

Swimming for Cross-Training

No other activity comes as close as swimming to being the perfect full-body fitness exercise, which makes the pool a great place to turn for relief from the pounding of the road.

By Josh Clark,

There's nothing quite so soothing for muscles tired from the pounding of the road as the gentle massaging action of water as you glide through it. Swimming is a zero impact sport, and as the least stressful cross-training activity it's ideal when coming back from injury. There's also something about immersing yourself in the calm and quiet of the water. As contemplative as running can be, swimming rivals it as a meditative activity.

That said, swimming is no day at the beach, either. No other activity comes as close to being the perfect full-body fitness exercise. It's true that swimming gives the most severely stressed running muscles a bigger break than biking or cross-country skiing, but it also uses many muscles that running neglects completely. Shoulders, arms and hips get plenty of work while your ankles get extra flexibility. Swimming also demands special attention to your breathing patterns, and the control you learn in the pool can translate to more efficient breathing during difficult running sessions and races.

Just as in running, swimming sessions can be designed for either endurance or for sprints -- aerobic or anaerobic workouts. To get a workout roughly equivalent to running, you have to swim only about 1/4 as far as you would run. For interval workouts, for example, 100 meter repeats in the pool would be about equivalent to 400 meter repeats on the track. A six mile run could be mimicked by a 1.5 mile swim. Of course, new swimmers may find it difficult to swim so long. Unconditioned muscles and poor technique make for inefficient swimming; lessons may not be a bad idea.

Keep in mind, too, that different swimming styles work different muscle groups. The butterfly stroke aggressively tones the chest and shoulders. The backstroke works the hamstrings. Freestyle strengthens the lower back. Try varying your stroke throughout the workout.

Because of the cooling effect of the water, you'll find that your heartrate will be about 10 beats slower per minute than an equivalent running workout. That's fine, but try not to let it fall much below that adjustment. To get the best workout, try to keep up a steady effort, kicking constantly without gliding. It's the same as running: keep your arms and legs moving at all times.