

The Wet Gazette

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A Return to Training and Competing

By Andrew Scheaff*

As the COVID-19 pandemic begins to slow, and swimmers are able to access pools with increasing regularity, or for the first time in a long time, these same swimmers are faced with a new challenge. How do I get ready to race after a long layoff? And how do I accomplish this goal safely? That's what we're going to discuss.

With major championships looming in the coming months, there is a strong urge to make up for lost time. Couple this dynamic with the unbridled enthusiasm that comes from time away from an activity you love, and you have a recipe for disaster. We're going to explore the basic strategies you can use to get fit, stay healthy, and enjoy the sport you love once again. Let's get into it.

80% Fit and 100% Healthy

The major challenge here isn't how to design the optimum training program to reach peak fitness in as little time as possible. The major challenge is how to transition back to normal training and race preparation without getting hurt. Nothing will bring your training to a halt faster than an injury, no matter how big or how small. Ask me how I know! This article is going to be geared towards staying healthy, with the assumption that staying healthy will allow you to train harder and longer. If you're 100% certain you won't get hurt and you want to compete in July, have at it. Ramp up the volume and intensity until it's time to taper, then get some rest and have at it!

For everyone else, the focus needs to be on how to get 'fit enough' while remaining healthy. We're going to take a look at the two most important strategies you can use to reduce the risk of getting hurt. Then we'll look at some general approaches you can consider taking, depending what type of physical activity, if any, you've been performing over the prior 15 months. Once you have a sense of how much, how hard, and how often you should be training, it's important to consider what types of activities are conducive to your goals of safety and speed. Lastly, I'll share a quick example of how these same ideas apply to swimmers at the highest level.

Risk Mitigation

There are two primary ways to reduce the likelihood of incurring an injury as you return to full-time training with the hopes of competing. The first, and most important is to manage your training. If you don't make reasonably cautious decisions with what you choose to do in training, all bets are off. The likelihood of injury goes up, and it goes up a lot. We'll take a look at how to make smart decisions. The second strategy is to prioritize your recovery, thereby reducing the likelihood that the training you do perform is going to cause injury. This is your insurance policy. The harder you want to train, the more you'll need to prioritize recovery.

Manage Your Training

If you want to protect yourself from injury, the number one goal you need to have is to be smart about your training. There are three primary ways to make training more difficult—do more, go faster, do it more often. If you want to stay injury free, you have to control those three variables as you get back to normal training. Here's how.

Control Volume. Too much swimming, no matter how it's done, is going to cause problems. Your body can only handle so much work, and your shoulders can only handle so much work. Fortunately, our bodies can adapt to handle more and more work. However, this is a process that takes time. Further, it's a reversible process. Just because you *used* to swim 5K every day doesn't mean you can swim 5K every day right *now*. Start less with less than what you're used, probably *much* less.

(cont'd on page 2)

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Current and Upcoming Events

2021 USMS Summer Fitness Challenge

2K Swim or Dryland Workout
June 1-15, 2021

Virginia Beach Lifeguard Association 'JK' 1-Mile Swim

Virginia Beach, VA; June 20, 2021

2021 USMS SCY Nationals

Greensboro, NC; July 21-July 25, 2021

Lake Moomaw 1-Mile Swim

Tentative; August 7, 2021

2021 Go The Distance

December 31, 2021

General Information

LMSC for Virginia Website: www.vaswim.org

USMS Website: www.usms.org

Nearby LMSCs

North Carolina: www.ncmasters.org

Maryland: www.teamunify.com

Potomac Valley: www.PVMasters.org

Nearby Zones

Colonies Zone: www.ColoniesZone.org

Dixie Zone: www.DixieZone.org

Online Meet Registrations:

www.clubassistant.com

LMSC Officers

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Training and Competing (from page 1)

Control Intensity. Imagine jumping off of a 10m ledge. Bad things would happen. Imagine jumping off a 1m ledge, 10 times. Not much would happen. In both cases you fell 10m, yet the consequences were dramatically different. Such is the impact of intensity. If you try to swim too fast, faster than your body is ready for, you're asking for trouble. Be patient and don't force anything. Let the speed come back naturally, and let the intensity come back naturally. Your body will let you when you're ready.

Control Frequency. Training hard causes damage to your body, damage that is repaired so that you come back stronger. Unfortunately, this process takes time, and there isn't much you can do to reduce the time it takes to recover. Especially as you return to training, swimming is going to cause more damage than normal because you haven't been swimming. As a result, it's going to take more time than normal to recover. If you go from swimming 1 time per week to swimming 6 times per week, you're asking for trouble. Slowly increase the frequency of your swim workouts.

To make training more difficult, you can do more, you can go faster, or you can train more often. Most swimmers will try to increase all three at the same time. Needless to say, this isn't very smart, unless your goal is to get hurt. Instead, only increase one of the three options at a time, and make sure those increases are conservative. Every week, you can increase ONE of the variables for the rest of the week. I understand that it's rarely that simple. However, that should be the intention. The further you are away from 'normal' training, the more cautious you need to be when increasing the difficulty of your training.

Prioritize Your Recovery

While managing your training is the number one strategy, as you can't out-recover bad training, the complimentary strategy is to do everything you can to recover as well as possible. That way, if you make a mistake with your training, you have a buffer to protect. Fortunately, these strategies also happen to really good for your health, so you should probably use them anyway. You don't necessarily need to do any of these steps. However, think of them as an insurance policy. The more risk you're going to take in returning to training, the stronger of an insurance policy you want to take. All of these strategies will help to ensure you're in a place where injury is less likely. If you're choosing to be extremely cautious with your return to training, these strategies are probably not as important.

Nutrition. There are many different nutritional approaches that one can follow to fuel for optimum performance in life and the pool. You likely know what type of approach has worked for you in the past, and you're probably aware of how close you are to optimum right now. If you're deciding to ramp up your training, make sure that your nutrition is as close to optimal as possible for you. Not only will it help fuel your training, it will ensure that your muscles, tendons, and ligaments are recovering more effectively. As these are the trouble spots for injury, you want to do everything you can to ensure you're protected.

(cont'd on page 3)

Training and Competing (from page 2)

Sleep. As with nutrition, you probably know how much sleep you need to function at your best, and you're probably aware of how you're doing on the sleep front right now. If you're able to get close to your optimum amount of sleep, you can be a little more cavalier in your return to training. However, if you're running short on sleep for whatever reason, be careful with how much training you add to the mix. Your ability to handle extra work without issue is going to be compromised if you're not sleeping as much as you need.

Warm up and warm down. It's easy to view warm up as time not spent working hard, particularly when your time is short. This is a mistake. Warming up creates heat in the joints and the muscles which makes them more easily capable of the high speed, high force, and high range of motion actions seen in swimming. Further, warming up serves to lubricate the joints prior to the harder work that's to come. This lubrication is like the oil in your car. If you've ever driven a car with low oil, you know how devastating that can be. The same goes for your body. Be patient, warm up, and stay healthy.

After training, your body tends to be 'revved up' from all of the hard work you've just performed. While this is great for swimming fast, it's not great for recovering from training. Take the time to help wind down physically and psychologically to help transition yourself to a state where you're better able to recover. Warm down. Take some deep breaths. Really try to disengage. Too often, we finish practice and race off to the next adventure in life. Take the time to slow down, and you're more likely to recover effectively. Deep, slow breathing is really underrated here.

Different Strokes for Different Folks

Below we'll take a look at some general recommendations for different individuals depending on their starting point, and what they've been doing for the past 15 months. My recommendations are just that, recommendations. They're not ironclad and your situation very well may be different from what's described. If you want to be more aggressive, feel free to do so. However, understand that the more aggressive you are, the more likely it is that you'll pick up an injury. If you just spent 15 months not swimming, the last thing in the world you want to do is to have to stop swimming again. Be patient. If there are other strategies you'd like to use, try to remember the underlying principles that are discussed. Go slow, probably slower than you think is necessary and try not

to adjust more than one variable at a time, only making one change per week. Provided you follow those rules, you should be good to go.

I've been swimming normally. If you've been swimming with your normal training schedule for some time, swimming at normal intensities and volume, feel free to continue as planned or ramp it up in anticipation of upcoming competitions. If you're already where you need to be, continue as planned. There are no restrictions here as you're already training hard and consistently. Simply proceed with your normal preparation for championship competition.

I've been swimming regularly. If you've been in the pool with consistency, yet not really training, you're in a good spot. The good news is that your shoulders are used to swimming, and your body is used to regular training. At this point, simply begin to progress the volume and intensity back to normal levels. Slowly integrate the types of training that you and your coach feel are best suited for helping you swim fast when it counts. While caution still needs to be exhibited, regular swimming has removed many of the potential problems you may have otherwise run into.

I've been swimming sporadically. The good news is that your upper body is used to doing some work. Further, you should have a pretty good sense of what you're capable of right now. The bad news is that you'll need to become more consistent with your swimming before you can really begin to train hard like you normally would. The first goal should be to establish a consistent swimming habit over the course of a week. More than trying to really push hard during your practices, simply focusing on getting to the pool and swimming. Once you're able to do so consistently, and you have a sense of what you're ready for, you can begin to slowly start building your training towards what will be required to compete.

I've been exercising regularly. While you may be 'fit', that doesn't mean your shoulders are conditioned to handle the rigors of normal swim training. Unfortunately, as there's nothing quite like swimming, if you haven't been swimming, you need to ease back into it. Fortunately, you've already established the habit of exercising and your body is used to being challenged. This is a good start. The challenge is transitioning to more swimming training without overdoing it. Continue with your regular exercise habits, and slowly begin to substitute more swimming workouts.

(cont'd on page 4)

Training and Competing (from page 3)

As you're 'fit' and used to pushing yourself, you'll need to be careful. Remember that you haven't been swimming and your shoulders are at risk. Be cautious with your swim workouts. Control the volume and the intensity at first. You can start with 2 workouts per week in the pool and add an additional one each week, remembering to drop one of your land workouts when you do so. Once you're back to a normal swimming schedule, then feel free to increase the volume and intensity.

I've been exercising sporadically. The first priority is to establish a habit of getting back into the pool and exercising regularly. As you've been performing some exercise, you probably have an idea of what you're capable of. Start there and slowly increase what you're doing on a week to week basis. Be cautious as you'll need to take the time to re-establish habits, as well as begin the process of conditioning your shoulders to withstand the rigors of training. The latter is important not so much for the performance benefits, but to ensure that you stay healthy. Once you've re-established the necessary habits, and you feel comfortable with executing them consistently, you can begin to focus more on 'training'.

I've been enjoying myself. If you've enjoyed a significant break from any sort of structured physical activity or physical training, I hope you had fun! As far as a return to training goes, be very cautious. Rather than jumping into 'training' I would suggest that you simply begin to reestablish the habit of exercise and training. Keep the frequency low, keep the volume low, and keep the intensity low. Don't consider it training, simply a return to exercising in general. If you're feeling pretty good after a month, you can slowly start to increase what you're doing. Continue to demonstrate restraint and only increase volume, frequency, or intensity one at a time, rather than all three. As far as competing in two months goes, understand that a cautious approach is much more likely to result in long-term success, even if you're not where you'd like to be when it comes time to compete.

What Should I Focus On?

When returning to the pool, you still have to determine the actual work that needs to be done. What's an eager swimmer to do? The focus here should be on performing activities that are safe and effective at improving your performance over the long-term. Here's what to emphasize in your training.

#1-98. Focus on your skills. I'm not trying to be dramatic. Your skills ARE that important. Your speed comes from your technique. If you haven't been swimming much or at all, you're going to be rusty. Make sure you are doing anything and everything you can to return to your prior technical ability. Even better, strive to use this time to ensure your skills are better than they ever have been before. This is the ticket to improve your speed and avoid injury. Fortunately, improving your skills is a very safe way to get back into the pool, and it's without a doubt the most productive. The more you focus on technique, the faster you'll be able to make a full return, and the better you'll feel.

#99. Aerobic fitness. Slowly increase the amount of swimming you're doing at slow speeds, while also slowly increasing the speed you're swimming at. Get fit. Aerobic fitness work doesn't have to be 10x400, nor should it be. It's simply a focus on swimming more, doing so at controlled speeds, and swimming with excellent technique. Even if you're a complete sprint beast, some aerobic work is valuable, and it's handled easily when returning to the pool. Not only will this strategy help your performance, have a basic level of aerobic fitness is important for health. If you're not a big fan of aerobic swimming, simply keep the volumes low, just do something.

#100. Speed. If you want to go fast, you have to go fast. Simple enough. However, the detail is in the dose. Use very short distances (less than 25m) and a limited number of repetitions (less than 10). Especially at the start, these don't need to be maximal efforts. Just pick up the speed and allow it to get faster as you feel comfortable, always ensuring that your swimming well. If you're a distance swimmer, remember even open water swims are races. You need speed.

If you're focusing on these aspects of training for several weeks, you may be ready to introduce more intensive training such as hard endurance work or race pace training depending on your fancy. However, if you're continuing to improve, I would caution against using these more intense training strategies until you're sure you need them, or you're sure you can handle it safely.

Other Topics of Interest

Here are some quick topics that are relevant to your return to swimming fast. They provide some quick hit wisdom that may be appropriate for the situation you find yourself in.

Training and Competing (from page 4)

Past Injuries. The best predictor of a future injury is a past injury. If this describes you, understand that you're at risk. That doesn't mean that all hope is lost. It just means that you need to demonstrate more caution than if you've never had a serious injury before. If you've had significant injuries in the past, these injuries are canaries in the coal mine. If they start to flare up a bit, it means you're doing too much, too soon. Back off. Be very cautious.

Warning Signs. If something is bothering you, stop. Take a few days off and see how you feel. The temptation will be to push through it with the hope that it's just temporary. You might get lucky and it will be temporary. Or you'll just make it a lot worse. It's better to take two days off than to be forced to take two months off, again. I understand that this is a hard decision to make, particularly when you're just getting back into it. Make the right decision, so you can do what you want to do in the long run.

Should You Compete? The more swimming you've been doing, the more likely it is you'll be able to racing successfully and safely. If this describes you, feel free to compete with reasonable expectations of fast swimming. The less swimming you've been doing, the more likely it is that you might pick up an injury, or simply swim slower than you'd prefer. The less aggressive you train over the next couple months, the safer you'll be, although you might compromise your performance slightly. Choose as you will. If you do choose to compete, and haven't been training as much as you'd like, adjust your expectations. It's better to be pleasantly surprised than disappointed by unrealistic expectations.

A Collegiate Example

The challenge of returning to swim after an extended break isn't just an issue faced by Masters swimmers. It's one that has been faced by all swimmers of all ability levels. We faced these same issues with our college team. Following our return to the pool late last summer, we had to be very cautious in returning to swim, even knowing we'd be competing in about 6 weeks, with a major competition to be held in a little over two months after getting back to it.

After starting in September, we didn't do any doubles until after Thanksgiving. We played it safe and our team swam fast in November. Now, while you probably aren't doing doubles during your normal

training, the same principle applies. We did less than we would normally do. We were patient. We also limited the amount of resistance swimming (parachutes, etc.) for an extended period of time to avoid injury. We did less dryland. As a result, we were fortunate to avoid major injuries and fast swimming resulted. If college swim teams exercised restraint upon returning to training, it's probably a good idea for you to do the same. As the team's results showed, it doesn't have to compromise your performance either.

Be Safe, Have Fun, Swim Fast

It's been a long time and I'm sure you're excited to get back to training and racing. Rightfully so. At the same time, that excitement can be the one thing that prevents you from accomplishing your goals. Any comeback is fraught with danger as your excitement is coupled with a lowered readiness to handle the very training you're so excited to perform. Use restraint. Be patient. Take your time. Savor every time you get in the pool, even if it's not as long, as fast, or as often as you want it. If you're patient and you do things right, you'll be back to normal training before you know it, healthy and happy. It will be worth it.

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Announcements

LMSC Bylaws:

Don't forget . . . please provide any comments on the existing LMSC Bylaws to Caycee Buscaglia by no later than **August 1st**. The Bylaws are available at www.vaswim.org.

Open Water Events:

Be on the lookout for open water events coming to a water body near you this summer. Some will be USMS-sanctioned. Others, such as the Virginia Beach Lifeguard Association Ocean Swim Series, are not USMS-sanctioned, but they are local events with a long history of safe and fun competition.

Convention Delegates:

The USMS annual Convention will be held virtually again this year on September 23-27, 2021. If you are interested in attending as a representative of the LMSC, please email Caycee Buscaglia at vachair@usms.org by **July 10, 2021**.

Getting Back to Socials!

By Alice Phillips

The SwimRVA Hammerheads held a social on Saturday, June 5 at Brambly Park in Richmond. This Scott's Addition winery, restaurant, and outdoor venue was the perfect spot to gather safely and celebrate the newly relaxed COVID restrictions. Denise Letendre organized the event, which included pool swimmers and the open water group, as well as family, friends, and dogs! Only a few weeks prior, the OW crew "enjoyed" a cold Down River Rip (4.4 and 2.5 mile James River event). On this day temperatures were close to 90, but the shade and refreshing food and drink, not to mention good company, kept everyone comfortable.



Rob Jones, James Jones and his friend Caroline, Randy Dash, Jay Peluso



Nicole LePere, Sidney Glass, Austin Glass, Denise Letendre, Gabby Mizerak



Wynne Reece, Tess Andres, and Denise Letendre



Barbara Hichak, Angela Howsmon, and Jonah Holland

If your team or workout group would like to host a social, the LMSC has some funds to help make that happen. Please contact Becca Latimer (LMSC Treasurer) for information about the reimbursement program.

