

Pooling Resources

There are all manner of training aids available to help you improve your stroke, but how do you choose those that will be of the most benefit to you? Triathlon coach Wayne Goldsmith has penned this article to point you in the right direction.

Words: Wayne Goldsmith | Images: Supplied

When you start training for triathlon, inevitably you will notice the incredible range of training toys and tools and the abundance of gimmicks and gizmos, all designed to help you realise your triathlon performance goals sooner and easier.

Triathletes are some of the most technologically literate athletes in the world and most will readily embrace any piece of training equipment that can make a positive impact on their training program.

A quick Google of 'swimming training equipment' will turn up more websites than you might find searching 'football results', and there are literally hundreds of manufacturers and retailers offering everything from paddles to pull buoys.

The challenge is deciding what piece of swimming training equipment will help you.

Why use swimming training equipment?

There are three main reasons to include swimming training equipment in your program.

1. **Stroke development** – to develop a specific aspect of your swimming technique.
2. **Stroke correction** – to correct a specific stroke technique error or deficiency in your stroke mechanics.
3. **Stroke enhancement** – to improve and enhance a specific aspect of stroke technique.

What types of swimming training equipment is available?

There are hundreds of different swim training aids, but the ones that make a real impact on your swimming performance are those which directly involve your hands, your head, your hips or your heels.

Hands: Swim paddles are used by swimmers and triathletes at all levels. Most swimmers, triathletes and coaches believe that using swim paddles improves stroke power and swimming strength. However, the real benefit of using swim paddles is in improving 'feel', or your ability to hold on to the water and apply pressure and stroking power. As a general rule, the less experience a swimmer or triathlete has, the smaller the swim paddle should be.

Head: Goggles and cap are essential items in the kit bag of every swimmer and triathlete. The bottom line



with goggles and cap is to find a combination that is comfortable. There are some really amazing designs on the market and some swimming goggles look like they'd be more at home in the cockpit of a jetfighter than on the head of an age grouper, but if they're not comfortable to wear, don't waste your money.

Hips: Towing devices such as parachutes can help develop swimming strength by overloading arms and legs with additional resistance. The key to using any towing device is to make sure they sit high in the water, i.e. they can be used while the swimmer can maintain a 'high hips' position when swimming.

Anything you pull or tow through the water that sinks, to be frank, stinks.

Heels: Fins and flippers are probably the most commonly used types of swim training equipment. Fins come in all shapes, colours and sizes and promise a range of benefits from increasing swimming speed to enhancing leg strength.

The real benefit of using swim fins, however, is that they allow inexperienced swimmers and triathletes to complete swimming drills effectively. As most swimming drills are completed at kicking speed, i.e. relying on the legs for the majority of propulsion, swim fins



provide all swimmers and triathletes with the opportunity to focus on their arms and their stroke technique and not be limited by their lack of kicking ability.

Ten important swimming training equipment concepts

1 Training equipment is meant to enhance and improve a specific aspect of your swimming. Select training equipment that can give you an edge or improve your swimming skills and technique in a specific area, e.g. paddles for 'feel', fins for kick.

2 Training equipment isn't a miracle cure or a short cut to enhancing your swimming performance: they are a supplement to your swimming training in the same way that vitamins and minerals are supplements to a sensible, balanced, healthy, nutrition-rich diet.

3 Avoid the 'bigger is better' battle. Larger paddles, for example, do not mean faster swimming. Bigger fins do not mean faster swimming. Select training equipment that is appropriate to you and your own unique swimming training needs.

4 Don't be afraid to include swimming training equipment in every part of your swimming training program. For example, you might include swim fins in your kick set but you could also include them in your main set – particularly if the primary aim of your main set is to maintain a specific swimming pace that you can't maintain without the use of fins.

5 Try adding one piece of swimming training equipment at a time. For example, using paddles, fins and some kind of resistance device like a parachute overcomplicates your training and makes it difficult to determine what – if any – benefit you are getting from any one piece of training equipment.

6 Talk to your coach about why you need to use swimming training equipment so you understand how it is improving the efficiency of your swimming stroke. Using swimming training equipment just because that's 'why we do' is not a good enough reason.

7 Not all swimming training equipment is right for everyone. Some triathletes will benefit considerably from using paddles. Others will find that using swimming paddles will actually damage their stroke technique and decrease their swimming efficiency.

8 Think 1:4. That is, for every lap of swimming you complete using a piece of training equipment, complete four laps without.



9 Plan to gradually and progressively decrease your use of swimming training equipment as your swimming technique and skills improve. For example, it is common for triathletes to use swim fins often during the early years of their training to compensate for their limited kicking ability. However, over time as you improve your kicking skills, your kicking technique, leg strength and flexibility, it is less necessary to use swim fins.

10 The bottom line is to select swimming training equipment that will improve the efficiency of your swimming stroke in triathlons. Getting better at swimming up and down a pool is not the goal. Nor is becoming the best triathlete in the squad at using paddles. The aim is to develop a more efficient swimming stroke so that you can complete your swim leg in the shortest possible time with the lowest possible energy cost, i.e. greater efficiency with less effort and exertion.

So, when it comes to swimming training aids, think about the acronym SPEND.

- It should develop, correct or improve a SPECIFIC aspect of your swimming technique.
- It should have a clear PURPOSE for its use.
- Will it improve the EFFICIENCY of your swimming stroke?
- It should NOT promise you unrealistic results with less actual swimming practice.
- You can DECREASE its use over time as your swimming stroke improves. **▣**



Wayne Goldsmith is a triathlon coach who has worked for both Triathlon Australia and Swimming Australia

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