

Five Common Swimming Myths and Misconceptions

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Any group of swimmers at any level is an interesting case study of their preconceptions about the do's and don'ts of swimming fast.

Denial and justification of specific training methodologies are the most fun to observe and debate. Having swum competitively for 20-some-odd years and coached now for over 10, I have witnessed some interesting concepts.

It was my interest in these debates that led me to get my MS in exercise physiology and apply it to my sport of choice, swimming. It is from my education and my experimentation as a National Team athlete and coach that I share with you a few of my favorite ongoing misconceptions:

1. Don't eat within two hours of swimming. You will certainly cramp!

Whoever coined this phrase or gave birth to this concept certainly didn't have my body. There is a significant percentage of swimmers whom I have trained with and have coached that need to eat right up to training time.

Have you ever tried to train on an empty stomach for three hours when you're only carrying 4 percent body fat? It doesn't work well. I'm not a huge advocate of jalapeno poppers or nuclear chicken wings prior to training, but I've found peanut butter and jelly or energy bars work great.

The sacrifice of tasting anything during warm-up, due to reflux, is counterbalanced with a solid block of energy to help you with prolonged duration at high intensity.

2. I'm not a great swimmer, nor will I ever be. I am a sinker, not a floater.

I love this one! This bit of philosophy tends to be used more as an excuse to not put in the time to adapt to an aquatic environment and learn to work with water, as opposed to punishing it.

Having worked with numerous masters swimmers and multisport athletes who struggle with this concept, one thought always enters my mind: RELAX!

Having swum or coached internationally for 15 years, I can honestly say that the majority of world class swimmers could be classified as "sinkers" due to their low body fat percentage. When trying to move through water at high speeds, body fat rarely can be regarded as an asset. Marathon open-water swimmers may have an argument, but the rest of us need to accept the fact that adding an extra layer of insulation won't assist us in achieving world-class status.

I realize that elephant seals and a few other aquatic mammals seem to excel with their elevated adipose tissue. What mother nature gave them in the form of high fat content was counterbalanced with incomparable hydrodynamics and skin composition. We're not so lucky.

Sorry about the lack of justification for holiday and weekend feeding frenzies. Let me reassure you that swimming has evolved to the point where the added buoyancy achieved through an increase in body fat is outdone by the unfavorable decrease in a strength-to-weight ratio.

3. Pulling with paddles is the quickest way to become a better puller, thus a better swimmer.

Paddles can be a dangerous tool to the inexperienced or technically challenged swimmer. The increased surface area that they provide has the potential to put undue pressure on parts of the shoulder that are sure to produce overuse injuries.

Proper pulling (with or without paddles) should be initiated with a preload on the latissimus muscles. Swimmers who tend to press straight down ? as opposed to getting the pulling surface of the paddle to point to the rear ? will inevitably put additional stress on the rotator cuff and triceps.

For those athletes who are strong and can muscle the additional surface area, speed can be achieved without the optimal muscles or pulling pattern. When the paddles are removed, people without the proper pulling mechanics most likely will swing off the back of the set.

With that in mind, try eliminating the paddles and incorporating a full pulling surface. By that I mean utilizing the surface area from the fingertip to the elbow. The quicker you can use the forearm along with the hand, the sooner you can pull and eventually swim correctly.

Not only do you utilize the appropriate muscles, but your shoulders and triceps will thank you!

4. Lifting weights for distance swimmers will affect their stroke and build too much muscle mass.

The first thing that comes to my mind whenever I hear this argument is the progress of weight programs in basketball and golf. These are two sports where a soft touch and flexibility are at a premium.

Although neither sport is distance-oriented, it is proof that strength training can be specific enough to produce the desired effect, while maintaining the important elements in each motor skill.

Strength-to-weight ratio is a critical concept for swimmers. The ability to maximize strength, while finding the right balance in muscle mass and flexibility, is the battle.

Periodization of strength training within a distance swimming program is the key. The majority of the strength training models that I consider successful use strength training in addition to the normal water workouts.

The early acquisition of additional strength and power can be successfully channeled into a season with proper planning. Early season high-repetition lifting sessions can be tailored to enhance strength and minimize the addition of any substantial gain in unnecessary muscle mass.

5. Kicking is primarily used to facilitate body rotation in swimming and doesn't really add much to forward propulsion.

I am guessing this philosophy grew in popularity throughout the stone-age. Although many open-water swimmers and multisport athletes choose to limit the use of legs, it's about energy conservation, not ability for the legs to help propel.

In my 10 years of coaching, I can honestly say that my fastest kickers were my fastest swimmers. Although there may be exceptions to this rule throughout the swimming world, it is obvious that leg power correlates to swimming speed.

The common thread among the previously mentioned misconceptions is education. Trial and error is probably the single greatest teacher.

With the multitude of variables our sport has to offer, a whole lot can be learned by sharing experiences. Sometimes, trial and error is what teaches you what works. There are a host of swimming theorists who don't really experiment in our medium. In the water is where theory becomes fact. Your body will dictate which theories are applicable to your peak performance.

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