



In a race, swimming too fast can be just as harmful as swimming too slowly

Set the Right Pace

Always arriving into T1 exhausted? Fed up of feeling like you haven't swum your best? Then follow **Dan Bullock's** tips for getting to grips with race pace



Dan Bullock

Dan Bullock is a former 220 Triathlon Coach of the Year. He's also ASA qualified and an expert in open-water swimming

How great would it be to arrive at T1 always feeling fresh and raring to get on with the bike? Regardless of distance and your swim background this is easier to achieve than you might initially think. And it all comes down to pacing.

When asked about pacing a triathlon swim, I think about a sustainable and efficient turn of speed that keeps me competitive but not so exhausted that I'm

destroyed for the bike. I also think about an optimum stroke rate to suit both the conditions, and the speed I want to swim at.

How to pace a race

Pacing involves the ability to change pace to make the most of an open-water race, ie drafting. It also means maximising open-water technique so that there's very little to reduce your ideal pace: too much sighting is going to reduce your speed and upset your pacing; an inefficient turn around a buoy (for example, doing breaststroke or one-arm front crawl) will slow you and upset your rhythm, leaving you to work harder to get back up to your race pace. But there are four key areas that you can focus on to pace a race

successfully: avoid going too fast; avoid going too slow; create a change of pace; and work on a front crawl (FC) stroke that doesn't tire you out and allows sustainable speed.

With regards to the latter point regular drills, video review, land-based training, core strength, mobility and flexibility will help. But the key word is 'sustainable'. Without good FC technique, the mechanics of your stroke will be tiring and leave you with a pace that slows as the race progresses.

To have a chance of taking control of your swim race, good swim technique is essential and should be addressed first (see 'Performance' in issues 223-225 for more). For the remainder of this piece we will focus on the first three areas in more detail. **220**

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Keep an eye on the clock but remember, a sustainable pace is what will win the race



Avoid going too fast

Going too fast is an all-too-common problem that we see in session after session with triathletes – who are, by their very nature, competitive people. Pretty much every single person goes off too fast in the excitement of the start, thinking that they can sustain this fast starting pace. But more often than not you'll be left feeling tired for the second half if you're unsure how to relax back down to a comfortable, sustainable race speed.

Luckily, there are quite a few session ideas you can incorporate into your swim to help avoid this pitfall. Here are three...

Negative splits

Where the second half of a swim is swum harder than the first. Start out comfortably then build the back end. A good workout would be 8 x 200m. Aim for the second 100m to be 10secs quicker than the first.

Heart rate (HR) pacing swims

Instead of holding a set of 100s at 1:40 and using a send-off of 2mins, swim at 20-30bpm below max, resting until your HR drops to 50bpm below max at the end of each 100m swim. This might give you a better idea of what your race pace might feel like.

If you find a heart rate monitor clumsy in the pool, check this with two fingers on the carotid artery in the neck for 10secs and then multiply by six. The fitter you become, the more quickly your HR will fall.

Clock work

Swimming with the clock/watch off. Get a training partner to time you over 4-8 sets of 100m with 20secs rest after each. How close were you to keeping them within a few seconds of each? Wait until the set is complete before asking for times, to avoid too much 'pace adjustment' within the set. Just try to feel the speed being kept similar. Counting your strokes will really help here.

Avoid going too slow

To get a better feel for race pace, here are some ideas that will help you swim at a sustainable race pace that will be challenging, yet won't leave you feeling too fresh in T1 or frustrated that you weren't more competitive. The key to success in this area is knowing what is a realistic but aggressive pace for you.

Broken swim

A favourite of mine is the broken 1,500m, which we at Swim for Tri (www.swimfortri.com) use as a regular test swim. Swim the following with the stated rest taken between swims:

3 x 200m, rest 30secs after each 200m; 5 x 100m, rest 20secs after each 100m; 8 x 50m, rest 10 secs after each 50m

We'll start an overall running time and stop the overall time at the end of the last 50m and subtract 4:20mins (total rest time) from the time to get a reasonably accurate 1,500m time.

There's not enough rest to fully recover between swims, so tiredness accumulates and a fair reflection of current ability is delivered. We swam this session on the last Joe Beer Tri camp out at La Santa in Lanzarote, and 16 out of 26 people swam within 60secs of their personal best 1,500m times.

T20/30 swims

The idea is to swim as far as you can in 20/30mins and count lengths, which is useful for getting an idea of sustainable pace. With practice, you'll settle into a rhythm that allows you to finish your swim neither too exhausted nor too fresh.

By going over distance, 20mins would be adequate for most people racing a sprint-distance triathlon, while 30mins would cover many racing Olympic distance. Doing this, you get a feel for what level of exertion is sustainable for you.

Change your pace

An ability to change pace will help you not only overtake other competitors but also help you race at your pace and swim the swim you would like to. After the excitement of the start, it is essential to relax back into a comfortable pace. Building the second half of a swim naturally will feel good as the body warms up after the shock of the start and the sudden exertion.

Chain-gang swimming

An open-water drill that's also a great way of learning change of pace. In a lane of 4-6 people, swimmer 1 goes before swimmer 2 pushes off on the person in front's feet. The 'gang' are to swim at a relaxed pace, tight to the lane rope, allowing the person at the back plenty of room to push off and sprint past the 'gang' down the middle of the lane. Rotate the lead until everyone has practised in all positions.

Fartlek training

Similar to Fartlek cycling or run training, which puts stress mainly on the aerobic energy system. Swim 1-2km as a continuous 3 length (3L) FC strong, 1L FC fast. Don't allow the three lengths to become too easy – it's not a swim-down from the fast length – yet ensure the speed change on the 4th length is significant.

Building pace

Swim 100m repeats at different speeds, getting faster by the length. Equally useful is the ability to get slower by the length.

For example, 8 x 100m, rest 20secs after each 100m, swim as:

Odd 100s – 1L easy, 2L hard, 1L sprint

Even 100s – 2L medium, 1L hard, 1L easy

An improved awareness of pacing, how to sustain a good pace and how to avoid going too hard or too slow will help you arrive into T1 at your absolute best and ready for a strong bike. Practising some of these drills will help you become more aware of this key part of your swim ability.