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Kaizen Swimming

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How to improve continuously, no matter how long you swim.

After 39 years of purposeful swimming (as opposed to merely “doing laps”) and 33 years of coaching and teaching, I consider myself fortunate to have achieved a rare distinction: I think I’ve become one of the best swimmers on earth. While that claim probably sounds staggeringly presumptuous, my definition of best—unlike one that applies to, say, Michael Phelps—doesn’t hinge on how fast I swim. Instead I mean that, among the billions in the human race, I think there are perhaps only a hundred or so swimmers on earth who use their available energy and power as efficiently as I do, who enjoy every stroke as fully, and who practice effectively enough to keep improving continuously.

It’s that last definition of “best” that excites me most. There’s a Japanese term *kaizen*, which means continuous improvement; specifically it denotes incremental improvement through cleverness, patience, and diligence. At age 54, I feel I am the embodiment of *kaizen* swimming. After 39 years of swimming, coaching and teaching, after over 15 million meters in the pool (I average about 500,000 meters per year), I’m still making regular advances in my control, efficiency, and ease. My 1500-meter time now is faster than when I was an 18-year-old college freshman in 1969.

In May of 2003, while filming a swimming video in Santa Barbara, California, and training with the Santa Barbara Masters swimmers in their 50-meter pool, I swam a series of 20 x 50 meters, interspersed with 10 x 100 meters. On all the 50s, I averaged 30 strokes per length (and completed each in 44-48 seconds). Two years

earlier, it required intense concentration and all the perfection I could summon to swim a single 50-meter lap in 30 strokes and about 50 seconds.

Because I’m a *kaizen* swimmer, I still think of myself as a developing swimmer—a category that every triathlete on earth would do well to embrace (yes, even those who may have swum competitively for many years or on the national level.) So long as you have human DNA and haven’t somehow acquired fish DNA, I guarantee that you can still keep improving as a swimmer. Even at age 54 or 64 or 74. And here’s the key lesson I’ve learned about improving as a swimmer: *Swimming harder doesn’t help.*

The only time my swimming stagnated was my final two years of college—when I believed that working hard was the way to success. From the time I began swimming as high school sophomore through my college years, I prided myself on working harder than anyone else in the pool and I improved steadily—for a few years. I also swam an average of 40,000 yards per week (compared with 15,000 now) and was a lean and hungry teenager. But in my final two years of college, I continued working hard and actually regressed. In fact, it was that frustration as an athlete that led me into coaching.

Over the 33 years since college I’ve stopped concentrating on how hard and shifted to a focus on achieving flow while in the pool and improved each year without pause. If you’d like to achieve a similar Nirvana, here are my rules for *kaizen* swimming.

1. Working hard doesn’t help. I swim in many different pools and with many Masters groups. Everywhere I

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go, most of my pool mates are working harder than they should. They think they're doing what it takes to improve, but when I watch from underwater, it is clear that most of their energy and effort is spent mainly on creating turbulence and making waves. Few use their effort effectively. The notion of working hard has become ingrained in the culture of swimming because "real swimmers" and their coaches talk a lot about "pushing through pain barriers." That brings us to the next rule for kaizen swimming.

2. Swimming your best doesn't hurt. I've had my share of great swims over the years. The best ones never hurt. In every instance I simply felt as if everything was in sync and working remarkably well. I did feel sensation, perhaps even intense sensation, but even more, I felt fully in control. And that's how all the great swimmers I've coached—including a couple who won medals at the Olympics—recall their best swims. The best swims always feel like flow states. Since realizing that, my philosophy has been to seek flow states in my swimming rather than test my tolerance for pain. And as long as I've done that I've improved continuously and enjoyed every lap.
3. Be the quiet center. While in Kona, Hawaii, for Ironman week in 2003, I swam 1.4 miles on the course every morning—typically accompanied by hundreds of Ironman qualifiers—experiencing how the actual swim leg would feel. I was surrounded by a mass of swimmers for the 500 meters closest to the pier. I became very aware of how inefficiently virtually everyone was swimming, churning the water rather than working with it. The amount of energy ineffectively expended was remarkable. I made my swims an exercise in being the "quiet center" of all that was going on around me—less noise, less splash, fewer bubbles. Whenever a swimmer passed me, I would strive to match their speed, but with slower, quieter movements. In every open water race or Masters practice I join, I aim to be the one expending the least energy and to have a sense of moving with a bit more cunning than everyone else.
4. Pay attention to yourself. Whenever and wherever I swim in Masters workouts, most of the triathletes in the pool seem to be concerned most with not being left behind. They go like crazy to stay on the feet of the swimmers ahead of them, as if falling

behind would be the end of the world, even when the set has been specifically advertised as a drill or a an opportunity to work on perfect technique. Striving mindlessly to stay on another swimmer's feet will never make you a better swimmer. Tuning in to your own movements and sensations will. Even in the midst of a lane of hardworking triathletes and Masters, aim to isolate yourself in a "bubble of awareness" and to focus on how much drag you sense, how much noise you're making, how connected and integrated your movements feel or what your stroke count is. (In fact, if possible, leave plenty of room between you and the swimmer ahead of you when you push off to start a repeat.) How you feel and how you move is all you can ever control; that's what you should mainly focus on—that and having every lap feel as much like a flow state as possible.

5. Don't push off without a plan. Never leave a wall, for any set or repeat, without a clear sense of one thing you're trying to do really well. A single-point focus is essential. As soon as you try to do more than one thing really well, you'll weaken them all. The clarity of one focal point allows you to practice swimming with the mindfulness of yoga or tai chi. It could be your head position, how you enter your arm and extend your body, or perhaps your sense of fitting through a smaller "hole" in the water. My favorite all-purpose, never-fail focus point is simply trying to swim silently.



Terry Laughlin is the founder of Total Immersion Swimming and author of Triathlon Swimming Made Easy. More of his articles are available at www.totalimmersion.net.