

The Naked Truth About Shaving Down



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> For years, American swimmers trained by exercising hard, eating well and getting plenty of rest in the days preceding competition. Shaving down was not a part of their regimen.

The routine started to change in the mid-1950s, however, after legendary Australian swimmers Jon Henricks and Murray Rose (pictured) showed up hairless at the 1956 Olympics in Melbourne. By the time Henricks and Rose moved from their homeland to Los Angeles in 1960 swim for the University of Southern California, serious American swimmers were embracing the practice of shaving down.

"There was a rumor that the Australians had shaved down," remembers Dave Radcliff, an Oregon Masters swimmer who swam on the 1956 U.S. Olympic team. "It had never happened before. I heard that Henricks was the very first to shave down."

Apparently, Henricks "was a very hairy young man," Radcliff

explains, "and his dad suggested that shaving would make him swim faster."

This is generally acknowledged to be the first documentation of shaving down for swim competition. And "it was the first time Americans heard of this practice," Radcliff adds.

Rose describes the moment his shaved body touched the water as "feeling that he was suspended, united with the element," empowered like "ballet dancers who remove their hair to activate their nerve endings." When he and Henricks came stateside, they brought the body-shaving trend with them.

How does shaving down help swimmers? Don Megerle—who coached the Tufts University swimming team in Medford, Mass., for more than three decades—is one of few who have researched this question.

Megerle discovered that the mind has much to do with body-shaving benefits. In 1969, veteran swimming coach Charles E. "Red" Silvia told Megerle shaving probably has

something to do with the brain sending fewer messages back to the muscles.

Intrigued, Megerle began investigating the physiology and neural mechanisms of the hair follicle. He discovered that by removing hair follicles and thin layers of skin, a swimmer brings the nervous system closer to the external environment, and exposes it to a variety of stimuli.

"Pre-shave, the nervous system is continually sorting out perceived messages through thoughts and actions, and is being bombarded with too much stimuli," says Megerle. "By removing the hair and skin, a swimmer decreases his sensory input and enhances his performance capacity through an improvement in his motor output."

Simply put, says Megerle: "You don't feel more; you feel less."

Radcliff agrees: "At first, in the 1960s and '70s, there was a lot of skepticism about shaving down. But it does work, and it has become part of the tapering process before a big meet." <<<

BARE FACTS

>>> In a 1988 study for the *Journal of Swimming Research*, three researchers concluded that the advantages of shaving "are not solely due to a psychological response." Among the key findings: "Blood lactate accumulation at a submaximal speed of 1.08 m/sec was significantly reduced by an average of 28 percent by shaving. Blood lactate accumulation at a maximal swimming speed of 1.30 m/sec was significantly reduced by an average of 23 percent. This much change in the physiological cost of submaximal and maximal swimming speeds is nearly as great as that resulting from a season of collegiate swimming training."

>>> With six medals, including four gold, in the 1956 and 1960 Olympic games, Murray Rose was the most successful male Australian Olympic swimmer of his time (Ian Thorpe later surpassed Rose's record). Rose (left) continues to compete as a Masters swimmer.

>>> As a 1966 graduate student at California State University, Long Beach, 1984 U.S. Olympic Coach Don Gambriel wrote his thesis on the effect of shaving down for the 100-meter crawl.

>>> In shaving terminology, the term "shaving down" means to shave in the same direction that hair grows. Shaving down is not as close as "shaving up," but shaving up is more likely to cause irritation and ingrown hairs.

>>> "I think more mentally than physically, shaving improves performance," says Coloradoan Tori Trees-Smith, a backstroker on the 1984 U.S. Olympic team. Trees-Smith notes some swimmers wear wetsuits and shave too, just for the mental edge.

>>> Shaving enthusiast Don Megerle recommends using a three-blade razor. "Don't use an electric razor," he cautions. "It won't remove the thin layer of skin [needed to improve motor output]."