

Train Slow, Race Fast

By Terry Laughlin

Without question, racing and training in open water has been an invaluable aid to my coaching and writing. Last summer was my most satisfying open water season. Between June and August I swam six races, winning the 50-54 age group by large margins in four, and placing fourth in two National Masters Championship events, a 5K and a 10K; in both, I swam faster than the winners of several younger age groups. This season I placed consistently in the top 10 percent and was competitive with very good swimmers 15 or more years younger than me—who were often winning their own age group.

The key lesson I took from this season was in how to define “fast swimming” for open water racing and what kind of training produces it. During the Olympics, Rich Barkan, a Total Immersion coach and Ironman finisher, alerted me to a debate at an on-line triathlon forum on the degree to which Olympic swimmers displayed “TI techniques.” After noting that the winners of the men’s 200, 400 and 1500 Freestyle events all swam with neutral head positions, fluent strokes and low stroke counts, I added that, specific techniques aside, the organizing principle of what we teach is Never Practice Struggle.

This stirred considerable debate. The prevailing opinion was that it’s essential to “swim hard and get used to dealing with fatigue” in training. My first response to the idea of training to “deal with fatigue” is that if you become fatigued during a triathlon swim leg, you’ve probably blown the race. My position is that it’s far more important to practice control in training to train yourself to swim effectively in the race. Practice exquisite control at relatively slow speeds, then test your ability to retain it at progressively higher speeds. My experience this summer illustrates the point.

Between June and September, I swam just eight pool practices, not once using a pace clock. The rest of my training was along a 200-meter line in Lake Minnewaska. None of these swims were timed. Lacking the usual measures to regulate training, and most of

the time swimming alone, I worked exclusively on “process,” using solitude and the lack of external pressure from teammates or the clock to examine and solve small inefficiencies in my stroke, to lock in subtle details that increased my sense of control and efficiency and to test my ability to stay relaxed and efficient across a range of stroke rates.

The bottom line is that without ever swimming “hard” in three months of training, I swam “fast” in my open water races. For example, in the New York City Ocean Mile on August 8th, my time of 19:52 placed 15th in a field of 250 swimmers including dozens of USS club and high school or college swimmers in their teens and early 20s, in addition to Masters swimmers. And in an exhilarating tactical race, I edged the aforementioned Rich Barkan by three seconds, following a shoulder-to-shoulder duel over the final quarter mile. One week earlier, Rich had swum 55 minutes for 2.4 miles at Ironman USA in Lake Placid.

So in the absence of interval training and dealing with fatigue, how did I prepare myself to swim well in races? Largely by viewing every practice swim as a race rehearsal. I used five levels of effort or speed in my training:

- **PERFECT:** Whatever degree of ease it takes to achieve my most meticulous stroke and maximum efficiency.
- **CRUISE:** Faster, but not breathing hard. Easily sustainable for perhaps 30 minutes or more of nonstop swimming. This is also the sensation I aim for in the early stages of longer races.
- **BRISK:** Faster—nearly approaching the pace or feel of the race itself—and slightly testing of my ability to remain efficient. This pace simulates how I aim to feel during the first quarter to half of a 1- to 2-mile race.
- **RACE:** This pace represents a real test of my ability to maintain a high level of efficiency. I think of it as requiring acute concentration more than intense effort. This simulates the sensations I associate with the second half of a mile race, or the final quarter of a 2-mile.
- **RACE-PLUS:** This represents how I would expect to feel while racing a shorter distance than my usual open water races, say 400 meters. It also simulates the level of effort, stroke pressure and tempo I employ in the last 100 to 200 meters of an open water race. Training at Race-Plus helps me build more speed capacity for distances of a mile and up.

I did 20 percent of my training at Perfect, 30 percent at Cruise, 30 percent at Brisk, 15

percent at Race and less than 5 percent at Race-Plus. The greatest virtue of this approach is that it puts me in rehearsal mode. During races I was always prepared to respond in the most effective way to any eventuality, because every stroke I took in a race I had practiced thousands of times in training. That provided a rare degree of mental comfort and control. So at least for me, a strategy of rehearsing successful and effective swimming modes has been far more fruitful than swimming hard and learning to deal with fatigue.

Here’s a sample 2-mile swim I did this past fall:

I swam the first mile using focal points, repeating cycles of 100 strokes with a single focus, then switching focus for the next 100 strokes.

- 100 strokes with “marionette arms”: focusing on doing each recovery with my hand/forearm hanging as a dead weight from my elbow.

- 100 strokes with “diagonal power”: focusing on a sense of synchronization between one hand slicing forward to the catch and the opposite foot downbeat.

- 100 strokes feeling an “armful of water”: a sense of solid pressure on my hand/forearm as far in front of my face as possible before beginning the stroke.

It took me about four rounds of 3 x 100 strokes like that (no pause between bouts of 100 strokes, just shifted focus), breathing every three strokes to complete the first mile. This mile was done entirely in the Perfect and Cruise speed levels.

On the return trip, I quickened my pace to the Brisk range and breathed six times consecutively on the right side followed by six consecutive breaths on the left—making this feel a bit more the way a race might feel. I focused the entire way on driving the hand opposite my breath forward and down as I rolled for the breath. So on my six right side breaths, I was focusing on my left hand drive and vice-versa. At every point in this 2-mile swim, I vividly visualized how I would employ each mode at some point of an open water race of one distance or another. The easier stretches relate closely to longer races; the faster stretches simulate shorter races. With this kind of training, there’s never a wasted stroke. ▲

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