rhythm as possible while swimming, in which there is some air in the lungs at all times, with slight variability through breathing cycles. This comfortable and natural breathing rhythm will ensure that there's always some air in the lungs and prevent loss of buoyancy.

To perform this safely in an open water environment, it's necessary to first attempt to replicate resting breathing rhythm while swimming in a controlled environment, i.e., the pool. Focus is on ability to utilize breathing to maximize both oxygen intake and the body's buoyancy potential. By focusing on breathing rhythm as it relates to buoyancy, it's easier to achieve a more balanced body position where the center of buoyancy in the body acts as a counterforce to center of mass.

This is especially important in open water swims, where the effects of drag are typically more significant than in pool swims. These factors are also unpredictable and continually changing throughout the swim: swells, chop, and commotion caused by other swimmers present constant challenges to maintaining an optimal body position that is balanced and aligned to enable stroke symmetry and rotation. Learning to maintain balance, then, is fundamental to swimming freestyle with efficiency—as fast as possible using as little energy as possible.

Training Recommendations

As always, train for new open water technique by starting in the pool. Floating still, experiment with varying the amount of air in the lungs and compare the results on buoyancy. Using a snorkel while swimming will help you concentrate on breathing rhythm and body balance. Try to establish a natural and comfortable breathing rhythm, and practice as long as necessary in the pool before attempting these techniques in open water.



About The Author - Erica Slaughter

Erica Slaughter is the swim coach for the University of Michigan triathlon club team in Ann Arbor, Mich. She is a former NCAA All-American swimmer and current open water swimmer. Erica is completing a Masters degree in Exercise Physiology at Eastern Michigan University.



Bonus Swim Workout #2

- 400 choice warm up
- 6 x 75s w/:15 seconds rest (sighting drill - every 25, stick you head out the water to the front and try to locate a new object the pool deck, as if it were a buoy in a triathlon)
- 3 x 150s swim w/:20 rest (decrease time 1-3)
- 3 x 150s pull w/:20 rest (decrease time 1-3)
- 300 (kick/drill/swim by 25)
- 4 x 75s w/:30 rest (tombstone kicking drill – hold a kickboard perpendicular to the bottom of the pool)
- 100 cool down

Total: 2600 yards



Gimme a Break!

Techniques for recovering without stopping

Everybody knows that rest and recovery are essential components of an effective training program. But have you ever thought about how to rest and recover *during* a workout, or even a race? You should—it will definitely help your training and race performance.

Triggers that might require recovery swimming include:

- Cramps, nausea, inhaling water, etc.
- Poor race pacing (aka *“Oh no! I totally took it out too fast!”*)
- Mental anguish or physical distress (aka, *“Ouch! I got beat up during that mass start frenzy!”*)
- Designed workout interludes (i.e. *“easy”* swims) among intense workout sets

Let’s examine a few techniques for actively getting yourself back in the groove. Adding specific recovery drills to your practice will ensure that you’ll instinctively have the techniques available when you need them.

Serenity Now!

If you get trapped in the anarchy of a mass start and can’t immediately escape, take a moment to channel your inner monk for some helpful tranquility. Instead of getting angry about the situation, your best strategy is to conserve energy by taking long, relaxed strokes in the draft while actively looking for an escape route. Smile to yourself because you realize that when the opening comes, you’ll have the reserve energy to blast your way past the fighters who have burnt themselves up.

- Drill: Practice this scenario with three other workout buddies; one in front and one on each side. While the three *“escorts”* swim as frenetically as possible, the person *“in the pocket”* works on staying smooth and relaxed. Switch positions so that each swimmer has a chance to practice inside the trap.

Access to Air

If you become overly stressed or panicked, it’s essential to quickly reestablish a regular breathing pattern, with equal emphasis on inhaling AND exhaling. Switching to backstroke or breaststroke can make it easier to get the oxygen you need, but remember to keep moving forward with proper stroke technique as you regain your rhythm.

- Drill: Practice an all-out sprint for a short distance, then immediately switch to recovery stroke while emphasizing regular breathing. Hold form and body position (backstroke or breaststroke), and *keep moving*. Then after about 15 seconds of deep breathing, resume your freestyle at race pace. Repeat 4 x 200.

Stretch it Out

When the person in the next lane takes it out fast, it's really hard to resist the urge to go with them. If this happens and you suddenly realize that your pace is overly enthusiastic, don't give up. Just switch your focus from turnover rate to DPS (distance per stroke.) Count your strokes, making sure you get a full extension into the catch and good early forearm engagement. Some people benefit from developing a mantra to repeat silently as a reminder. "Long, strong, smooth, groove," etc.

- Drill: Repeat 5 x 200s with the first 100 at a high effort, and the second 100 relaxed—but still holding a good pace with excellent DPS. Try to hold the time for the second 100 within 5 seconds of the first. Rest 10-15 seconds.

Active Recovery

Interval workouts include designated rest and recovery times. Make sure you make the most of them by remembering these key points:

- Perform "easy" or "cool down" swims with the same focus on proper technique as you would do during any other drill. Hold your posture, get a good catch, breathe smoothly, etc. Practice the habit of perfection with every stroke you take, even if it's not part of a work set.
- Take advantage of downtime between repeats with mild stretching, deep breathing, and visualization of the next repeat. Stand up straight to allow your diaphragm to fully inflate your lungs, and shake out any stiff muscles. Quickly review your muscle tension from head to toe to ensure that you are fully relaxed (especially in the neck and shoulders) before you begin the next repeat.

Approach your active rest and recovery techniques with the same diligence you put into your exercise effort and you'll soon see improvements in your races.

About The Author - Terry Heggy

Terry "Speed" Heggy has been swimming for more than 50 years. He won his age group in the 10K Open Water Championship in 2006, competed in the National Championship Olympic Distance Triathlon in 2014, and qualified again for USAT Nationals in 2015. He's the head coach of Team Sopris Masters in Glenwood Springs, Colo., and is a USMS-certified Level 3 Masters coach and an NASM Certified Personal Trainer.

Learning How to Kick so You Don't Have To

The Secret to Elite-level Triathlon Performance

If you're a triathlete, you might think the title of this article is silly. "Oh, brother, another swim coach who wants to convince me, a triathlete, to kick during the swim. What do they know about triathlons?"

Is kicking harder than an easy two-beat kick during the swim leg of a tri a terrible idea? Yes, it's a terrible idea. About 3 percent of the distance covered in an Olympic-distance triathlon is in the water. You need to save your legs for the other 97 percent of the race.

But does that mean you shouldn't learn how to kick?

No. This is where the elite separate themselves from everyone else. Not only is learning how to kick vital to your swimming performance, it's one of the key ingredients in helping you improve your whole triathlon.

Although only about 10 to 15 percent of your entire triathlon is spent in the water, kicking is one of the things that can make time in the pool worth it. The benefits of swimming and learning to kick properly are not isolated to the swim—the improvements cross over to the bike and run as well.

The goal of this article is to teach you that you must learn *how* to kick, so you know how *not* to.

Why You Should Learn to Kick

As a triathlete, you might be tempted to resort to your strength when learning to swim—your strong and powerful legs. However, if you overuse your legs—keeping them engaged and stiff as you try to overpower the kick—they'll end up slowing you down.

Swimming isn't a skill that improves by going harder and stronger—it's exactly the opposite. The main goal should be to learn how to swim along the surface with style and economy of motion. Once this is achieved, the swim can become a warm-up for the rest of the race, instead of something that makes you feel like you're about to enter an anxiety-inducing washing machine.

Working on your kick is going to teach you how to relax your leg muscles and how to activate them only at the most productive moments of your stroke, making sure there's zero energy wasted. Kicking is also something you can do every day without the wear and tear that comes with land exercise.

The goal of this training is for your body to respond to the higher levels of stress you experience by swimming and kicking harder than the two-beat kick you use during a tri. This means your base level of fitness will increase more than it would with only bike and run training, and your legs will be more powerful and more efficient at using oxygen.

How to Kick Properly

Your legs shouldn't always be engaged. There are points during the kick cycle that some muscles are engaged, but the rest are completely relaxed. If all your leg muscles are tight, you're doing it wrong. Here's how to kick properly:

- Start your kick with a straight leg, with the knee of the kicking leg higher (closer to the surface of the water) than the shoulder-to-hip line.
- Your knee should be relaxed. Start driving your knee forward (toward the bottom of the pool) by engaging your hip flexor. *This is the only point in the kick where it's OK to bend your knee.*
- Once your knee is slightly below the shoulder-to-hip line (closer to the bottom of the pool), your knee needs to stay put. This is when you engage your quadriceps and straighten out your leg. It's important that your knee stays in the same place relative to your hips and torso while your leg straightens. This action will place pressure on the front of your ankle and foot, *and that's what propels you forward.* If your knee snaps back while you're straightening out your leg, your quads are weak, and the distance your foot has traveled will be minimal. You won't have much propulsion.
- Now that you've followed through straightening out your leg, engage your glutes and upper thigh muscles to recover the leg back to the starting position at the surface.

That's what your legs should do during the kick cycle. But it's also important to point out what your legs should *not* do:

- Your legs shouldn't move in a circular motion as they would in running or cycling. It's more whip-like, and the movement starts in the hips.
- The bend in your knee comes from driving your knee forward, not from the back of the thigh. At this point, the back of your leg is relaxed.
- As your leg straightens out and pressure is applied to the front of your ankle and foot, your ankle is completely relaxed. *Your foot will be pointed from the water pressure alone, not from you actively pointing your foot.* If you're doing this correctly, you'll feel some stretching and slight soreness on the top of your ankle.
- Once your leg is straight, it starts to recover to the starting position, and your knee and quads are relaxed. The leg will stay straight because of the water pressure against the back of your calf muscle. Don't bend the knee during the recovery and don't bring your heel toward your glutes. Remember, this is kicking, not running.
- During the entire kick cycle, your calf muscles should never be engaged, and your ankle is always floppy and relaxed. *If you're actively pointing your foot, you're overusing your legs.*

During the kick cycle, the front and back of your thighs take turns being engaged and relaxed. Those are the only muscles needed for a productive kick. Below the knee, everything should be relaxed. Getting to the point where your legs are relaxed and productive during the swim is only possible after you've learned how to kick. Be patient and put in the time and technique work. This is something you cannot skip; only conscious practice and consistent work will create the result you're looking for.

Knowing You Have a Proper Kick

After putting in the time and work on your kick, you'll discover that swimming has become a lot easier for you. You'll discover that when you're relaxed, you swim faster and it's easier to keep your hips and legs up at the surface. You'll also start to get a better feel for the water. Your legs won't burn anymore, and you'll notice some changes in your biking and running sessions. You'll be able to keep up with people you couldn't keep up with before and go for longer training sessions.

On race day, everything you do is a perfect reflection of what you've done in training. This isn't a day for anxiety and lucky charms; this is a day to celebrate all your hard work and sacrifice. Practice is for the mental work, the tough work, the grind. Race day is for turning your brain off and enjoying.



About The Author - Richard Garza

Richard Garza is the head coach of Texas Ford Aquatics Masters in Frisco, Texas, and held the same position for U.S. Masters Swimming competitors at the 17th FINA World Masters Championships in Hungary in 2017. A Level 4 USMS-certified coach, Garza was a 2014 USMS Kerry O'Brien Coaching Award recipient and is the chair of the USMS Legislation Committee.

Becoming A ‘Real Swimmer’

An inspirational and passionate coach changed my life

In 2009, my boys were swimming with Fort Worth Area Swim Team and I was logging a lot of bleacher time, as any swim parent does. I watched the Masters group with fear and envy thinking that it was something I could never do. The coach, Ric Nesbit, was a seven-time NCAA swimming champion and in the Texas Swimming Hall of Fame, so that was a little intimidating as well. I was a slow-swimming triathlete and had never had a lesson in my life. I could only swim “some version of freestyle,” as Ric would later call it.

As I made up my mind to complete a half-IRONMAN triathlon, I realized I needed help because really, I hated swimming. I remember my first conversation with Ric. I told him I wanted to swim the Olympic distance .9-mile swim in 25 minutes and the half-IRONMAN’s 1.2 miles in under 35 minutes. All he said to me was, “just come to practice and we’ll make it happen.”

I really didn’t know what I needed in a coach until I went to practice.

Ric was real old school and rough around the edges. He barked out sets and sometimes yelled. Then in the same moment, he was kind and complimentary with a fellow swimmer who had been working on some tiny detail and had finally accomplished it. This man was more than a little passionate—so much so that a part of me was afraid to come to practice, but at the same time afraid to miss practice.

Swimming with Coach Ric was like nothing I’d ever done before. Time and again, just as I’d begin to think we’d be finished with the workout, he would announce another set that I had no idea how to do. Every practice was filled with me learning a new stroke or fixing one I had tried to learn, or doing crazy drills that were completely new to me.

Some of the drills and sets puzzled me. Why would a swimmer not breathe for 25 yards? The idea seemed more than a little insane. Then there were the almost-daily emails from Coach Ric on a swimming-related topic or links to a new YouTube video he wanted us to watch.

More times than I care to recall, he would yell my name to get me to come to the end of the lane because everyone else had already finished the set. On more than one occasion, I threw up in the car on the way home because I’d kept my heart rate too high just trying to keep up with the other swimmers, and had dashed off after workout without properly cooling down. And, yes, there were the practices when I went home and cried. This was the hardest thing I had ever done.

For more than a year, Coach Ric was hard on me and the practices were tough. But then, suddenly, something clicked for me. Coach Ric moved me over to a faster lane. I was no longer in the dreaded slow lane. I was able to complete sets and I could do all four strokes and do two of them really well. I went to my Olympic distance triathlon and completed my .9-mile swim in 25 minutes just as I’d hoped. I couldn’t believe it, and Coach Ric was so proud of me. Words cannot describe how excited he was, and for what seemed like weeks he told everyone about my accomplishment.

Having met my first goal, I kept coming to practice and working on the next goal: completing the 1.2-mile IRONMAN swim in less than 35 minutes. I was able to make the intervals most of the time and I even went to a few swim meets. I was shocked to not be in last place in any of the events I entered. I even got a few first places. The whole time Coach Ric cheered just as hard for me as he did for our national champion and ex-collegiate swimmers. I went to my half-IRONMAN and swam my 1.2 miles in

under 38 minutes. I was amazed. I was in the top 10 percent of swimmers for the whole race, a fact I found to be simply unbelievable. Coach Ric told me I was ready for the full IRONMAN swim distance, 2.4 miles.

After working with Coach Ric, I can call myself a real swimmer and not “just a triathlete.” And last October, after four years with Coach Ric, I decided to sign up for that full IRONMAN. The day I went to tell him that I was finally going to do that full IRONMAN I’d dreamed about was the day he passed away.

I think of Coach Ric often in my training and to say I miss him, his friendship, and his practices would be a huge understatement. Coach Ric was irreplaceable. It still doesn’t feel right when he isn’t on deck when I go to the pool. I cannot put into words how difficult it’s been for me to embrace this sport in the same light without him here. I can’t say I’ve ever had someone in my life teach and inspire me the way he did. He brought a passion to swimming that I’ve never seen before. And that is what makes a great coach.

About The Author - Jen Baron

Jen Baron, 36, is a swim mom, a nurse, and a member of the Fort Worth Area Swim Team Masters in Fort Worth, Texas.



Bonus Video Playlist

Bonus Video Playlist:

1. Olympic Triathlete Jarrod Shoemaker
2. Triathlon Swim Training with IRONMAN Champion Ben Hoffman
3. Open Water Drafting
4. Open Water Starts
5. Get Hip With Your Hips
6. Paddle vs Propeller



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