

# Warming Up For A Fast Swim



BY DAN BULLOCK



The new season is under way and listening to early feedback from the first few races I am spotting a common theme among the many triathletes I work with. I am hearing athletes say they've had problems getting going, their arms felt like lead by the first buoy and the natural exuberance of the start did not subside as quickly as usual and they were exhausted early on. A simple warm up could change everything.

The reason these athletes are struggling is because the body is suddenly working too hard to get you up to race speed and fatigue is building up quicker than can be dealt with. Many athletes

have a gentle jog on race morning or the more prepared might bring a turbo to get the blood flowing, but this only really serves the lower extremities. This warming of the core temperature is essential but ideally there needs to be some specificity of movement to prepare for the swim. For many the upper body is ignored relying on the two minute dash in cold water from the entry to the start line. This is not an ideal swim warm up given the time available and in many cases the temperature of the water.

Finding more time in the early hours is not easy. I appreciate there is a lot

going on with registration and racking but fortunately a good upper body warm up needs little equipment or time. It can be made more specialised with a set of stretch cords, which you will often see the pro athletes using ahead of their races. You too should consider adding a dry land routine. Right up until the last minute you can at least be swinging your arms and getting the upper body warm. With the blood flowing through the arms and shoulders this will enable you to get up to race speed sooner with less fatigue. A good upper body mobility routine will also help pull more of the

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wetsuit up and out of the legs into the body leaving the desired thinner panels sitting nice and high on the shoulders where they should be.

Without any sort of pre-race warm up routine you'll struggle to get the best from your swim start. I often hear people say they were caught in congestion in the early stages of the swim to then warm up and spend the rest of the race having to swim around other people. This uses more energy and ultimately you'll swim further. I have introduced a strict warm up routine for my triathletes and it begins close to the start of the race with

a full dry land routine including the use of stretch cords. Ahead of this some athletes might use a Power Breathe as part of their pre-start warm-up.

Doctor Alison McConnell, a professor of Applied Physiology at Brunel University, believes athletes who have been training with a Power Breathe device will find it a useful warm up tool to get the body fully ready for exercise. She suggests two sets of 30 breaths at around 40 per cent of maximal inspiratory strength with a one to two minute recovery between to the two sets.

McConnell said: "I found this heavier breathing helped start the warm-up process and when arm swings and jogging are added the body feels far more awake and accepting of the upcoming exercise."

### Upper Body

Loosening up the shoulders with some simple mobility exercises ahead of getting in the water will help your early speed at the start and reduce fatigue levels as you approach the first buoy, as well as keeping your heart rate down. Even if there is only five minutes

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use this time wisely and do some arm swing exercises. This taps into a wide range of swimming muscles and can be performed while standing. You just need your feet shoulder width apart and to keep the head still.

### Arm Swing Warm Up

1. Swing the arm from the hip sideways up over the head to the opposite ear. Keep your body still and stand up right as if sandwiched between two panes of glass. Perform 20 reps alternating arms eventually developing a loose relaxed continuous rhythm.
2. This is an extension of the first warm up, but instead of reaching for the ear swing the arm from down by the hip sideways up over the head to the opposite shoulder. Remember to keep your body still and stand upright. Perform 20 reps alternating arms eventually developing a loose relaxed continuous rhythm.

### Shoulder Warm Up

Bend forwards with the upper body horizontal and arms outstretched. Keep the hands pulling central under the body. Pivot at the elbow to set up a wide elbow and a vertical forearm. Remain firm at the wrist and point the fingertips down. This movement will not only remind you to set up your catch properly but will warm the triceps ahead of the gun going off. Aim to do 20 well executed reps.

One thing I still see a lot of prior to racing, ex-swimmers are especially guilty because years of bad information, is static stretching. If a movement involves another part of the body pulling it or pushing it then it is unlikely to be helping. Some efforts can leave you lethargic and actually do more harm than good if you are not completely warmed up.

### Stretch Cords

If time is available then shoulder warm ups using stretch cords are the ideal way

to replicate front crawl movements. I would recommend trying to make time for this if possible. Anchor the cords to a fence, railing or post and use the handles to effectively swim. Keep the strength of the elastic down by moving in closer to the fixing point. You are not trying to develop strength today just warm the body up.

### Water Warm Up

1. **Wetsuit Flush:** If you do get time in the water to swim and it is not too chilly then this time should be put to good use. Start with a wetsuit flush to get the suit completely vacuum sealed to minimise water flooding in making the elbows, shoulders and crotch feel heavy because of excess water. Jumping into the swim course ahead of time allowing the suit to fill before exiting and squeezing excess water out will save swimming with extra weight.
2. **Front Crawl Up:** Once back in the water start with 5-10 minutes of steady swimming while rehearsing a



mental check list of what you should be focusing on. For the lower half of the body this should include a small leg kick with the big toes tapping against each other reminding you not to splay outside the profile of the trunk. For the upper body remember to point the fingertips to the bottom of the water while using the hands and forearms to send water back down to the feet. Don't forget to think about the body movement in the water with a good degree of upper body rotation. This in turn promotes a long arm cycle with good streamlining and by lifting the trailing shoulder ease the head turn for breathing.

**3. Breast Stroke Warm Up:** I would then work with some breaststroke arms with front crawl legs to really wake the legs up and remind them that they can contribute to the swim leg of the race. Switching back to full front crawl you should check the

arm pathways under the body send the water back down towards the feet in a straight line for maximum propulsion. If the stroke keeps you straight less sighting is required. As you make your way to the start line add some short bursts of speed and low sighting positions for the head. Introducing some speed here will help with the aggressive nature of the swim start.

### How Warming Up Helps

Over the last few months I have been working with pro triathlete Emma-Kate Lidbury to gain every little advantage. Often, despite her swim background, she was struggling to make the front pack where race tactics were decided and played out. Having the ability to get up to race speed sooner meant working and staying with this lead pack. Missing the pack, which would most likely not be swimming any quicker in the later stages, would mean she would have to work harder on the bike to make up time.

Lidbury said: "I found a dry land warm

up has helped get me up to race speed quickly once the gun goes. Before, I often felt sluggish to begin with, which is never good if you're trying to get off the start line quickly to get clear water and swim front pack. I would also find that I was breathing harder than I should be just to get up to speed. Doing a dry land warm up overcomes all of this and gets your entire upper body loose and ready for action, as well as gently raising your heart rate, so that swimming at race pace doesn't feel harder than it should. For me, it is also a perfect time to really get my brain in gear too and start focusing on the race ahead."

Make time on race morning to give yourself the best chance of starting a race at the speed you would like. Getting to the start line a little more prepared can make a big difference. The warm up doesn't need to take too long or be overly complicated but will change the way you start a race. **1**

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