



Time to Swim Right:

My Eye-Opening Swim Session with Swim-Tek's Jim Williams.

CERTIFIED COACH

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"Swimming is a technique sport." These are the words my friend Brad Mott told me when I decided to train for triathlon after ducking the swim for duathlon for my first 2 years in multisport. Those words have stuck with me through all of my swim training of the past 5 years. I have never been a high volume athlete, which has shown up somewhat in my bike splits. Yet my swim has always been a strength, despite my average of 1.5 hours per week (max of 3 hours a couple times per year) of water time. Now, I cannot even come close to competing with athletes who come from a swim background, but as far as triathletes go, my swim always ranks within the top 1-2 % in every race. I believe this is a result not of natural talent (something I have very little of), but a result of my total dedication to swimming correctly every time I hit the water. I always focus on my distance per stroke and streamlining in the pool, and taking long relaxed strokes and holding solid water with my pull when in the lake. I am dismayed by the number of athletes who put in hour upon hour of pool time never to see improvement in their swim times. Without emphasis on technique, they are just becoming better and better at thrashing the water.

Terry Laughlin, the brain behind Total Immersion, says that swimming is 70% body position, and only 30% propulsion. By getting the body flat in the water, and swimming on our sides for the majority of the time, we become much more "fishlike", invisible to the drag that is created by water, which is a 1000 times denser than air. If we could all get that 70% body position thing right, we would all be much better off than if we focus all of our time and energy into pushing more water behind us at a faster and faster rate for length after length. When that 70% is correct, then working on holding the water and pulling past an anchored hand, rather than allowing the arm to slip as you stroke, will add much more power and speed to the stroke.

With all of this in mind, I contacted Jim Williams of Swim-Tek (see link on my "Friends" page) and scheduled a video taping session. The first thing I found was that Jim's sessions are very reasonably priced. Try to find any hour consultation time in any sport out there for \$40 or less. This is cheaper and more beneficial than a carbon fiber water bottle holder that many triathletes have on their bike. I was a bit nervous about being filmed. I had only had one person in my entire swimming career critique my stroke. I was aware that there could be A LOT wrong with what I was doing. The session consisted of swimming 4x50 yards while being recorded above and below water. Then I jumped out and dried off to watch and learn.

It was obvious to me immediately that Jim had a wealth of knowledge and experience when it comes to coaching swimming technique and fitness. He went through, step-by-step, what a good swim stroke should look like, totally emphasizing body position first, then breaking down the actual arm stroke itself. I was amazed at how obvious many of my technique flaws were when I watched the replay of the video at regular speed and slow motion. My most detrimental flaw was that I looked too far forward when I swam. This in turn increased my low back arch and dropped my hips and feet, presenting much more body to the water than should be. Jim

recommended that I tuck my chin and look straight down, in effect lengthening my neck and overall spine. I also saw that when I breathed to my left side (my weaker side, despite my emphasis on bilateral breathing in ALL swims), I would lose my balance and compensate with a wide kick. This was also a drag-producer, something that could significantly add on time over an Ironman swim when I breathe to the left for half my breaths.

Some of the more subtle things that Jim picked out included hands that were too high in the water during my glide phase, loss of my high elbow during my pull, and minimal snap from my hips and core during initiation of the stroke. These all add to increase drag or loss of power during the stroke. Jim then described drills that would break down my stroke and allow me to overcome my flaws. He had great video footage of many of these drills which helped me to understand and visualize what I needed to work on during subsequent swims. Many of these drills were the basic TI drills that I had left behind years ago thinking that I was too advanced for them (kicking on stomach while looking down and reaching for the far wall with the top of my head, kicking on side, 3 stroke and roll, etc.)

With a plan in hand, I changed my schedule to swim more on my own rather than hammering myself during morning master's swims. This allowed me to work on my stroke without distraction. Once Lake Padden warmed up, I started including some of the drills in the open water, and also just focusing on perfect body position and stroke mechanics during my long relaxed swims. I have been amazed how much more relaxed, smooth, and effective my stroke has become during my open water swims, in particular when the water has been rough on those breezy morning swims. All of this resulted in my best swim times to date for the early summer sprint distance triathlons. I look forward to trying out my new stroke at the Tri Without Borders Race next week, then also during the 4k swim at the Grand Columbian ITU long distance race in September.

I, without any hesitation, recommend that all triathletes have their stroke videotaped and analyzed. The information you will glean from such sessions will mean far greater speed and/or energy reserved for the bike and run segments of your races. One Advantage Multisport athlete went through the taping with several subsequent lessons with Jim, resulting in a very strong, yet relaxed three stroke breathing 27:31 half iron swim at Lake Stevens, the fifth fastest swim on the day. This, in only his second year of triathlon. Get taped, do the drills, and swim right. You will find that you can improve your swim times on far fewer yards if those yards are swum perfectly, and you will find far greater enjoyment of your swim training and racing.

Train well,

Daryl Smith
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