

TIMEOUT FOR TRAINING

Managing Yourself, Managing Your Mindset

by Alice Phillips >>> Illustration by Rick Gutierrez

As ubiquitous as the slogan is, when Nike says, “Just do it,” most Americans wonder, “when?!” Life for Masters athletes is no different—full of children’s activities, commuting hassles, deadlines at work, caretaking of an older relative, entering a new relationship, recovering from a divorce or a health crisis—all of these realities can make training time management a challenge.

Glossy supermarket magazines may suggest

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otherwise, but there are no special secrets to time management.

Establishing and maintaining an exercise habit involves a series of steps starting with initial commitment, continuing through potential job and family hurdles and tending to little details like a well-stocked gym bag. As USMS members point out, developing and sticking with a regular swimming routine takes both discipline and flexibility.

Consider the challenging pace kept by David Hefner, a 50-year-old athlete with Swim Florida Masters. Hefner travels almost every week of the year, most often between his home in Sarasota, Fla., and his job as executive director and COO of Penn State Hershey Medical

Center in Pennsylvania. He also occasionally travels across the country to provide healthcare consulting. Despite his packed agenda, Hefner trains five to seven days a week and consistently places among the USMS Top 10 in his age group.

“If my plane is delayed and gets in after midnight, and I have a really long day the next day including some after-work entertaining, then I won’t get up and work out. Otherwise, I make the time from 5:30 to 7 a.m., when there are no meetings, conference calls, e-mails, etc.,” he says. Like others, Hefner’s found that the benefits to body and mind are well worth the discipline it takes to swim through a typical week.

“Too often our days can become consumed with activities we do not truly value,” points out Greg Dale, Ph.D., a sports psychologist at Duke University in North Carolina. “If exercise is truly something you value, then you must arrange your priorities accordingly.”

A national champion in the 50 backstroke, 41-year-old Oregon Wetmaster Valerie Jenkins has adopted this mindset. She places her health, where she resolutely includes swimming, third on her priority list, right after faith and family, but before her career.

Positioning sport before

another responsibility might seem inappropriate to some, but Florida masters coach Rick Walker determined long ago, “You have to make that time for yourself, you have to be a little selfish.”

New England Masters swimmer Greg Shaw, a college professor, husband and father of teenagers, agrees. “Exercise is not something ‘extra’—it shouldn’t be,” he says. “It is an integral part of who I am, and so is my life at work and at home.”

Once they make the initial commitment, many swimmers find that the time spent in training actually heightens their performance in other areas. New mother and coach Jennifer Pottgen-Gray of Prairie Life Center Masters in Olanthe, Kan., has noticed that working out is a great way to network, and that many of her fellow swimmers end up doing business together. From her on-deck perspective and her own college and professional experiences, Pottgen-Gray has also found that pool time may actually result in more efficient office time, a situation she describes as “forced discipline.”

“It’s better to be [in the pool] and miss 15 minutes of work than not be there, because you actually get more efficient—you have to be more focused and get A-B-C done so that you can go for your



swim,” she says.

Hefner agrees. As vital as he sees workouts to well-being and disease prevention, he realizes they also often provide yet another purpose: “I find [my workouts] meditative or contemplative to deal with something that I may consider stressful—I usually think of innovative solutions.”

Duke University’s Dale advises that to establish a regular exercise routine, it “has to be one of the first things to be scheduled in your daily calendar. That might mean you



have to get up an hour earlier, take your lunch time or spend time at the end of the day to make sure you work out.” The exact time of the appointment obviously will vary with lifestyles and individuals.

Hefner and Walker prefer morning, so that they’ve “got it in the bank” before other daily responsibilities intervene. Pottgen-Gray’s group works out at midday because their pool is right in the middle of a business park and convention center—the ultimate in convenience. Shaw prefers to

swim at the end of his workday because it’s easier to get a lane at his local YMCA and he also feels most energetic in the evening.

The American Council on Exercise reports that most people actually perform best in the late afternoon when body temperature is higher, making muscles looser and more reactive. But in the real world, the most practical time to schedule training is when you can best fit the training in.

Protecting exercise appointments is an effective

way to manage training time, but it’s still important to be flexible. Pottgen-Gray and her husband are both avid exercisers. Although they’ve set a regular routine of who gets to exercise on which days, they review the calendar weekly, usually on Sundays, and adjust for schedule bumps. Training time and days may shift, but they achieve their goal of both having workout time that week as well as family time with their two-year-old daughter.

Swimmers who have trained

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extensively or more frequently in the past when their lives were less complicated can fall into an “all-or-none” trap. If they can’t get the whole 60 minutes in or if they can’t make a coached workout, they may not bother to go to the pool. Dale cautions that this mentality is bound to lead to long-term lapses in training. He suggests, “Rather than thinking about the quantity of the workout, think about the quality.... Even in [stressful] times, you must go back to what you value and remind yourself that working out (even if it’s shorter in duration) will still provide you a release from everyday life and help

alleviate some of that stress.” Jenkins of Oregon Masters exemplifies the flexible, creative approach to training time management. In her job as a district sales manager, she was on the road 80 percent of the time last year. Her goal was three swims a week for about 1.25 hours each, but with travel interruptions she had to explore other fitness options as well. She would take a power walk with a co-worker, visit the hotel gym or simply do a stretching routine in her room. Then, when she was home for weekends and holidays, she and her husband would work out with the local USA-Swimming club team to build a

base of heavier yardage.

Even the most organized and committed Masters swimmers encounter everyday obstacles to their routines. Many rely on these tips and timesavers to make the most of the time they have.

At the pool. If you can’t swim as frequently as usual in a given week, increase your intensity on the days you can go by doing a tougher set with shorter rest intervals. Or, if you only have a half hour, an express workout counts (*see sidebar*). Ask your coach to provide you with a few solo workouts so that you’ll have a backup plan if you miss practice. Carry your favorite workouts in your gym bag so they’re always at your fingertips, no matter when and where you get wet. If you’re away from home, use the USMS “Places to Swim” list on the web to find alternate locations (www.usms.org/placswim).

Cross train. Can’t get to the pool? Cross train by running, walking, hiking, lifting weights or taking a yoga class. Surprisingly, when it comes to weights, just one set of 8 to 12 reps, working to the true point of fatigue, is sufficient to build strength, according to the American Council on Exercise. Doing three sets only yields an additional 11 percent gain, based on research reported by *Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise*.

Find a partner. So often, it’s the social reinforcement that keeps people coming back to a coached workout—a benefit that need not be exclusive to water training. Make an exercise appointment not just with yourself but with a friend. Take a fitness class with a neighbor. Schedule a regular Saturday morning run or bike ride with a group (triathletes have been doing this for years).

Get it in gear. Adopt the scouting mentality and be prepared. Pack your gym bag with an extra set of toiletries

and personals. Once a week, restock these items, plus include a week’s worth of underclothes. Pack at least two or three practice suits so that you’ve always got a dry one ready to go.

Get a low-maintenance haircut. Easy hair makes the transition between showering and moving onto your next daily activity much easier. Learn to dress for success with less excess and more simple elegance. Pottgen-Gray finds that she often gets by with a “smooth ponytail and cool earrings.”

Fit exercise in at midday. Find a café or deli that allows you to pre-order, so that you can pick up your lunch right before or after your workout. Eat while you check e-mail or read files. Yes, it’s multi-tasking, but it’s worth it for that post-workout endorphin rush.

Make a plan for the home front. Establish a cooperative routine with your partner so that you share the household responsibilities *and* get personal time to pursue other interests (e.g., swimming). If you have children, explore family fitness options like bike riding, backyard kickball and, of course, trips to the pool.

Manage change. You may try to set a Monday-Wednesday-Friday swimming routine that just never works. You may try getting up at 5 a.m. for two weeks and find it agonizing. You may have to endure a few bad hair days before you find that ideal low-maintenance style. Regardless, keep your eye on the fitness prize. Realize the role exercise has played in your life in the past and the continued benefits it could offer you now, then commit to getting through the discomfort of juggling your schedule.

As Hefner notes, “It is a paradox that many of us discover...by expending energy, we find ourselves having more energy, hence a higher sense of well-being and greater productivity.” <<<

DEVELOP AN EXPRESS ROUTINE

Don’t fall into the all-or-none trap. Even if you can’t go to that one-hour coached workout, get wet for 30 minutes with the following suggested sets.

Coach Jennifer Pottgen-Gray, Prairie Life Center Masters (Kansas)

- 4-minute warm-up, at least 200 yards, relaxed swimming; vary your strokes
- 4 to 5-minute transition set, such as a 4x50, all drill; only focus on stroke technique
- 17-minute high-intensity main set, such as 6x200 FR on descending interval, depending on ability (such as 2 @ 3:00, 2 @ 2:45, 2 @ 2:30)
- 3-minute cool-down, anything goes; relax, vary strokes

Coach Rick Walker, Swim Florida Masters

“The most important thing is to just show up and keep moving!”

- 2x1000

Greg Shaw, New England Masters, World and National Record Holder

- 500-600 warm-up
- 100 FR on 1:30 until there are 5 minutes left
- Swim down an easy 200

HOW MUCH TRAINING IS ENOUGH?

The government’s recently released 2005 dietary guidelines recommend different activity levels based on an individual’s goals. These time periods are designed to include moderate to vigorous activities from yard work to swimming.

- 30 minutes/day on most days to ward off chronic disease
- 60 minutes/day on most days to prevent unhealthy weight gain
- up to 90 minutes/day on most days to keep weight down for previously obese people

>>> For more information, visit www.mypyramid.gov.