

Gear, Gimmicks, Gizmos and Goggles – a look at swim gear

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There are many and varied training and racing aids on the market designed to help you swim faster. They can make training more interesting by adding variety to workouts and can help you focus on improving aspects of your stroke in isolation.

When considering buying swim gear, ask yourself several questions:

1. Why am I buying this piece of equipment?
2. What will it do for me?
3. Do the promised benefits justify the expense?
4. Is it specifically designed for swimmers?
5. How long will it last?
6. Is it designed to help me specifically or is it a "one size fits all" that may not be appropriate for my size, shape, training background, fitness level, technique etc?
7. Can I get the same improvements by working a little harder at what I am doing now?
8. How specific to swimming is using training equipment? (After all no one can use paddles or kickboards in competitions).
9. Are the top swimmers using this equipment successfully? What about competitors in my age group or at my level?
10. Was it designed by coaches and swimmers based on their own practical experience or by large manufacturers just trying to sell a new "gimmicky" product?

What type of gear is available?

Bands - Not the musical variety: more like the rubber variety. Bands allow you to tie your legs together to focus on your arm pull only. Be careful not to pull too far off the centre line (the central axis) when using bands. A wide or narrow pull can result in "snaking" as your legs are not able to kick and balance your stroke.

Cap - An essential item to keep your hair tidy! Caps are usually made from rubber or plastic. The better ones are made from silicon. Keep your caps in good condition by drying them thoroughly after training and racing. Turning them inside out and sprinkling them with talcum powder or baby powder also keeps them in good order.

Cossies - Buy ones that are comfortable and durable. As they start to wear out, wear two old pairs (one on top of the other) to stretch out their useful life. Wearing three old pairs at once turns old cossies into "drag suits" as the extra thickness makes for extra

resistance. When wearing in new cossies, keep a tube of Vaseline handy in case the new stitching causes chafing.

Drink Bottles - 750ml drink bottles with water or sports drink should be as much a part of your swim kit as goggles and a towel.

Fins - Fins are usually worn when working on stroke (stroke development and stroke correction) and when doing over-speed work. Most drills are done at kicking speed, and swimmers with weaker kicks can often benefit from wearing fins during drill work to keep up a reasonable momentum. Fins can also help you get the feel of swimming fast through the water, but it is important to maintain good control of your stroke at the faster speed. Fins come in various shapes and sizes (including cut down ones called "zoomers"). Buy fins that are not too firm as it limits the natural movement of the leg. Avoid really long ones as they make life a little too easy and are of limited value as conditioning tools.

Goggles - Goggles should be comfortable and not let in any water. If fogging up is a problem, spit (yuk) in them or lick the inside of the goggle before you start swimming. If diving in with goggles on, keep your head fairly relaxed, eyes fixed straight ahead. Looking up or down when you dive can cause the goggles to come off or end up around your neck. Also most goggles have a split band on the back. Spread the band evenly across the back of your head to keep your goggles in place while swimming. Buy goggles that fit your eye sockets and not necessarily the ones worn and advertised by the top swimmers. If possible, try them on before you buy them. (Don't spit in them until AFTER you pay for them though!).

Heart Rate Monitor - A good idea for the serious senior swimmer to allow you to keep a check on how hard you are working. Think of a heart rate monitor as a "speedometer" for your heart. Some ideas for using a heart rate monitor are:

1. Swim in and touch the wall at the end of a swim set. Take your heart rate immediately. Take it again one minute later and note how much it decreased over the minute. As you get fitter, your heart rate will recover (reduce) faster.
2. Most swimmers use their heart rate monitors to see how their heart is responding to hard work. When doing easy sets or recovery training, use the heart rate monitor to make sure your heart rate stays below 50-60 beats from maximum.
3. When swimming down, take your heart rate every minute or so to see how your body is recovering from your training workout.

Kickboard - A good tool to help you develop your kick. A great idea (if you can afford it) is to buy one and do a 200 metre kick time-trial. Repeat the time-trial monthly. Every time you improve by 10 seconds, cut 10mm off the kickboard with a sharp knife. In this way, as your kick improves, you learn to rely less on the added buoyancy of the board. A good way to save money is to buy a pull buoy and use that as a kick board (and as a pull buoy!).

Paddles - The smaller the better. One trap that many new swimmers fall into is the "small paddle-small improvement: bigger paddles-bigger improvements". The bigger the paddles the greater the load on your shoulders and upper back. Use paddles that overload your muscles, but don't overload the joint to the point where your technique is compromised and you risk injury. The short cuts you take this year, will be the ones you pay for next year.

Pull Buoy - A piece of equipment designed to keep your legs afloat while working your arms. Shaped a little like a dog biscuit and usually made of foam rubber, the pull buoy fits snugly between your legs, just above your knees and stays there with a little gentle pressure applied from your inner thigh muscles.

Training sets using swim gear

If using overload gear (pull buoy, band, paddles, kickboard) aim to incorporate the gear into your training program. For example, take the training set 10 x 100 metres on 2:00 minutes, (that is, swimming 100 metres every two minutes).

Variations on the basic set incorporating overload gear include:

- 10 x 100 with pull buoy
- 10 x 100 with hand paddles
- 10 x 100 kick
- 10 x 100 band only pull (legs tied together but no pull buoy)
- 10 x 100 with pull buoy plus paddles plus band

Try the mix and match approach as well:

- 10 x 100 (first 5 kick, second 5 paddles only)
- 10 x 100 (3 kick/3 band only pull/3 paddles and pull buoy)
- 10 x 100 (odd 100's kick/even 100's pull)

General guidelines:

1. For every lap swum with paddles, fins or pull buoy (overload gear), swim two without.
2. Doing sets with overload gear on is not a short cut to improved swimming.
3. If you are using overload gear that makes you alter your stroke just to use it, (ie paddles that are too big) you are probably better off not using the gear.
4. The basics of good swimming are still developing a good rhythm and a relaxed recovery, a long stroke and a strong, steady, rhythmic kick.

Some do it yourself ideas:

1. For something to tow and add resistance to your swimming try tying a 2-metre length of rope to a one metre by 50 cms sponge. Tie the rope to your waist and

trail the sponge behind you. It will get heavy after it soaks up some water and give you something to tow up and down the lane. The great thing is that when you have finished, you can simply wring it out and put it in the bottom of your swim bag for another day.

2. Get an old inner tube (the inside of a car tyre). Using a strong pair of scissors, make two cuts 10 cms apart to form a loop. This is a great way to make swim bands. One old inner tube can make enough bands for your whole swim-squad.

Have a go at using these gizmos and enjoy your training.