Swim Bag: Fins, Fins, Fins

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BY LAURA HAMEL

Our last fin review was in the September-October 2010 issue and not much has changed in the world of fins. There are a few new models and some minor changes and rebranding in others. The previous fin review can be accessed at usmsswimmer.com or in the online version of SWIMMER via usms.org/myusms.

The fins are divided into two main categories: long and short, with one model falling into a category all its own. A brief explanation of what is generally true about the different uses for long and short fins is included.

Because of the number of fins submitted for testing, they were divided across the July-August and September-October issues. Most of the standard fins are here. A few others, as well as specialty fins—including breaststroke and IM fins and monofins—will follow.

LONG FINS

Many coaches like long-bladed fins for beginning swimmers and triathletes and for longer sets that focus on kicking technique. The longer blades slow down the kick and immediately impart a sense of confidence and some real propulsion, allowing newer swimmers to work on specific technique. More important, they encourage toe pointing and ankle flexibility, which is often poor in athletes coming from running and cycling backgrounds and in new swimmers who haven’t yet honed their technique.

This is a delicate balance; if a fin is too stiff it can result in ankle, knee, hip, or back soreness or cause bicycling of the legs. But if the blade is too flexible it won’t encourage the ankle flexibility needed for an improved range of motion and overall technique.

Long-bladed fins can be challenging at first when doing flip turns, and they can curl up over time when stored in the trunk of a hot car. Once that happens, they won’t work as intended and should be replaced.

1. Head Corda Fin | head.com/swimming | $37

This fin is the stiffest in the long-bladed category and most of our testers liked the way it performed overall. A swimmer with very stiff ankles and weaker legs, who isn’t ready for strong resistance, will bicycle in this fin and could experience knee or ankle discomfort. The Corda is better suited to a swimmer with strong legs who has some ankle flexibility and is working on increasing it.

2. Speedo Trialon Rubber Swim Fins | speedousa.com | $34

These fins are a great first pair for the new swimmer. The blades are stiffer than both the Sporti and Finis fins, because of the thicker side rails, but not too stiff for a swimmer working on ankle flexibility. For more experienced swimmers these offer enough resistance to make kick sets fun and fast. The foot pockets are comfortable and they appear to run true to size.
3. Sporti Floating Swim Fins | swimoutlet.com | $18

These fins would suit an advanced beginner who already has decent ankle flexibility. The blades are narrow and flexible and thus don’t offer as much resistance as a stiffer blade would. Our advanced testers preferred a stiffer blade for more resistance and speed work. The Sportis allow for more vigorous kicking than some of the other long fins and they offer a surprising amount of propulsion for how flexible they are. The foot pockets are very comfortable and feel natural. They appear to run true to size, although a bit narrow.

4. Finis Long Floating Fins | finisinc.com | $20–25

The Finis Floating fins were the overall tester favorite in the long-bladed category. They have an excellent balance of flexibility and stiffness and cater to a range of abilities and kicking techniques and drills. The foot pockets are very comfortable according to the testers, although several testers remarked that they run slightly on the small side, so size up if you’re between sizes.

5. DMC ELITE SWIM TRAINING FINS | DMCSWIM.COM | $60

These fins, previously tested when they were branded as the Tech 2 Swimfin (the model name was changed to DMC Swim, and is now DMC Elite), are in a class all by themselves. Not long, not short, but with the best of both worlds. They seem heavy at first but for most testers that didn’t carry over to performance.

And these fins perform. They are blazingly fast and can handle long and short sets, eight-beat and two-beat kicking, beginner to advanced swimmers, and everything in between. The wide blade and side channels are responsible for some of the magic, as well as the perfect balance of flexibility and stiffness of the blade. The silicone foot pocket is soft and pliable and doesn’t leave a blister. The drainage hole is small and offset so wayward toes don’t stick out and get rubbed the wrong way, providing they fit properly.

And there’s the rub—getting a proper fit was difficult for testers who are in-between sizes or swimmers with narrow feet. And they run a full size large, so size down when ordering. We couldn’t find a pair to fit male testers with foot sizes between 10 and 11.5. The large (10-12) is too big and only fit the testers with size 12, and the medium-large (8-9) is too small. The size missing from the line-up is a 9-10, which, oddly, is only included in the Original model (also reviewed here).

Some of our testers who are between sizes like this fin so much that they use a neoprene sock to fill in the gap, but we’re hoping for more sizes in the future. These fins are on the pricy side but they’re quite durable and will stand up to years of regular use.
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SHORT FINS

Short fins are used primarily in short-distance sets and they’re designed to make you speed up your kick and work harder, as you would during a sprint race. Used properly, they will increase leg strength and help build good technique and timing.

Most of the models in the short fin category (except for the ultra-shorts, as noted) have enough blade to respond to an advanced beginner—someone who has reasonably good ankle flexibility and is focusing on proper kicking technique.

Short fins are also easier to use when doing flip turns and they fit better in a swim bag or luggage if you like to travel with them.

1. Sporti Training Swim Fins | swimoutlet.com | $18

These all-purpose fins are comfortable and have a reasonable balance of flex and stiffness. Although this training fin is considered short, our experienced kickers said this model feels more like a medium-blade fin because of the flare and increased surface area. As with the Sporti long fins, they run true to size but a little narrow.

2. Speedo Short Blade Training Fins | speedousa.com | $34

Testers rated this a good overall fin with moderate speed enhancement. Some testers didn’t like the way the fin blade performed in the water and described a slipping sensation when kicking vigorously. The foot pocket is comfortable and will accommodate a wider foot.

3. Speedo Biofuse Fin | speedousa.com | $38

Testers liked the Biofuse and reported good resistance with less flex in the blade than with the Short Blade, because of the heavy side rails. This made these fins good for vigorous, short sprint-kick sets. The foot pocket provides excellent comfort and testers really liked the small ridges of rubber on both sides of the heel that made donning the fins easier.

4. DMC Original Training Fins | dmcswim.com | $50

The DMC Original is shorter and more flexible than the DMC Elite. Testers loved this fin in 2010 and they love it now. Its wide blade and side channels make it a powerful fin, but it’s not as fast as the Elites are. It features a very comfortable and flexible foot pocket that naturally molds to the foot, but testers with narrow feet had more difficulty getting a proper fit.

FITTING NOTES

Fins need to be snug on your feet to work properly, but not so tight that they hurt. Depending upon your foot shape and the brand you choose, you might experience rubbing and blisters. This can be resolved in several ways: Find a pair that doesn’t rub (expensive if you have to go through different fins), use a lubricant such as TRISLIDE or Body Glide (one more thing in the swim bag and use too much and the fins fall off), or use fin socks (to be reviewed later this year).

If you have difficult-to-fit feet, heel spurs, or just hate things encasing your heels, try one of the open foot-bed models such as DMC Elite, Aqua Sphere Alpha, or the new Speedo Nemesis. (The latter two will be reviewed in the next issue.) If any of your toes stick out of the drainage hole—this often results in a painful blister on the top of the toe—try a different fin.
5. HEAD Energy Fin | head.com/swimming | $30

Although Head makes a good long fin, testers didn’t like their short fin as much. The hard plastic blade is too stiff and it wavers and slips through the water, making kicking awkward. This fin could be greatly improved with a more flexible blade, as the foot pocket itself is comfortable and secure. Testers appreciated the tab at the heel that makes donning the fin a little easier.

6. Aqua Sphere Micro Fin HP | aquasphereswim.com/us | $30

This new fin was the tester favorite in the short-fin category. Testers all agreed that the Micro Fin HP had the perfect combination of blade flexibility and stiffness, and they liked the slightly longer blade length as compared to the ultra-short models. The foot pocket is soft and comfortable and has a textured sole, which testers said felt strange at first but was comfortable. A great fin that offers just the right amount of propulsion for short- and medium-length kick sets at a range of tempos.
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**SHORT FINS: ULTRA SHORTS**

These fins are designed for sprint kicking—six- and eight-beat kick sets to work the quads and train for the explosive kicking needed in sprint races. Zoomers and Burners have very small blades that only gain purchase on the water when attached to experienced kickers with good technique and ankle flexibility. Many coaches agree that ultra-shorts are not a good choice for swimmers still working on mastering kick technique. Since these swimmers don’t encounter any resistance on their insteps—because their toes aren’t pointed—they keep their poor ankle position and imprint bad technique.

7. **Finis Zoomers Gold | finisinc.com | $32**

Zoomers have been around a long time, and Finis has significantly improved the comfort and fit in the Gold, which replaces the red and blue models. Testers who remember the older models were thrilled with the improvements and reported a much more comfortable foot pocket and better fit, making these workhorse fins a great choice for a hard kick set.

8. **TYR Burner EBP | tyr.com | $35**

This ultra-short has the most comfortable foot pocket of all the full-foot-pocket fins—a buttery-soft rubber that doesn’t leave blisters if fitted properly. It’s also neutrally buoyant, not floating the feet too high or sinking them too deep. These are great fins for the sprint specialist looking to get a vigorous quad workout in comfort.

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