

Top 10 Training Tips for Masters Swimmers

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Peter Reaburn is an Associate Professor in exercise and sport science at CQUniversity. He was the founder of Miami Masters in Queensland, Chair of the 1990 National Swim Organising Committee, spent two years as State President of AUSSI Queensland and 10 years on the National Coaching Panel. He has won national distance swimming championships and was world-ranked in 1500m freestyle as a younger master swimmer. He still swims open water including Byron Bay last year and was winner of the Australian Ironman Triathlon (50-54 years) in 2005. He has recently written the definitive book for athletes over 30 years of age titled *The Masters Athlete* now in its second reprint and available at: www.mastersathlete.com.au. A great Xmas present too.

Peter will be writing regular *Bridging the Gap* articles for us.

Introduction

As an athlete, I have always had a passion for understanding my body and how it responds during exercise and adapts to training. As a sport scientist with a research interest in older athletes, I am lucky enough to be able to stay on the pulse of research, limited as it is, that is undertaken on aging athletes.

Below are the top 10 tips for masters swimmers. These are based on 46 years of high-performance competition in sport and 25 years of reading and conducting research. I hope the suggestions help you. Biased as I am my book [The Masters Athlete](#) discusses in detail each of these tips with examples and specific suggestions on how to turn them into action.

1. Train using the principle of specificity

In a nutshell, this scientific principle of training says that if you want to improve your 50m sprint freestyle, it won't happen doing big sets of 200m swims. Conversely, if you want to do a PB in the 800m, you won't get it doing 25m sprints with long recoveries. You need to analyse the event(s) you want to be good at or do a PB in and work with your coach to develop that capacity. I see way too many masters athletes wondering why they aren't getting faster when all they do is train slow.

2. Progressively overload your body

Just as I see too many masters swimmers training incorrectly for speed or endurance, I see too many either doing the same thing year in, year out, day in day out, week in week out. I also see some former swimmers coming back into masters and hammering themselves as they did as 15-20 year-olds and overtraining or getting injured. The principle of progressive overload means just that - progressively overload your cardiovascular, musculoskeletal and nervous systems by gradually increasing how often you train, how hard you train and how long you train for. Build these slowly with emphasis on intensity last.

3. Train with intensity

Once you have developed your cardiovascular, musculoskeletal and nervous systems progressively, the absolute key to better performances and PBs is intensity of training. Research has shown that masters athletes tend to train with lower intensity as they age. Equally, research as shown that those that train with intensity, slow down at half the rate of those masters athletes who drop intensity from their training. You need to train fast to race fast. Sprint sets develop speed, high heart rate sets develop endurance. No short cuts, just hard work. But if you do these too often, too hard and/or too quickly for too long, you will overtrain or injure yourself. Rely on a coach and listen to your body – and progressively overload!

4. Recover even harder than you train

Anecdotal evidence from all the older athletes I know, combined with research on aging non-athletes as well as exercising rats have all shown that as we age, we appear to need longer to recover and longer to adapt to training. Thus, we need to be aggressively using the recovery strategies research has shown work. Those rated very highly are contrast water therapy (hot/cold showers), compression garments (yep, they work!), ice baths, stretching and nutrition (especially high [glycemic index](#) foods and [carbohydrate-protein drinks](#) after training). Other recovery strategies science has shown work are active recovery (easy swims), massage, spas, and sleep – now I like that! I have a whole chapter in my book on the specifics of how to use these recovery strategies most effectively.

5. Do flexibility and core training

Research has shown that as we age, we get less flexible. Yet swimming is a sport that demands good range of movement around the shoulders, hips, knees and ankles. Poor flexibility, particularly when combined with poor technique, can lead to injury. I stretch before and after every swim session. I also do 2-3 15-20 minute flexibility and core stability sessions a week at a gym or while watching the news on TV. It's kept me injury-free – fingers crossed!

6. Do strength training

One of the major declines as we age is a decline in strength as a result of a decline in muscle mass. This begins at 35, drops steadily till around 50, drops a little more quickly from 50-65, then plummets after 65-70 years. Thus, the older we get, the more important strength training becomes as we age. It keeps us strong and supple and helps maintain speed. The older you get or the more competitive you are, the more important strength training becomes. Speak to your coach or age-group coach at your pool about who to go to about this. You may have to pay for it, but it's worth it depending on your goals.

7. Train consistently

Stay active for life! In my game we call it training age. The longer you've been at training, the quicker you adapt, the faster you recover, the better you become. Sure take a break from hard training, but always try to swim at least twice a week. Get to the gym more often in the off-season, get stronger in the tummy and lower back, get more flexible and keep the heart and lungs moving by cycling or walking, jogging. Stay active for life and remember [Exercise is Medicine](#).

8. Warm-up and cool down

Warm-up enhances performance and cool downs enhance recovery. Yet I see too many masters swimmers doing neither before training or racing hard. Warm-up as close as possible to the event, use stretchy cords if you have to. Do the same with cool-down. Do it for not only performance and recovery reasons, but health reasons.

9. Periodise your training

Fancy term but simple in its meaning. It means working hard at times, medium at times and easy at times. It means having hard days followed by easy days in a week. It means having hard weeks followed by easier weeks. I have whole chapter on this in my book that can help you realise you can't train hard day in day out, week in week out. You need to alternate and manipulate how hard, how often and how long you train for. Crucially, you must allow time for your (aging) body to adapt.

10. Listen to your body

The bottom line. Listen for the little joint or muscle 'niggles', the signs of tiredness such as grumpiness or lack of interest, falling asleep at the desk. Have you recovered hard enough, long enough? Do you need more rest? A day off?

I hope the above help you achieve your personal goals. Stay active and exercise for life!