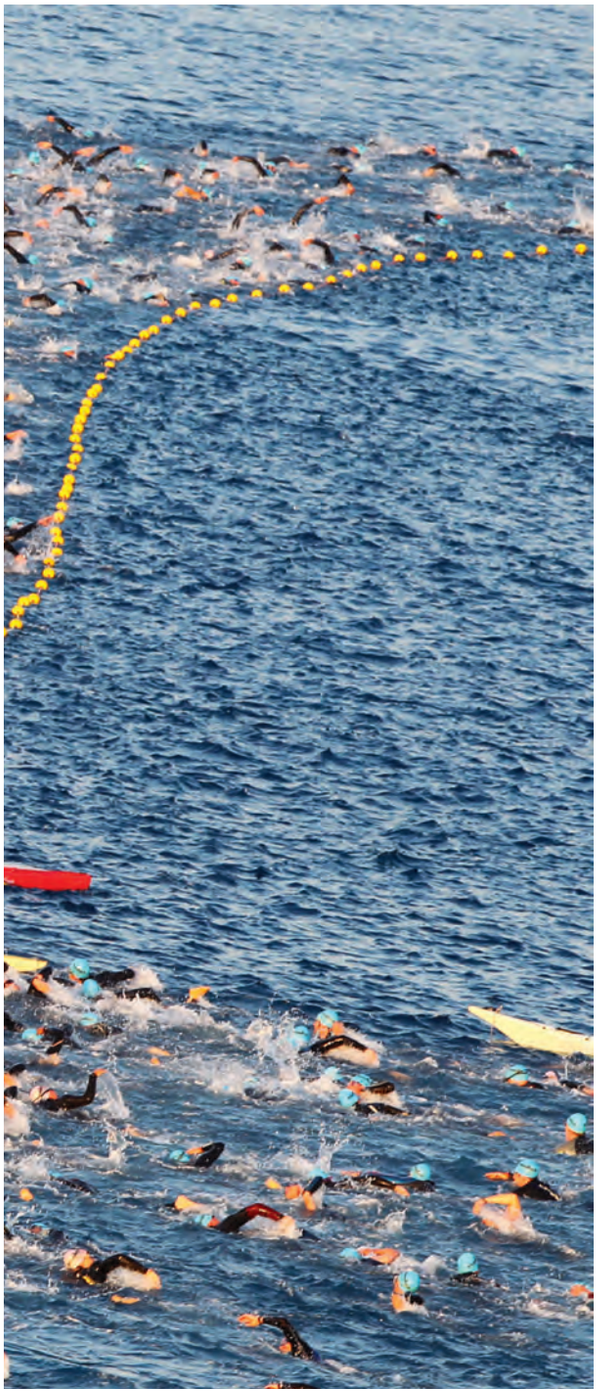

Don't Give Up

Persevering with your swim could change the way you race Ironman

People often say, especially those doing Ironman, it's not worth persevering with trying to swim faster when it's such a small part of the day. I have heard it used as an excuse many times when people want to get out of that extra training session. True the swim is relatively short compared to the other disciplines but is a key one. A change in conditions such as the water getting choppier or the swim becoming non-wetsuit (it happened at Ironman Frankfurt) could make a slow start to the day or even end the day for the slowest swimmers. Solid swim training will help contain this deficit or the heartache of not making the swim cut-off after all the work and effort.

For those fortunate enough to be breaking 60 minutes for a 3.8K swim it would seem pointless upping your swim training in an effort to break 50 minutes because gains at this end are harder to achieve. While this article is primarily aimed at helping mid pack and tail enders break through there are plenty of useful hints here that will help all swimmers.

BY DAN BULLOCK

Facts And Figures

When it comes to average times for Ironman it makes for interesting reading. These vary from race to race but I did find a useful resource (Runtri.com) which offers average swim times for various races. If we take Ironman Florida 2009 as an example the average time for this 3.8K sea swim was 81 minutes. A non-sea swim would likely be a little quicker than this. If the 25 most popular Ironman races are averaged the time goes down to 76 minutes.

A couple of races sway these figures, though, making them faster than what is the reality at most races. This is because it includes Ironman Hawaii and Australia's Port Macquarie which has a renowned fast swim. It's interesting to see the average swim time at the latter was 64 minutes but Australian's, which make up the bulk of the field, are known for their swimming abilities. Equally, you might say to include the results from the World Championships in Hawaii is unfair due to the quality of the field. Interestingly only the first 450 to exit the swim were inside 75 minutes with the vast majority outside of this time.

Effects Of The Swim

What I have noticed from watching the swim exit at Ironman events is at between 45 and 50 minutes the faster pros smoothly exit the water and quickly get into their stride. Five minutes later the strong age groupers and slower pros start to filter through one or two at a time. Most of these, apart from the odd ex-swimmer, were well trained and disciplined athletes starting the bike in good shape after a well executed swim. As the hour rolled around groups of four and five were coming through in a controlled state with few people looking exhausted needing to drink or eat. They seemed to be

comfortable and find a rhythm immediately as they went out on the bike.

As the clock moved towards 70 minutes groups were getting larger with greater numbers of dishevelled and tired swimmers. By the time the 85 minute mark came round groups of 15 - 20 were rolling out of T1, water bottles were being dropped and bikes were wobbling with less care being exhibited as self preservation kicked in. With around 2000 people racing these events it seemed that most were exiting at the same point in time. Here the most accidents seemed to be taking place too. I can't even imagine what it must be like in transition with so many people trying to find bags and change into their bike kit. It must be the complete antithesis of the smooth easy flowing competitors around the hour mark. I have even seen someone end up with an aerobar through the knee cap after crashing on a dropped bottle just out of T1 ending their race and season.

After about 90 minutes things start to calm down again but not by much. Not until 100 minutes was it noticeably thinner on the ground but these people were tired. This is a long time to be in the water for any swimmer, so it's no wonder. Heat and energy are being expended and refuelling is going to need to take place sooner than a swimmer around the 65 minute mark, who, through good technique has expended less energy.

A friend who I have helped come down from a 78 minute Ironman swim to 55 minutes over the past three years explained: "I recall my first Ironman T1 and it was like running through London Bridge Station at 5:30pm on a rush hour evening. It was chaotic. Last year exiting at 55 minutes was more like cruising through the same station at midnight."

The Swim Matters

Even at a leisurely two hours the Ironman swim is a very small proportion of the day but consider where you are starting the bike from. If you are a good cyclist then you have a lot of ground to make up through a lot of heavy bike traffic. Rumour has it that famous German road cyclist, Udo Bolts, overtook hundreds of people on the bike in Kona several years ago. Impressive but he did not have the fastest bike split that day. Being exhausted from a hard swim and weaving through the field was unlikely to have helped.

A high proportion of two hour swimmers end up not finishing the race due to being immersed for so long, getting cold and expending a lot of calories that cannot be replaced during the swim. As a result they start with fewer calories onboard than faster swimmers and fail to catch up for the rest of the day. A couple of years ago the last buoy broke loose on the Ironman Brazil course about 1:45 into the race. While unfortunate and rare those in the water ended up swimming 4.5K making it a long day. The message here is to spend as little time in the water as possible because here conditions are at their most hostile with more factors of your control.

On a multi loop course if you are 45 minutes or more behind the lead swimmers then it wont be too long before you get lapped on the swim and potentially on the bike. Getting lapped in the water can be especially unnerving as the pro train steams past. Similarly on the bike too. Sub 70 minute swimmers are going to have a clear first loop and avoiding traffic both in the swim and on the bike should always be an aim.

How To Improve Your Ironman Swim

As a coach the nice thing about working with Ironman triathletes is that we do have a lot of distance to race. This means even the smallest imperfection in the stroke which will be repeated thousands of times will slow your average swim speed. Conversely small improvements to technique can yield huge gains. With so much distance to cover improving your average swim speed from 0.72 metres per second to 0.83 metres per second will mean a reduction from 88 minutes to 76 minutes. In pool terms this means improving from a 35 second average over 25 metres to 30 seconds per 25 metres. Most swimmers when they come to me can can easily swim this 30 second target for 25 metres, and often maintain it for 100 metres, but by the time 400 metres comes around the average speed falls purely because of their technique.

Five seconds over 25 metres is a big chunk of time to reduce but by no means impossible for most, the hard thing is maintaining this pace. A few simple adjustments to your front crawl technique can help bring this improvement in open water and have you maintain it. Improved technique will lead to a more relaxed swim requiring less energy and oxygen. As technique disintegrates you need more energy and oxygen to combat the extra effort needed to shunt a larger profile through the water. Three relatively simple

adjustments to your open water front crawl could yield these results.

1. Sighting

Sighting every seven or eight strokes will reduce the frequent interruptions to your natural swim velocity. Lifting the head every third stroke to simultaneously breathe and sight will really tire you for the following reasons:

a. A stronger push down of the swimming arm to lift the head means you're not propelling yourself forwards as early as you might. The degree at which the forearm becomes vertical goes a long way to dictate at which point you start to move forwards. Pushing down to lift the head excessively will leave the forearm horizontal preventing forwards momentum.

b. A secondary effect of sighting will be a harder leg kick. This happens as the head returns to neutral and you try to return to normal cruising speed after looking up. The legs tend to sink — not even your wetsuit will not stop this — leaving more of the chest, stomach and legs exposed. This increases your frontal surface area which ultimately leads to more drag.

2. Leg Splay

It's important to stop splaying your legs when you turn to breathe. If you lack balance and control within your technique people tend to splay their legs more with each breath. This is usually happens to counter act the off balance position caused by turning the head to breathe. This can be devastating to your streamlined profile. Try swimming a few strokes with your fins on. Point them to the bottom of the pool and feel the extra workload your arms perform. You're effectively applying a braking effect each time you breathe, and if you breathe every third stroke that is a lot of braking. If you hold a steady 25 strokes per 25 metres that will be over 1,200 sets of brakes being applied over 3.8K.

3. Swim Straighter

Only swim the race course distance and no more because it's a waste of time, effort and energy. This isn't easy if you're not well balanced in the water and making best use of your stroke to keep you straight. If your front crawl stroke does a nice job of keeping you straight then you will not need to rely on external factors, such as excessive sighting, to keep you straight.

I now teach from this view point and encourage swimming straight by making use of the body and limbs, and utilising their pathways to drive you forwards.

The main factors that will keep you swimming straight are:

a. Bilateral breathing in training, although not necessary on race day, will bring a natural symmetry to your stroke by stopping one side becoming over dominant. Be careful with this because you will take four breaths less per length bilateral breathing compared to average to single sided breathing. As a result it can encourage many to rush a flatter stroke in order to breathe quicker. Don't forget your rotation through the long axis. Better still try a central snorkel for best symmetry of stroke practice.

b. Channel water back towards the feet with an effective catch position avoiding excessively wide sweeps of the hands. Stay on the black line at the bottom of your lane at quiet times in the pool. Keep your hands on the black line. It is okay for the elbow to break wide of the black line to set up an effective catch position.

c. Keep breathing movement to a minimum. If the head lifts unnecessarily high rather then turns this usually drags the opposite recovering arm across the centre line on entry. This then upsets where you start your initial pull phase from. Get the head back to a neutral position after a surface inhalation. Don't waste time exhaling and inhaling while above the surface. You can exhale under the water. If the head remains above the surface for a long period the recovering arm, while exiting, will then push the head back to neutral. As this gains momentum the recovering arm can be pulled across the centre line leading to more lateral body movement.

You could spend a lot of time attempting to save 30 minutes from your bike split. Improving open water swimming will allow you to swim straighter, require less sighting and expend less calories. Six good swimming lessons that improve your speed in open water seem cheap in comparison,e both in terms of time and money. Don't give up on your swim it could change the whole way you race.

Dan Bullock is senior coach at swimfortri.com and a Speedo Openwater Advisory Coach.