12-WEEK INTERMEDIATE SWIM PROGRAMME

Build a stronger, more efficient freestyle stroke

Improve technique, endurance, and swim fitness for pool swimming, open water, and triathlon.

GIVE IT A TRI

SWIM STATION
GIVE IT A TRI

Welcome

This 12-week swim programme is designed for intermediate swimmers who want more structure, better swim fitness, and a more efficient freestyle stroke. Whether you are swimming for general performance, open water confidence, or as part of triathlon training, this plan is built to help you improve the quality of your stroke as well as your ability to sustain it.

The programme progresses through four key technical phases - balance and rotation, catch, pull, and push - so you develop stronger foundations, better feel for the water, and the ability to hold form as the effort increases.

Who it's for

- Intermediate swimmers looking for more structure in their training
- Swimmers who can already complete regular sessions and want to improve efficiency, pacing, and endurance
- Fitness swimmers, open water swimmers, and triathletes
- Those wanting to build confidence across both technique and sustained swimming

What you will achieve

- A more efficient and sustainable freestyle stroke
- Better pacing awareness across Aerobic, Threshold, and stronger effort work
- Improved ability to hold form under fatigue
- More confidence and control in training and longer continuous swimming

Programme Created by David Ashton

This programme was created by David Ashton, who holds a BSc in Sport and Exercise Science from Loughborough University, an ASA Level 2 Swimming Teacher's Certificate, and a British Triathlon Coach Award.

With over 20 years of experience teaching and coaching swimming, David brings together a strong background in both competitive swimming and endurance sport. His swimming career included 11 appearances at the British National Championships, as well as racing at the Team GB Olympic Trials, Team England Commonwealth Games Trials, and the Masters World Championships.

Alongside his coaching background, David is also an accomplished endurance athlete, with multiple Ironman finishes, an age-group win at the Iron-distance Serpentine Swim, and completion of all three London Classics.

This programme combines technical swim coaching with real-world endurance experience to help swimmers build efficiency, control, and confidence over 12 structured weeks.

How to Use This Plan

- Complete Session 1 and Session 2 each week as your key swims.
- Use the Bonus Session only if recovery, schedule, and overall training load allow.
- Prioritise technical quality before pushing pace.
- If fatigue is high, reduce volume slightly before sacrificing stroke quality.
- Focus on consistency from week to week rather than trying to force every session.

Effort Scale

Effort	Description
Recovery / Easy (3-4/10)	Very relaxed, low effort, full control of breathing and stroke.
Aerobic (5/10)	Steady and sustainable. You could maintain this for a long time.
High Aerobic / Tempo (6/10)	A strong but sustainable pace often used for longer continuous swimming and race-specific efforts.
Threshold (7/10)	Comfortably hard. Repeatable effort that requires concentration and good pacing.
VO2 (8-9/10)	Very hard. Used for short, demanding efforts with good recovery.
MAX (10/10)	Sprint effort. Highest intensity, used only in short bursts.

Equipment

- Pull buoy
- Finger paddles with wrist strap removed

These are the recommended tools used in some sessions and drills.

Drill videos, terminology and FAQs:

See pages 17-19

Phase Overview

Phase	Focus	Development
Weeks 1-3	Balance / Rotation / Recovery	Build body position, controlled rotation, and relaxed recovery.
Weeks 4-6	Catch	Improve hand entry, feel for the water, and early forearm engagement.
Weeks 7-9	Pull	Develop stronger propulsion, better connection through the stroke, and more sustained work.
Weeks 10-12	Push	Hold stroke length and propulsion under fatigue with more race-relevant effort.

WEEK 1

Focus: Balance / Rotation / Recovery

SESSION 1 - Technique and Threshold - Total: 1400m

Warm Up - (100m)
100 Easy front crawl

Skills & Drills - (400m)
8 × 50 @ 15s rest
1. Side Kick
2. Swim
3. 6-3-6
4. Swim

Main Set - (800m)
4 x 50 @ 20s rest - build within each 50 from Aerobic to Threshold
10 × 50 @ 20s rest - Odd = Threshold (7/10) - Even = Technique (controlled swim)
4 × 25 fast @ 20s rest

Swim Down - (100m)
100m Easy swim

SESSION 2 - Aerobic - Total: 1500m

Warm Up - (200m)
200 Easy swim

Sectional Skill Work - (200m)
4 × 50 @ 15s rest - 25 Side Kick / 25 Swim

Main Set – (900m)
6 × 150m Aerobic @ 15s rest

Swim Down - (200m)
200m Easy swim

BONUS SESSION - Total: 1500m

Session
15 × 100 Aerobic @ 15s rest.
Try to keep the same effort across all 15. Record time to see how consistent the pacing is.

Drill Glossary

Side Kick - Body position and rotation drill to improve balance in the water. If this is too difficult, try side kick with a kick board.

6-3-6 - Balance and rotation drill that reinforces alignment and controlled rotation.

Single Arm Extensions - Isolates timing, body position, and catch awareness on one side at a time.

Single Arm UNCO – Improves rotation, coordination, and body control while reinforcing balance and alignment in the water.

Catch Up - Helps improve front-end timing, reach, and stroke alignment.

Almost Catch Up - A slightly more continuous version of catch-up that keeps rhythm while reinforcing front-end timing.

High Elbow Drill – Improves body rotation and reinforces a high-elbow, relaxed recovery.

Fists / Fist drill - Improves feel for the water by removing the hand surface area.

Finger Paddles (no wrist strap) - Encourages continuous pressure on the water from the catch through to the push and exit.

Flicks - Reinforces the push phase.

Shark Fin – Improves balance, rotation and control through the recovery.

Front Paddle / Doggy Paddle - Helps connect the front of the stroke with an effective catch and pull.

12 Kick Switches - Rotation and bodyline drill used to improve balance and controlled side-to-side movement.

Terminology

(You can also refer to our swimming terms post on Instagram)

Pull only - Swim using a pull buoy and your arms only, with no kick.

Turn at the 'T' - Do not swim all the way into the wall. Instead, turn around the **T-marking** on the pool floor at each end of the lane. If your pool does not have a T-marking, avoid swimming right into the wall and pushing off. This helps replicate a more continuous swim.

Sighting - Look ahead for a point in the distance by lifting your eyes forward into "crocodile eyes", before turning to the side to breathe.

Breathe every 3 / 5 / 7 - Take a breath every 3rd, 5th, or 7th stroke. Usually changing after each length.

Swim with focus - Swim front crawl as normal, while keeping your attention on the specific technical point given.

EVF / Early Vertical Forearm - A high-elbow catch position that helps create a stronger, more effective pull through the water. See our post for visual examples of correct and incorrect technique.

Build - Gradually increase your speed across the repeat as instructed. Each build set will guide you on how the effort should progress.

FAQs

These are the most common questions about how to follow the programme and get the most from it.

What level swimmer is this plan for?

This plan is for intermediate swimmers and triathletes who can already complete structured swim sessions and are comfortable swimming continuously. It is not designed for complete beginners still learning basic freestyle skills.

How many swims per week should I complete?

Complete Session 1 and Session 2 as your core weekly swims. Use the Bonus Session only if your recovery, schedule, and overall training load allow.

Do I need to complete every session exactly as written?

No. Consistency matters more than perfection. If fatigue is high from other training, reduce volume slightly before sacrificing stroke quality.

Do I have to do the drills?

The drills are an important part of the programme. They are there to improve your technique, and better technique improves your efficiency in the water. While drills are not fast swimming, they help you move better through the water, hold form more easily, and complete the main sets more effectively.

What if I only swim twice per week?

Complete Session 1 and Session 2. Skip the Bonus Session unless you are recovering well and have room in your overall training week.

What if I miss a week or a session?

Do not try to cram missed sessions in. Resume with the current week if possible, or repeat the previous week if you have missed a large block and need to rebuild rhythm.

What does “Pull” mean in this plan?

Unless otherwise stated, “Pull” means freestyle pulling with a pull buoy. If paddles are specified, use them as written. If you do not use equipment, swim the set as controlled freestyle.

What if I do not have paddles or a pull buoy?

You can still complete the session by swimming the set normally, but prioritise stroke control and pressure on the water. Equipment is useful, not essential.

How hard should Tempo feel?

Tempo should feel strong but sustainable, similar to a controlled race effort where breathing is elevated but rhythm and form remain steady. Strong but controlled, without tipping into Threshold effort.

How is Tempo different from Threshold?

Threshold is a harder, repeatable effort that requires focus and good pacing. It should feel challenging, particularly in the latter part of the rep. Tempo should feel strong but sustainable, similar to a controlled race effort where breathing is elevated but rhythm and form remain steady. It should feel strong and controlled, without tipping into Threshold effort.

What do “Aerobic -3s / -6s / -9s” mean?

These targets are based on your base 100m Aerobic pace for that session. For example, if your Aerobic base pace is 2:00 per 100m, then “-3s” means aiming for 1:57, “-6s” means 1:54, and “-9s” means 1:51.

Can I use this plan for open-water racing?

Yes. The plan is written in the pool but includes elements that support triathlon swimming, such as pacing control, sustained effort, sighting practice, and open-water-style turns.

Where should these swims fit into a triathlon week?

Ideally, place key swim sessions where they do not heavily clash with your hardest bike or run work. The Bonus Session should sit on a lower-fatigue day where possible.

Disclaimer

This programme is intended for general training guidance for healthy athletes. Adjust session volume and intensity to suit your current ability, race calendar, and overall triathlon load. If you have any medical concerns, injuries, or uncertainty around exercise suitability, seek professional advice before beginning.

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