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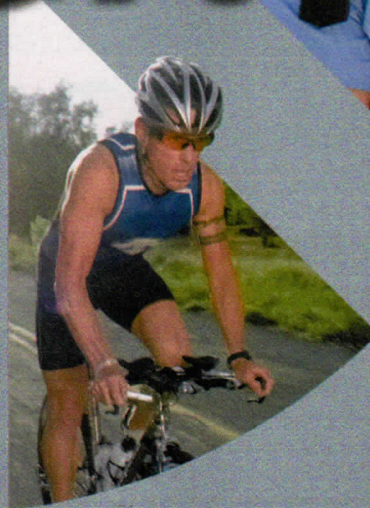


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FALL...BACK INTO THE POOL

FIX THE PROBLEMS NOW THAT YOU WANTED TO FIX LAST SUMMER

BY JOHN FITZPATRICK

It's winter. The triathlon season is over. You have hung up your swimsuit and goggles. You want to take some time off from triathlon training.

I'm sure I've met you before. You arrived panicked on my swim deck last July, pleading with my coaches to train you for a late summer triathlon. You don't plan to see us again until next July when you face your next 60-day deadline.

Don't repeat the same mistake in 2008.

Every August, I send a message to the triathletes on my swim team: The fall is the most important season for swimming. Year after year, more and more of them take my advice. Here's why:

THE DAYS OF THE DUATHLETE-TRIATHLETE ARE OVER

In the past, you could dog the swim and make up the time in the bike and the run. But today, most triathletes train to excel at all three disciplines. You can't be a two-trick pony anymore.

If you are in the middle to back half on the swim, consider this: If you give up 5 minutes on the swim to your peers, will you be able to make up the two to three miles that you spotted them on the bike? Ten minutes?

Every minute you drop on your swim will group you with faster runners and cyclists. And if you can hit that faster swim time with greater efficiency and less effort, you'll have more energy than they do—an edge in the race.

SWIMMING MAKES YOUR RUNNING BETTER

Swimming is great cross-training for running. It's controlled respiration helps build aerobic fitness. Water supports your body, lengthens your spine and is easy on your joints. Many strong runners on my Masters team testify that swimming made their marathon training more effective.

CHANGES TO YOUR STROKE TAKE LOTS OF TIME AND REPETITION

Swimming requires precision movement execution. Water creates so much resistance that inefficiencies result in wasted effort and exhaustion.

It takes time to understand what you are doing wrong, feel what's right and change your movement grooves. It also takes 10,000 correct repetitions of a simple skill to get it fully ingrained into muscle memory. If you're an above average swimmer, your changes are subtler and can take even longer to adapt.

Whatever your swimming background, seek out a good coach. A trained set of eyes will identify what adjustments can break your plateau. DVDs and magazine articles are helpful, but an actual person watching is invaluable.

Weak swimmers should take lessons and learn to swim right from the get-go. Learn a technical system and practice it slowly and methodically. When you get the movements down, execute them with ease and relaxation so you can stay smooth on race day.

Veterans should get an underwater video stroke analysis. You may be fast and look good on the surface, but an underwater clip will shatter that assumption. An underwater shot is the only way to identify the small changes that can impact your time. Get a few things to work on and check in after a few months.

FIND A GROUP TO SWIM WITH

I can't emphasize enough the importance of swimming in coached group practices. The structure and energy derived from the community will help you work harder and get more done.

If you panic in race crowds, learn to cope by practicing with a group. Waiting at the pool until your lane clears out is not helping. You need to learn to pace with others, pass and be passed.

Not all Masters programs and group swim classes are alike. Check out the practice times and locations, the coach, and the people.

HOW WILL THIS YEAR BE DIFFERENT?

Set goals for the upcoming season while your race experiences are fresh. Think of how you will train differently this year. Will you swim during the winter? Will you take lessons? Will you swim with a group? Start swimming now, break out of the rut and have great swims in 2008.

John Fitzpatrick is owner of Chicago Blue Dolphins and was named Chicago Magazine's Best Swim Instructor, 2006. He is an ASCA Level II certified coach and a Total Immersion Teaching Professional. You can reach him at fitz@chicagobluedolphins.com, 773-251-5308 and www.chicagobluedolphins.com.

