

# Lets Talk Taper

## Tapering for Peak Performance

by Sue Welker

Over the past several years I have had the opportunity to work with several adult athletes in preparing for their athletic goals in both triathlon and swimming. I look at tapering as a continuation & build up to a peak event or performance that an athlete has been training consistently for over a period of time. It may be a season long goal or even a goal that you have been focused on over a couple years. The biggest key to a successful taper is what you have put in prior to the “taper time”. If you have not put the time in training then you won't have much to taper from.

That being said, planning the last couple weeks before a big event like the CMSA State meet or USMS Nationals is not a generic formula. As adult athletes we have many stressors & activities in our life that zap our energy & reserves. Preparing the last few weeks for your goal should involve a thorough evaluation of yourself, your life, and what zaps your energy each week. Some adult swimmers strength train, run, cycle, do yoga or any number of exercises with in their weekly routine. As you evaluate your activity level you need to consider all of these activities and cut back on anything that takes away from your swimming performance. That may include an hour of soccer with your kids a week before nationals!!

Lets look at a few aspects of tapering that may help you pull together the perfect plan for you:

**TRAINING:** Most swimmers will reach peak power and performance after anywhere from 1 – 4 weeks of reduced volume. A good rule of thumb used by several triathlon coaches is “the longer you have trained & the higher the volume, the longer you need to taper to reach your potential & refuel your body.” If you really just started training & focusing on your swimming 3 weeks ago, and are swimming 3 hours per week, you probably would get by on a 7 day taper maintaining some high intensity swimming (speed) and decreasing volume by only 30-40% that week. If you have been swimming 7-8 hours weekly along with 2 hours of strength training & 2 hours of other cardiovascular activity, your taper will look much different. You would want to aim for closer to a 21 day taper dropping the strength training 3-4 weeks out & the other cardio at that time also. A 20% drop in volume each week may work well for you. As a general rule most swimmers should maintain interval work, with increasing rest periods, and really work the race pace energy system. This means **to swim fast in a meet you must allow yourself to rest enough to swim fast in practice!!** Most studies show that the length of taper is less important than the reduction in volume. It shows that most swimmers will reach a level of supercompensation when a 60% decrease in volume is achieved.

**WARMING UP & STRETCHING:** This is a much over looked area of training, and an aspect that most of us could improve on. As swimmers we put our body through a variety of movements in all of the 4 strokes. Stroke length and power will improve as your body

becomes warmed up & loose. We must also remember that as adults it takes us much longer to warm up our body and ready ourselves properly to reach high intensity swimming. This means that you probably need to do at least a 800 – 1200 yard warm up. Close to 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of your usual total yards in a practice would be a good rule of thumb. You should always remember that the best time to stretch is following a good warm up and not before practice while your muscles are cold. The importance of warming up is even more significant if you are swimming a shorter even which requires you to explode off the block and swim a 50 or a 100. Consider getting in the water and loosening up prior to your sprints.

**NUTRITION:** This is an area that most of us busy parents could do a better job with. The old saying “you are what you eat” I think really holds true. It is important during taper to maintain your calorie intake to match the reduced training volume. An appropriate balance of protein, carbohydrates & fat in the diet become even more important. Many people skimp on protein and are carbo kings and queens. Just remember that the plain dry bagel you are eating gives you no protein, and protein helps with muscle repair and growth which is vital during this time. Most importantly don’t forget to eat the morning of your big meet. You should consume 200 – 500 calories 2-3 hours before you swim with a mix of simple & complex carbohydrates and a smaller amount of fat & protein.

**SHAVING:** My favorite ritual & no better way to get pumped up for your big race than the shaving of the arms! I know swimmers are nutty people & I know the amount of drag that is on your arms really isn’t that great but, if you really want to have that PR then go for the smooth & slippery feeling of shave arms (and legs). This will be an even better psyche up if you have a few of your swimming friends to join you in a shaving party. Swim suits are mandatory!

The end of a long swim season is always filled with a lot of anxiety and high emotions. Your positive attitude & confidence in the plan and training you have done will be a huge step towards success. Trust yourself and your coaches. Listen to your body. Remember, your taper is your plan and your responsibility to do a little self analysis of your fitness and what works best for you. One plan does not work for all, and frequently it will take a few years to find what is best for you. Communicate to your coaches what your plan is and ask for their advice to help you reach your peak performance. **Most of all we are adults, have fun and enjoy the fitness you have!! Stay wet & swim fast.**

☺ Coach Sue

**Great resources on swimming & tapering:**

**Swimming Fastest, the essential reference on technique, training and program design,** by Ernest W. Maglischo, 2003

**Coaching Swimming Successfully,** Dick Hannula, 1995

**Coaches Quarterly, USA Swimming, It’s taper Time By Bob Steele,** March 1995