

HOBART AQUATIC MASTERS SWIMMING CLUB SKILLS AND DRILLS NOTES

LONG DISTANCE SWIMMING

For most Masters swimmers, long distance swims are 400m and beyond. Long distance swimming is approached differently to short distance swimming and sprints. The key differences are:

- Greater focus on distance per stroke
- Optimising the efficiency and effectiveness of every turn
- Judging the pace correctly
- Adjusting stroke technique, breathing pattern and kick tempo to conserve energy
- Maintaining mental focus during the swim

Distance per stroke. Long distance swimming involves getting as much distance per stroke as you can. In general, the fewer strokes you take to cover the distance, the less energy you expend. This is achieved by adding more glide in your stroke in the catch phase and not rushing into the pull phase. One way to test your distance per stroke is to count your strokes per lap during training and try to reduce the number of strokes. One less stroke per lap over 800m or 1500m is a significant reduction overall.

Allow yourself to swim with a more relaxed stroke than when sprinting.

Turns. Turns take on extra importance over longer distances because you do so many of them (29 per LC 1500m and 15 per LC 800m). There are two aspects to focus on: minimising the energy expended when turning, and maximising the distance you push off the wall. Practise efficient turns as you train, improve your technique so that you can execute the turn quickly, and develop your streamlining glide off the wall so that you push off as far as possible before starting your first stroke.

Pacing. You need to know and practise the pace at which you are going to swim your long distance event. Develop an accurate feel for the pace at which you want to swim. Most importantly, do not over-swim at the start of your event because the extra energy you expend at the start cannot be retrieved later during the swim. Practice starting off slowly and then settling into your pace. When you are fresh and generating adrenaline you will tend to swim faster, so learn to control this initial burst. Swimming repeat distances (such as 100m or 200m) with a short interval (10 seconds) will enable you to check your pace against the clock. It is better (physically and mentally) to start slow and swim faster as the swim progresses rather than start fast and get slower as the swim progresses. Do not be distracted by the pace being swum by other swimmers. Get inside your long distance swimming bubble and stay there.

Technique. Most swimmers make subtle changes to their technique for long distance swimming. This includes achieving extra distance per stroke (as described above), sitting a bit lower in the water, breathing more often than when sprinting (because you are more reliant on oxygen as your energy source), and reducing the tempo and/or power of your kick. Most freestylers will adopt a two-beat kick, and form stroke swimmers will put less energy into their kick to make more energy available for their shoulders.

Mental focus. It can be challenging to maintain a sharp mental focus during a long distance swim. Your mind can wander; causing you to lose count of laps completed, and lose focus on your technique. This could be associated with the increase in endorphins generated by swimming, which affects your mental acuity. One way to overcome the lap counting challenge is to force yourself to practise counting laps during training regardless of whether you are leading or following. Also, recognise the moments when your focus is beginning to wander, and bring your focus back on to an aspect of your technique or your lap count. This requires a heightened level of concentration.

If you are swimming 1500m, try breaking the lap counting task into parts, such as 3 X 500m, or 3 X 400m plus 300m. Similarly, an 800m could be broken into 2 x 400m or 4 x 200m. Work out what works for you in training and stick to that during the event.

Practice. Your ability and confidence to cope with the challenges of long distance swimming will improve as you practise swimming the distance. Set yourself to swim your event several times before the event, and when you do these practice swims, rehearse the things you want to focus on.

Conclusion

Long distance swimming is less stressful, more relaxed and potentially more enjoyable than sprinting. It gives you time to think about what you are doing and make adjustments along the way. It also promotes your aerobic fitness and sense of accomplishment.

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