

# Building a Solid Race Base

‘You can’t win it in the swim but you sure can lose it’, or so the saying goes. With this in mind, Triathlon Australia’s Wayne Goldsmith has compiled a list of his top-10 swim training tips that will help you build a foundation on which to base your perfect race.

Words: Wayne Goldsmith | Images: Thinkstock

**B**efore we dive into the training tips, if you’ll excuse the pun, let’s first try and get a handle on the philosophy behind triathlon swimming. Here are three things to remember: **You’re not a swimmer. You’re a triathlete.** There’s a huge difference. A swimmer is totally focused on refining and perfecting swimming technique to swim as fast as possible in a pool. In theory, when a swimmer hits the wall at the end of their race, they should have nothing left in the tank. A triathlete is a multisport athlete who needs to complete the swimming leg of the race in the shortest possible time BUT – and this is important – with the lowest possible energy cost. Swimmers are about excellence in the pool; triathletes are about efficiency in open-water environments.

**There is no perfect stroke, but there’s an efficient stroke for you.** Don’t get hung up on finding and mastering the theoretical ‘perfect’ stroke. It does not exist. What is real is your stroke and making your own swimming stroke as efficient as possible by focusing on the big principles of efficient swimming.

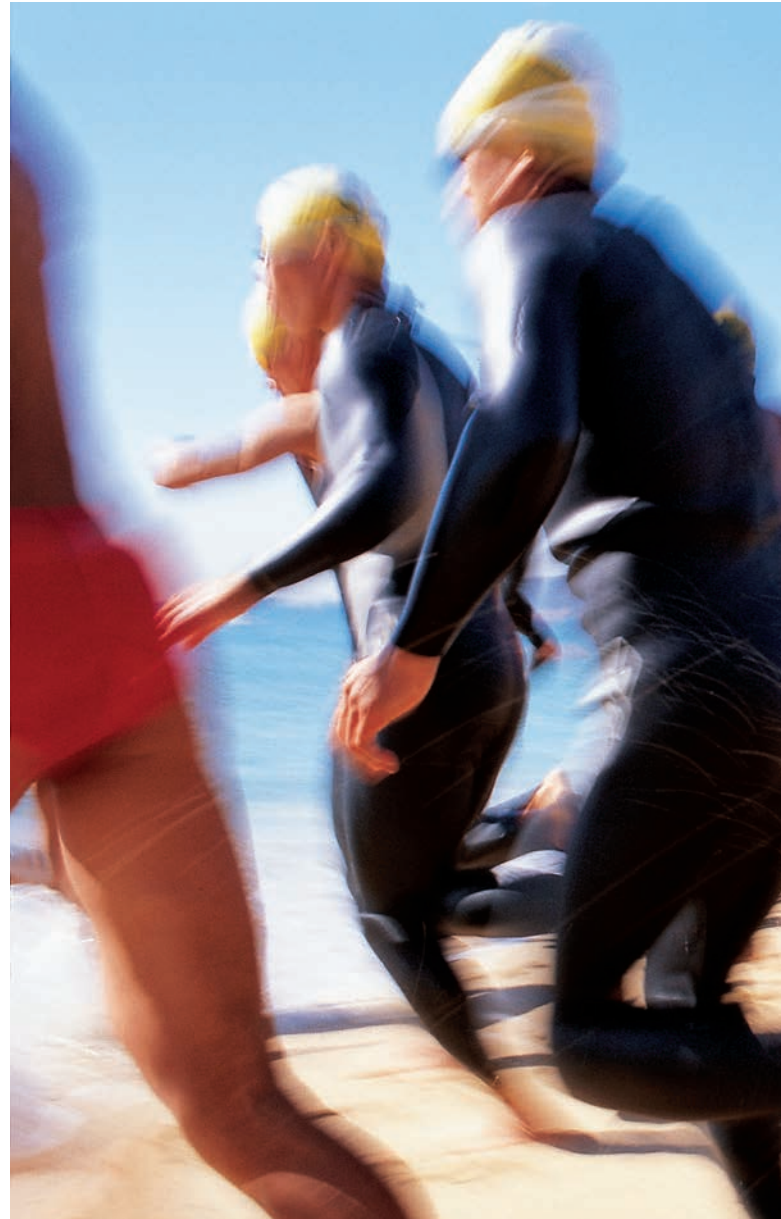
**Swimming toys will not help you develop an efficient stroke.** Paddles, fins, towing devices and pull buoys that look like they were designed by NASA will not help you develop an efficient swimming stroke. It takes a lot of practice to learn to swim slowly with relaxed breathing, a good body position and rhythm. Save your money. Just get in, concentrate on the basic principles and swim, swim, swim. So, with this in mind, here are my top-10 tips to enhance your triathlon swimming leg.

## 1 Soft hands – tension is the enemy.

If you’ve ever seen a learn-to-swim class, you’ll notice how much fun the kids are having. Why? Because if they’re having fun, they’re relaxed, and if they’re relaxed they can learn to do just about anything in the water. The singing, the games, the toys are all designed to help the teacher get the kids to relax and learn to love being in and around water. For triathletes from a non-swimming background, it is of critical importance to be relaxed around water. Typically, they will get tight and tense in the water and then, in frustration, try to muscle their way up and down the pool. Tension is the enemy of performance. In swimming, more than the other legs, the faster you want to go, the more relaxed you have to be. A simple technique to help you with this important aspect of swimming technique is to think ‘soft hands’. No matter how fast you are swimming, keep your hands soft, loose and relaxed.

## 2 Head and hips – the relationship between your head and your hips is the key to everything.

This one simple concept can change your swimming forever and for the better. If you swim with your head too high, your hips will be forced too low in the water and the resulting swimming



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position will be inefficient and ineffective. For most triathletes the ideal head position is neutral. This is the same as if you were looking straight ahead walking down the street.

**3 Breathing – too often overlooked.** Breathing is an important aspect of all swimming. Breathe in completely on each breath and breathe out completely on each breath. There is no breath-holding in swimming, as holding your breath creates tension and tightness, both of which

interfere with your performance. You should also be aware that if you change your breathing rate – for example, from a breath every two strokes to a breath every four strokes – you also need to change the rate and force you exhale. When you turn your head to breathe you should be able to inhale completely.

**4 Small head movements – all head movement in all swimming strokes should be minimal.** Big head movements interfere with body alignment – particularly the all-important head-hips relationship

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– and decrease the efficiency of your swim stroke. With freestyle, remember the three points of minimising head movements: Keep one eye in the water as you turn your head to breathe; keep one ear in the water as you turn your head to breathe and keep the corner of your mouth in the water when you turn your head to breathe.

### **5 Feel, don't force – you can't force a swimming stroke.**

In fact, the opposite is true. Aim to relax more, try less, use less effort and swim faster. This is particularly important when you want to sprint. When you want to swim faster, relax more, keep breathing fully and completely, keep your hands soft and simply move your arms and legs faster. Don't confuse speed with effort. Swimming faster is about relaxing more and moving faster – not trying harder. It takes practice – but it works.

### **6 As if you were walking – try not to overcomplicate things.**

Basically, you swim as if you were walking down the street! Eyes and head 'neutral' looking straight ahead, i.e. straight down at the bottom of the pool with relaxed, easy, rhythmic breathing and kicking from the hips. That is, in order, from the hip, to thigh, to knee, to shin, to foot.

### **7 Pressure then power then pressure then power – an effective swimming arm stroke moves from slow to fast.**

As your hands enter the water (softly), you will feel the pressure of the water on and around them. Keeping your hands soft at this point of your stroke allows you to feel more effectively. This pressure is what swimmers refer to as 'feel'. Once you feel the pressure, you can apply force to the water with your arms. However, it's all about feel and pressure: first feel the pressure, then apply the power.

### **8 Kick...yes, you have to – just not very much.**


A steady, even, rhythmic kick is important for all triathletes to help maintain a good body position. Don't get too stressed about it. You don't need to kick like an Olympic 50-metre swimmer – just remember these three tips: Don't kick any wider than the width of your hips; don't kick any deeper than the depth of your hips; kick from your hips, and then allow the power to flow from your hips, down your leg through your thighs, knees, shins and feet – kick the way you walk.



### **9 Stop doing drills – yes, you read it right.**

Using swimming stroke drills to develop and correct a triathlete's swimming stroke is overrated. For a start, as most drills are performed at kicking speed and therefore rely on a strong kick to do them correctly, most triathletes cannot do most swimming stroke drills. Then the nature of drills is to overemphasise one aspect of stroke mechanics and as a result of doing a drill to fix an aspect of your stroke, you can often create another stroke fault. And finally, unless you can complete the drill with a high level of efficiency, there's no point doing them. Too many triathletes waste too much time trying to perfect a stroke drill only to end up frustrated and disappointed. Forget drills. Remember the basics...soft hands, head and hips position, get your breathing right then fill in the blanks as you go.

### **10 The abilities – flexibility, stability, mobility.**

Away from the pool, you can help develop the foundations to enhance your swimming technique by working on these three 'abilities'. Try some Pilates, yoga, or core classes for instance – to improve your abilities and watch your swimming technique improve. 



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