

TRAINING TOOLS

*Confused about all the training aids on the market? Speedo advisory coach and Swimfortri director **Dan Bullock** explains what they are and how to use them...*

▶▶ Once upon a time all you needed to swim was a costume. Then along came goggles, which allowed swimmers to stay in the water for longer, but life was still fairly simple. This is the case no longer.

The quest for swimming speed has resulted in a whole industry of items designed to make you stronger, sleeker and more efficient. Used correctly, many of these swimming toys and floats can help you improve but people are often unsure what the correct procedure is. With a little more understanding of what the various items do and how they can help you, you will get more out of them and get to use them safely and effectively.

By explaining the main items and how they're used, you may also be inspired to try some kit you've never used before, and so improve your technique more quickly.

A couple of words of caution are necessary here. Firstly, many pools will not like you bringing in paddles, fins and snorkels so it is worth checking with the duty manager first. Get a clear guideline on what is allowed before jumping in and panicking the lifeguards. Often lifeguards will say no just to make their lives easier.

If your local pool isn't keen on swim aids then you might contemplate private gym membership, where pool use is usually more relaxed. Alternatively (as gym membership can be costly), consider joining a masters or triathlete swim team that has lanes booked and will use swim aids as a matter of course.

Another factor to consider is safe usage. Many training aids have both a technique and resistance application, depending on the way they are used. As with any resistance training, be careful of overloading various body parts. Always ensure you are fully warmed up before using any swim equipment. You would never lift heavy weights immediately, or start running flat-out without a warm-up; the same applies here. In particular, never use paddles or fins during a warm-up.

Many senior swim coaches suggest no more than 25 percent of a session should be attempted with any one item of swim equipment. They, of course, would be referring to swimmers who have grown up swim training. People who do not have a strong swim background should take even more care. ▶▶



Speedo BioFUSE
Power Paddle

PADDLES

Effectiveness rating: ★★★★★

Why: For resistance and technique work

Level: Intermediate to advanced

Making the hand seem bigger means you hold more water, and allow the arms and shoulders to work a little harder, but be careful not to overload the shoulders. Go with a size of paddle not much bigger than your hand. For technique work, Speedo Tech Paddles have a nice shape and feel comfortable in the hand. If using larger paddles, swim slowly with them and use them to anchor the hand. Really feel the body travel over the hand. During these swims, bring the legs in and use them to lower the pressure on the shoulders.



Alternatives... For technique work, practice sculling while standing in the shallow end without any straps holding the paddle to your hand. Effective sculling should keep the paddle fixed to the hand with just water pressure. For fitness work, only use the middle finger strap to ensure you push through to the back of the stroke. If you exit the stroke too early you will feel the paddle pull away from the hand.

FINGER PADDLES

Effectiveness rating: ★★★★★

Why: For improving your feel for the water

Level: Intermediate to advanced

These are smaller paddles that cover the fingers and allow the surface area of the palm to stay exposed. The smaller surface area allows for more feel of the water and also places less strain on the shoulders.

Alternatives... These give you something to point the way with and set up a nice pulling position in the water. To make the most of this, make sure you point fingers to the bottom of the pool after you finish extending the lead arm forward and you will almost have a pointer that the hand can follow in an effective arm-pulling position.



Kickboards make sure you've got your footwork right



FINS

Effectiveness rating: ★★★★★

Why: For increasing propulsion and ankle mobility

Level: Beginner to advanced

Fins will help when practicing drills because they allow you to stay relaxed as you move more slowly through the water. They will also help you develop better flexibility in your ankles. Be careful though – it is important to kick from the hips at all times. Make sure you also avoid friction and blisters by putting Vaseline on the feet and around the toes.

Alternatives... Fins are essential for technique work as they help to make that initial breakthrough when practicing body position drills. You can also use them with paddles for swimming at speed without the effort, which can help you ingrain correct stroke pathways.

KICKBOARD

Effectiveness rating: ★★★

Why: For developing correct leg mechanics

Level: Beginner to advanced

Forget about speed – for beginners, the important thing is to ensure you are at least going forwards. A kickboard makes sure you've got your footwork right. You should aim to drive the motion from your hips rather than your knees, and point your toes at the back wall of the pool rather than the bottom.

Keep the head down when kicking; it leads to better streamline and an easier, more comfortable position for the neck. Lift the head to breathe when needed.

Alternatives... During your swim-down or relaxation time, kick gently with a large kickboard balanced under the body, while sculling with the hands. Pulling with a kickboard between the legs is a nice drill as well. It gives you something to reach for and extend the back of the stroke towards, but avoid swinging the arms around to meet the float. Use the natural rotation of the body to lengthen the push back and tap the float.

STRETCH CORDS

Effectiveness rating: ★★★★★

Why: For strength, conditioning and travel

Level: Intermediate to advanced

A wide variety of these are now available: including bands, tethered belts to keep you static in the water, and parachutes to help get the most out of your training. Traditional stretch cords can be used for technique work on dry land, including race day warm-ups, and recreating a decent front crawl session if you cannot get to the pool. I use the lighter versions as they come in various strengths. For a pre-race warm-up you should definitely use the lighter versions to generate blood flow through the shoulders without overloading them.

Alternatives... I carry a set when travelling, as I don't know when I will have access to a pool. Although they're clearly not a replacement for being in the water, they can make for a reasonable swim session if there is nothing else available. Physiotherapy rehab exercises can also be carried out with stretch cords.

DRAG SHORTS/DRAG SUITS

Effectiveness rating: ★★★

Why: For productivity

Level: Intermediate to advanced

Drag shorts are large, baggy suits that create lots of drag while swimming, similar to other training methods with high resistance, like running with ankle weights or cycling with a heavy frame for winter. It can really make an impact to the amount of effort expended during a session.

Alternatives... Your drag suit does not need to stay on for the whole session. Add one over your regular suit for your main set (or part of it) to add resistance to certain aspects of your session.

COMBINED PULLKICK / KICKBUOY

Effectiveness rating: ★★★★★

Why: To avoid lugging two floats around

Level: Intermediate to advanced

This item is an interesting concept that combines elements of a kickboard and pull buoy, cutting down on your pool baggage. There is enough buoyancy for the float to be used to lift the legs, if used as a pull buoy, and also enough to support the arms for kicking.

Alternatives... Swim the 'extension drill', using the lead arm to support the combined pullkick/kickbuoy out in front to provide some stability. The upper body should remain motionless if performed correctly. If the float is not used then you will often see the upper body wobble as a reaction to the leg kick materialising in the upper body. As core strength increases and body alignment in the water improves, aim to remain motionless without using the float.

CENTRAL SNORKEL

Effectiveness rating: ★★★★★

Why: For total focus on drills

Level: Beginner to advanced

A wonderful item for use with specialised technique work, the central snorkel eliminates the need to turn your head to breathe, allowing you to relax and watch the pathways of the hands as they pull under the body. It's much easier to focus on drills the first few times you do them if you do not have to consider the timing of the breath. The snorkel will also

PULL BUOY

Effectiveness rating: ★★★

Why: For increasing arm strength

Level: Beginner to advanced

Many people swim faster with a pull buoy because it improves their body position in the water. However, its purpose is not to substitute for a wetsuit or to hide a poor kick as some people seem to think. It's designed to add an additional workload to the arms for a greater training effect.

Providing a comfortable alternative to the traditional use of flat floats, the pull buoy is held between the thighs to allow arms to move with normal timing and rhythm. Compared to flat floats, the contoured shape allows longer swim sets to be achieved.

Alternatives... One way to hone your technique with the pull buoys is to play 'catch up' – a favourite drill of mine. If you perform full catch up (i.e. hand recovers to meet the outstretched resting hand in front) with a pull buoy between your legs, you will feel the isolated pull of each arm one at a time, and can focus on going forward without the stabilising effect from the legs. By deliberately pulling extremely wide on a few strokes, you can feel how unbalanced it leaves you. Keeping the legs straight and toes pointed is key, so that discrepancies in the pull are highlighted. Once you start to pull yourself forward and keep the body streamlined you will feel less off balance.

Pulling can be performed with paddles to add extra emphasis to the workload of the arms, or add a pull buoy between your ankles to ensure a tough core workout, as you try to keep the buoy balanced and in place.



The contoured shape allows for longer swim sets

get you used to a normal head position (usually in swimming your head should be kept completely still unless turning to breathe). You may want to use a snorkel mask or nose clip to prevent water from going up your nose.

Alternatives... Ask a teammate or friend to observe you while swimming with the snorkel. Ideally the head should be kept motionless. If the snorkel is moving then you will know that your head is moving.