

15 SWIM WORKOUTS FOR TRIATHLETES

Get tips, workouts, and videos to make you a more efficient swimmer.



WHO'S THIS FOR?

Are you having trouble coming up with workouts that produce results in the swim leg of your triathlon? Swim training on your own can be tough, but we're here to help.

Our 15 Swim Workouts for Triathletes program is more than lap swimming done right. It's about improving your swimming skills so you can get faster results in triathlons.

For optimal results, build brick and other two-discipline workouts around this program.

We hope you enjoy this program. You'll be a more efficient swimmer once you finish it..

Don't forget to join our Facebook Group (USMS 15 Swim Workouts for Triathletes), exclusive to triathletes doing this program. Ask questions, encourage others, share your successes, and most important, have fun!

TRAIN WITH OUR WORKOUTS

All of our workouts are broken into sets; warm-up, main set, and cool-down are all very important during your workouts. We also explain each set in-depth because we want to ensure it feels like you have a coach while you are swimming.

For each set, we don't always use send-off times or rest times because improving your technique is more important than worrying about the clock. When there is a send-off or rest time, pay attention to tracking your time. Adjust your send-off times as needed.

We know swimming isn't a one-size-fits-all sport. When in doubt, we recommend 30 seconds rest between each 100. In each workout, we describe the equipment needed. Try not to use fins if we don't say to.

No worries if you don't have a piece of equipment. Most sets can be done without it. Just stay focused on the right aspects of the set.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Participating in this program requires effort and focus. We have progressive and strategic swimming workouts, actionable tips, and essential articles/videos to lock in that mental zone (80% of swimming is mental).

Overtraining can set you back on your training plan for your triathlon season. Always talk to your doctor about any limitations or concerns you have, and never exercise in pain (don't ignore your body if it needs rest). Otherwise, try to follow the program as closely as possible.

It's time to dive in. Happy training!

WORKOUT 1

BODY POSITION

GOAL

Learn a horizontal and balanced body position, which is more streamlined and efficient to move through the water

MENTAL CUE

Your goal in the water is to maintain a balanced position with your legs near the surface for less drag and resistance while swimming. When breathing, try not to lift your head out of the water, which breaks the balanced body position. Instead, focus on rolling your head to your side to sneak a breath. The basic element of swimming is being able to lie face down in the water and flat in a streamlined position. Do this by keeping your arms 4-6 inches below the surface, keeping your neck relaxed and looking straight down while using a light flutter kick to keep your feet breaking the surface of the water. Get into this position for 2-3 seconds every time you push off the wall today.

▶ 📄 PREPARE

Improve Freestyle Breathing Pattern for Better Speed & Endurance

Five Ways to Improve Your Freestyle

WARM-UP

Practice floating for 2-3 minutes – figure out how to use as little energy as possible to keep your body horizontal in the water.

8 x 25s swim with 20 seconds rest between each – push off the wall in a relaxed floating position for 2-3 seconds and then transition to swimming while trying to maintain a horizontal body position.

MAIN SET

8 x 25s swim with 15 seconds rest between each – swim to the middle of the pool, and then float/pause for a second; learn to trust that your body will continue floating even when you aren't taking strokes; then resume swimming to the wall.

4 x 100s swim with 30 seconds rest between each – focus on not twisting your head when you breathe but rather keep your spine in line. Try to keep half of your head in the water when you rotate to the side to breathe.

6 x 50s swim with 20 seconds rest between each – maintain a constant EASY kick that lightly breaks the surface and makes a small splash.

4 x 75s using pull buoy with 30 seconds rest between each – the pull buoy will mimic your body position when wearing a wetsuit; continue practicing keeping your body horizontal.

COOL-DOWN

100 easy swim

TOTAL

1500 yards

WORKOUT 2

CATCH+PULL TECHNIQUE

GOAL

Improve your stroke, which produces the majority of forward propulsion

THINK

Think about your hands being your paddle in the water. Build a big, strong paddle by positioning your fingers together with just a slight gap between them. Keep your fingertips pointing down at the bottom of the pool and the palm of your hand pushing water backward. The exact position and movement of your arm, wrist, and hand under the water are important to engage the large muscles in your back and create a powerful stroke.

▶ PREPARE

[Swim Freestyle Faster! \(Part 1 of 4\)](#)

[Paddle vs Propeller](#)

[5 Common Freestyle Mistakes!](#)

WARM-UP

10 pop-ups to observe your strong arm position and engage the correct muscles before starting to swim. From in the pool, place your hands on the pool deck and push yourself up like you are starting to climb out of the pool. This arm position is what you want to replicate under the water during each stroke.

8 x 50s with 20 seconds rest between each – use a snorkel to watch your strokes underwater. Look for your wrist to start moving backward while your elbow remains in place, causing your forearm to come under your shoulder during your catch.

MAIN SET

4 x 75s with 20 seconds rest between each – start with two or three push-ups on the deck for muscle engagement, then jump in the pool and swim a 75 focusing on your fingers and hand position.

8 x 25s with 15 seconds rest between each with paddles – grasp the top edge of your paddles so they extend past your wrist. Swimming with paddles in this position keeps your wrists from bending during the catch and engages your forearm strength during your pull.

4 x 150s with 30 seconds rest between each – 25 scull followed by 125 swim with a strong effort. When sculling, keep your arms extended forward with your hands 6-plus inches below the surface. Move them back and forth in a sweeping motion, constantly applying pressure down and backward.

COOL-DOWN

100 easy swim

TOTAL

1600 yards

WORKOUT 3

FINISH EACH STROKE

GOAL

Maximize the power from each stroke by using the full length of your arm

THINK

Feel the pressure of the water on the palm of your hand for the entire stroke. Keep pushing water backward past your hip by using your triceps. Don't push too far and flick water into the air.

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[How to Get More From Your Freestyle Pull](#)

[How to Finish Your Stroke With Power](#)

WARM-UP

10 dips on a starting block, bleacher, or chair to activate and engage your triceps.

200 swim – brush your thumb across your thigh at the finish of each stroke to feel your hand extending past your hip bone.

MAIN SET (REPEAT 3 TIMES)

4 x 25s with 15 seconds rest between each – single-arm drill (swim the first and third 25s with your right arm only and your left arm extended in front of your head or down by your side; the second and fourth 25s are strokes with your left arm only with your right arm extended in front of your head or down by your side). Pay attention to any differences you feel between the two strokes.

4 x 25s with 15 seconds rest between each – descend stroke count (count the total number of strokes that you take on the first 25 and try to lower that number on the next 25s by maximizing your propulsion with each stroke).

200 swim – focus on completely finishing each stroke and not turning your hand sideways to “knife” out of the water when your triceps get tired.

COOL-DOWN

4 x 100s with 30 seconds rest between each – swim the first 25 with underwater recovery (dog paddle) and then do a 75 easy swim

TOTAL

1800 yards

WORKOUT4

RECOVERY + ARM ENTRY

GOAL

Improve your recovery to be quick and relaxed

THINK

Try to return your arm to the front as quickly as possible to start your next stroke. Remember, the pause/glide happens IN the water, not by holding your arm above the surface. The recovery motion should also be a movement that doesn't strain or impinge your shoulder joint. Allow your arm to chop and splash into the water instead of fighting gravity. Use a wide arm recovery for a relaxed shoulder and neck. You should hear a sound and see a splash when your arms enter the water.

PREPARE

**Freestyle Recovery
Drills for Your
Swimmers**

WARM-UP

100 swim
100 pull
100 kick

MAIN SET

6 x 100s with 30 seconds rest between each – stick drill for a 50 and then swim the final 50 (to perform stick drill, use a 12-inch piece of PVC pipe or a single paddle, and focus on a quick arm recovery and chopping each arm into the water in front of your head; leave the stick or paddle on the pool deck, and swim a 50 focusing on making a small splash as your arms re-enter the water).

1 x 300 with pull buoy – focus on having a wide, relaxed, quick arm recovery.

6 x 100s with 30 seconds rest between each – wide fingertip drag drill for a 50 and then swim the final 50 (to perform wide fingertip drag drill, sweep your thumb and pointer finger in a large arc across the surface of the water). Focus on swinging your hands away from your body the last 50.

COOL-DOWN

100 easy swim

TOTAL

1900 yards

WORKOUT 5

STROKE TECHNIQUE REVIEW

GOAL

Bring together the four phases of freestyle and work on a continuous and efficient technique

THINK

When everything works together, you can propel yourself through the water with minimal drag and resistance. Be aware of your body position at all times while you're swimming. A streamlined position will help you move through the water more efficiently and get the most out of each underwater pull.

▶ PREPARE

Freestyle (DIY Assessment)

4 Freestyle Drills to Improve Your Technique

WARM-UP

4 x 150s with 30 seconds rest between each.

- 1) focus on body position, reset with a float after each 50
- 2) focus on catch and pull, do three pop-ups after each 50
- 3) focus on the finish, touch your thumb to thigh with each stroke
- 4) focus on arm recovery while using a pull buoy

MAIN SET

16 x 25s with 15 seconds rest between each –

1-4: float and kick in horizontal body position past the flags and then swim the remainder, 5-8: use a buoy and scull the first half of each 25 and then swim the second half, 9-12: descend your stroke count each 25, 13-16: do wide fingertip drag drill.

400 swim – first 100 is using buoy for body position, second 100 is paddles only to emphasize catch and pull, third 100 is no equipment but as few strokes as possible, and the final 100 is stick drill to practice chopping your arm into the water.

4 x 50s pull with 20 seconds rest between each – use paddles and buoy to combine good body position and strong underwater pulls.

4 x 50s swim with 20 seconds rest between each – all strong effort with quick, relaxed wide arm recovery.

COOL-DOWN

200 easy swim

TOTAL

2000 yards

WORKOUT 6

BILATERAL BREATHING

GOAL

Practice breathing to both sides, an important skill in the open water

THINK

Bilateral breathing helps you maintain a straight path and allows you to choose a single side to breathe away from waves and wind. Training yourself to breathe to both sides helps develop a balanced stroke and body. The goal is to be even in training so that you can adapt and choose on race day.

WARM-UP

4 x 100s with 30 seconds rest between each – breathe every two strokes but switch sides each length of the pool.

COOL-DOWN

200 easy kick with fins

PREPARE

[Common Freestyle Breathing Mistakes](#)

[Open Water Swimming Tips](#)

[How Open Water Swimmers Can Become More Comfortable With Bilateral Breathing](#)

MAIN SET (REPEAT 3 TIMES)

200 swim with fins – breathe every third stroke but think about what you're doing when you breathe to your comfortable side and try to compare and replicate that movement and feeling on your uncomfortable side.

8 x 25s with 15 seconds rest between each – round 1: Breathe every five strokes focusing on a slow, continuous, steady exhale the whole time your face is in the water; round 2: Breathe to your uncomfortable side, focusing on rolling your head, looking to the sky, rotating your body, and extending your front arm; round 3: Take as few breaths as possible across the pool each time, increasing the rest time for additional breathing time on the wall.

TOTAL

1800 yards

WORKOUT 7

SIGHTING + BREASTSTROKE

GOAL

Practice specific skills for open water races in the pool

THINK

Place a brightly colored object/cone or an extra water bottle at the opposite end of the pool to practice scanning the horizon looking for the course buoys. One benefit of training with a Masters club is being able to look for the coach walking on deck during practice. You'll lift your head to look for buoys 100-plus times in a race, so it's important to make this movement efficient during swim practice. Develop a quick head lift, before or after taking a breath, that only elevates your eyes out of the water. Breaststroke is a good skill to be familiar with for sighting, resting, and assessing your location in the water.

▶ PREPARE

**Breaststroke
Kick 101**

**Breaststroke –
Swim it Correctly!**

WARM-UP

4 x 75s with 30 seconds rest between each – 25 breaststroke and then 50 easy freestyle swim.

MAIN SET (REPEAT 2 TIMES)

2 x 25s Tarzan drill – swim the whole length of the pool freestyle with your head out of the water.

2 x 25s fast swim – sight something on deck behind your lane during each length four times.

2 x 25s breaststroke – swim slow to rest and catch your breath.

3 x 100s with 20 seconds rest between each – medium effort swimming, sight two times each 25.

1 x 400 with buoy only – sight two times each 25. The buoy will replicate your body position in a wetsuit, but you'll still need to lift your eyes to see the course markers.

COOL-DOWN

3 x 150s with 30 seconds rest between each – 50 FAST, sighting three or four times, followed by a 100 easy focusing on stroke technique.

TOTAL

2050 yards

WORKOUT 8

GOAL

NO WALLS, TURN AT THE "T"

Learn how to get up to speed without using the walls to mimic accelerating in the open water

THINK

Without rest breaks on the wall, you'll have to adjust your effort to adapt to the long efforts. The awkward 180° turns in the pool will also increase your treading and maneuvering skills for moving around people and other obstacles in a race. Practicing this way also helps mimic a deep-water race start or if you get bumped or stop during the swim. Training for a long open water swim in a pool is a challenge because of the short rest breaks you get to take at every wall. Removing the ability to touch and rest/breathe on the wall is a great way to build confidence for a long open water swim.

PREPARE

[Finding Joy in Training Far](#)
[Finding Your Best Open Water Race in the Pool](#)

WARM-UP

5 x 50s starting and ending in the middle of the pool – tread water or float for 20 seconds between swimming each 50.

2 x 100s with no walls with 30 seconds rest between each. Swim four lengths of the pool without touching any of the walls. When you get to the "T" on the bottom of the pool, turn around and start swimming in the opposite direction. Rest on the wall between 100s.

200 easy pull with a buoy for recovery.

MAIN SET (REPEAT 3 TIMES)

3 x 50s with 20 seconds rest between each – start by treading water under the flags for 10 seconds and then sprint for the first 25 and then swim the second as an easy effort.

1 x 300 swim with medium effort – turn at the "T" and don't touch or use any of the walls. Focus on getting back up to speed after each turnaround.

COOL-DOWN

200 easy pull with buoy only

TOTAL

2200 yards

WORKOUT 9

RECOVERY POSITION + BACKSTROKE

GOAL

Learn backstroke to help you relax and recover in the open water and get through challenging situations

THINK

Many things can go wrong in open water, things you can't even prepare for. But today's practice will encourage you to roll from your stomach to your back in the pool so that you can be comfortable doing it in open water with waves, people, and more around you. Being able to roll over and float on your back is a good skill for all open water swimmers because there's no bottom to stand on or wall to hold onto. Double-arm backstroke is a gentle way to keep moving forward while catching your breath on your back in a race.

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**Backstroke Swimming
Made Easy!**

You Can Swim!

**Why Triathletes Should
Swim Different Strokes**

WARM-UP

4 x 150s easy swim with 30 seconds rest between each – 50 freestyle, 50 backstroke, 50 freestyle

MAIN SET

6 x 50s swim with 15 seconds rest between each – sprint the first 25 to get out of breath, touch the wall, push off on your back, float or swim easy backstroke until you catch your breath, and then roll over and finish the remainder of the length with fast freestyle

100, 200, 300, and 400 with 1 minute rest between each – 75 strong effort freestyle swim, 25 easy back float or double-arm backstroke or regular backstroke. Repeat to reach each distance.

COOL-DOWN

6 x 50s with 20 seconds rest between each – swim the first 25 non-freestyle (any stroke, drill, or method of moving that isn't freestyle), and swim the second 25 freestyle.

TOTAL

2200 yards

WORKOUT10

OPEN WATER SKILLS IN THE POOL

GOAL

Improve your open water skills
even if you're only swimming
in a pool

THINK

Use all the open water skills we've practiced during these workouts. These skills will make you more confident in the water so you can focus on swimming fast on race day. Feeling the pre-race jitters is normal before starting a triathlon. This swim session is designed to help you feel at ease when you're facing an event with deep water, windy and wavy conditions, lots of other people, and much more chaos. Imagine yourself in the race, and practice all the skills you'll need to catch your breath, get back on course, fix your goggles, etc.

WARM-UP

4 x 100s easy swim with 30 seconds rest between each

- 1) bilateral breath every third stroke
- 2) 25 breaststroke followed by 75 freestyle
- 3) no walls and turn at the "T"
- 4) 25 backstroke followed by 75 freestyle.

10 x 25s with 15 seconds rest between each – all your choice of open water skills: backstroke, breaststroke, Tarzan drill (swimming freestyle with your head out of the water), sighting, bilateral breathing, etc.

COOL-DOWN

200 easy swim

PREPARE

Swim Freestyle Faster!
(Part 4 of 4)

Open Water Swimming
(Buoy Turns)

MAIN SET

6 x 75s with 20 seconds rest between each – tread water under the flags for 10 seconds, swim the first 25 fast, the second 25 backstroke or breaststroke, and the final 25 easy freestyle

4 x 250s with 1 minute rest between each – 25 fast Tarzan drill, 25 easy recovery on your back, 200 medium effort swim with no walls

TOTAL

2300 yards

WORKOUT 11

STROKE CADENCE/ TEMPO

GOAL

Work on having a quick stroke tempo so you can adapt to the water conditions and adjust your stroke after interruptions

THINK

The cadence of your arms should vary with the effort of your swimming. These sets will help you find a wider range of cadence for your arms. Distance per stroke is king in pool swimming, but when you add windy and wavy conditions or hundreds of other people in the water, being able to increase your tempo is good. Your arms must try to find resistance in the water to propel you forward but sometimes all you get are bubbles and air. The increased cadence gives your arms more opportunities to produce propulsion.

PREPARE

**Your Ideal
Stroke Rate**

**Get Hip With
Your Hips**

WARM-UP

200 easy swim thinking about distance per stroke.

8 x 25s with 15 seconds rest between each – 1-4: Descend the number of strokes you take on each 25 to work on your efficiency, 5-8: Increase the number of strokes you take on each 25 to work on your speed.

MAIN SET (REPEAT 2 TIMES)

4 x 50s with 30 seconds rest between each – focus on having a high stroke tempo .

300 medium effort pull with buoy (paddles optional).

4 x 150s with 30 seconds rest between each – first 50 is easy effort with long strokes and low cadence, second 50 is medium effort with an increased cadence, final 50 is hard effort with fast arm cadence without relying heavily on your kick.

COOL-DOWN

100 easy swim of your choice

TOTAL

2100 yards

WORKOUT 12

GOAL

PACE CHANGES + ACTIVE RECOVERY

Learn how to recover while still swimming because you shouldn't take rest breaks during your race

THINK

We can't replicate mass starts or chaotic buoy turns in the pool, but you can force yourself to get out of breath and then learn how to recover while swimming easy. The start of the race is always chaotic and stressful. No matter what, your heart rate, anxiety, and stress levels will be elevated. We also rarely get a warm-up swim before the race, so today's practice will start with a fast effort. Other issues can arise with getting hit or kicked, pushed underwater around a buoy, or swallowing water from a wave or passing swimmer.

PREPARE

**Best Sprint
Workouts for
Swimming Faster**

WARM-UP

Start with some dryland warm-up like you would before a race. Arm swings, jumping up and down, stretch cords, or walking around the pool deck. The goal is to get your heart rate up and to get your body ready to swim like it would in a race.

400 swim – 100 MAX EFFORT SPRINT followed immediately by an easy 300 swim. Do whatever you have to do to continue swimming during the easy part: backstroke, floating, etc.

MAIN SET (REPEAT 3 TIMES)

16 x 25s with 15 seconds rest between each – push off the wall and swim the first 8-10 strokes as fast as possible without breathing, and then swim the remainder of the length easy.

8 x 100s with 30 seconds rest between each, rotating fast 25 with the other 75 recovery – 1) the first 25 is fast, 2) the second 25 is fast, 3) the third 25 is fast, 4) the fourth 25 is fast. Repeat this pattern for the next four 100s.

16 x 25s with 15 seconds rest between each – same as above.

COOL-DOWN

200 easy swim with fins

TOTAL

2200 yards

WORKOUT 13

LEARNING TO PACE

GOAL

Learn how to settle into your target race pace naturally

THINK

Having a realistic swim pace that you work on in the pool will set you up for success on race day in the open water. You cannot win your triathlon in the water, but you can lose the race by using all your energy and coming out of the water too fatigued to continue. The more you practice at this realistic pace in the pool, the easier it'll be to recognize when you're swimming at that effort in the open water, where measurements are less accurate. Listen to your body, and take note of some of the physical cues that let you know when you're working too hard (out of breath, heart pounding) or not working hard enough (mentally distracted, slow stroke cadence, etc.).

▶ 📄 PREPARE

Teach Your Swimmers to Perceive Their Pace

Try These Two Self-Talk Tips for Better Swimming

WARM-UP

200 easy swim

6 x 50s with 15 seconds rest between each – build your effort from easy to fast within each 50.

12 x 25s with 15 seconds rest between each – 1-2 are SPRINT, 3-4 are easy, repeat.

MAIN SET

100 swim as fast as possible, make note of your time.

100 easy recovery swim of your choice.

10 x 100s with 15 seconds rest between each, holding a consistent pace on all 10 (your goal pace for these is your FAST 100 from above plus 10 seconds). Make note of your time on all of them so you can check if you started too fast or too easy.

COOL-DOWN

100 swim, 100 pull, 100 kick

TOTAL

2300 yards

WORKOUT 14

BUILD + NEGATIVE SPLIT

GOAL

Learn your limits in the water
in a controlled environment
like a pool

THINK

Consider all the different speeds and efforts that you have when cycling and running. The goal is to have a similar range of efforts in the water, not just "on" and "off." Start by swimming slower than you ever have to find a wider range of speeds. Associate internal feelings such as breathing, heart rate, and stress levels with the duration that you can maintain that pace. This is about being honest with yourself so that you can have a successful and well-executed race.

PREPARE

**Seven Effective Drill and
Pace Sets for Triathlon
Swim Training That
Won't Bore You**

WARM-UP

3 x 200s – 100 freestyle
swim, 50 nonfreestyle
stroke of your choice, 50
kick.

MAIN SET

3 x 50s with 15 seconds rest between each – 1: easy effort, 2: medium effort, 3: hard effort. Check your times to make sure that your increased effort results in faster times.

100 easy pull with buoy only.

6 x 50s with 15 seconds rest between each – 1-2: easy effort, 3-4 medium effort, 5-6 hard effort. Check your times to make sure that your increased effort results in faster times.

100 easy pull with buoy only.

9 x 50s with 15 seconds rest between each – 1-3: easy effort, 4-6: medium effort, 7-9: hard effort. Check your times to make sure that your increased effort results in faster times.

100 easy pull with buoy only.

1 x 500 pull with paddles and buoy – negative split, meaning that the second half (250) of the swim needs to be faster than the first half. This forces you to control your effort on the first half to have enough energy for a strong finish.

COOL-DOWN

100 easy kick

TOTAL

2400 yards

WORKOUT 15

RACE SIMULATION

GOAL

Gain confidence to start racing again by doing race-specific distance intervals in the pool

THINK

Treat this training session like race day. Try to do the swim early in the morning like a race. Wake up early. Have a good breakfast. Limit your swim warm-up to dryland exercises, and wear your race kit for maximum simulation. Try to put together all the skills that you've practiced in the past month in the pool. Focus on yourself because that is the only thing you have control of in an open water swim or triathlon.

PREPARE

[How to Draft in Open Water Races](#)

[How to Develop a Great Prerace Routine](#)

WARM-UP

Start with some dryland warm-up like you would before a race—arm swings, jumping up and down, stretch cords, or walking around the pool deck.

100 swim

MAIN SET (REPEAT 2 TIMES)

4 x 500s swim with 15 seconds rest between each, just enough to get a drink of water and take note of your interval time – first 100 is FAST with high stroke cadence followed by a 400 with good pacing. Sight something on deck behind your lane two times on EVERY 25 during this set. Your personal goal is to descend your time (get faster) on each of the 500s.

COOL-DOWN

200 easy pull

200 easy kick with fins

TOTAL

2500 yards



**CONGRATS.
YOU'VE DONE AN AMAZING JOB WITH OUR 15
SWIM WORKOUTS FOR TRIATHLETES!**

If you walk away feeling like your stroke feels “different” or “weird,” that’s a good thing. It means you’ve changed and are on the right track to improving your swim times.

This training program can be repeated two or three times until you feel comfortable enough to move on to our Workout Library, which has more than 1,000 workouts.

We wish you well as you continue your triathlon season. Thank you so much for including us in your journey.



**U.S. MASTERS
SWIMMING**