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Issue 7 | Winter 2009

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**2ND ANNUAL
DC KONA
REPORT**

**2009
EVENT
CALENDAR**

**FINANCIAL
PLANNING
FOR TRIATHLETES**

**TOTAL
IMMERSION
SWIMMING**



Team Z's
**Chris
Wren**
places 8th in Kona

Our Total Immersion Experience

BY DAN AND SHANNON HICOK

In October, Shannon and I had the opportunity to participate in a Total Immersion swim clinic in Towson, MD. I had been aware of Total Immersion as a method of learning swimming since I first became involved with the triathlon community. I've always been curious what it's all about. What is Total Immersion? Why it is such a popular method of swimming for triathletes? What makes it different? How quickly would I see improvement if I adopted the drills and techniques? I was excited about the opportunity to find answers to my questions.

Class Time

The clinic consisted of two full days of instruction, on a Saturday and a Sunday. We began the first day getting to know the instructors and the other students, and getting an overview of Total Immersion. Our class was led by instructors Dave Cameron and Anne Svenson. I was interested to hear that most of the other students had objectives similar to ours. Nine of the ten students were triathletes who wanted to learn how to swim faster and more efficiently. Some also expressed the desire to be more comfortable and relaxed in the water. Obviously, the word is out in the triathlon community that this is the way to go!

Camera Time

We started the first pool session with an underwater video to baseline our swim strokes, identify areas that needed improvement, and learn by observing and evaluating other student's strokes. I hoped that my time studying TI techniques in advance of the class would show itself in my first underwater video. One look at my video revealed that my swim stroke needed a lot of work. And Underwater video is an indispensable tool in learning to swim; unfortunately, there is good news and bad news. The good news: underwater video shows every flaw in your technique. It's essential to get immediate and clear feedback if you want to improve; underwater video is very good at revealing exactly what you need to work on. The bad news: underwater video shows every flaw in your technique. Be prepared to feel a bit uncomfortable seeing how bad you look underwater! In addition to showing off our flaws for the class to scrutinize, our instructors were nice enough to compress a wide-screen video format into a standard-width TV. Either that or I need to loose 100 lbs. Have you ever seen underwater video of an elephant swimming, maybe on Discovery Channel? Yeah, that was me! But after you get over the initial shock, you can see immediately what you need to work on.

Ok, so we'll start with Shannon in Figure 1, who looks much better underwater (or anywhere else for that matter) than her husband. The first thing to notice about this photo is her head position. She is looking forward – almost straight ahead. That head position causes her whole body to sink. In her case, her hips are not that far from the surface, but she's able to do that only by bending her spine and dipping her stomach (not that she has one). If she brings her head down so that she is looking at the bottom of the pool, her whole body will naturally rise to the surface, resulting in a more horizontal body position. A nice tip from our instructors: when you

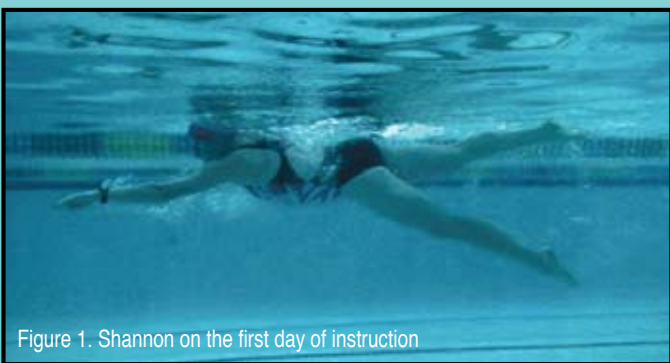


Figure 1. Shannon on the first day of instruction

have a proper head position, you're looking down and can actually see a bit behind you. That position feels very unnatural if you're used to looking forward like most of us, but once you get used to it, you'll feel how much more easily you glide through the water. When you have a horizontal body position, you feel like you are slipping easily through the water, compared to the more typical position which may feel more like plowing through the water!

Shannon also shows a very wide kick, which is an attempt to compensate for her poor head position. Well, she did have to find a way to get her hips from sinking! She realized early during her pool time on day one that almost all of her major stroke flaws were a direct result of her poor head position. Once she started focusing on and correcting that (which is FAR easier said than done), everything else started to fall into place.

In Figure 2, you can also see that Shannon's lead arm is already beginning to pull before her recovering arm has penetrated the water. This is one of the more difficult bad swim habits to break. We must learn how to be "patient" with the lead arm, delaying the pull until the body has rotated. We learned that this is not just for hydrodynamic reasons, but also for balance.



Figure 2. Shannon on the first day of instruction

When we have more of our body in front of our center of mass, it is easier to maintain a horizontal position.

Now on to the Discovery Channel, where the elephant is learning to swim...



Figure 3. Dan on the first day of instruction

The first thing my instructors noticed about my swim stroke is my tendency to look forward, resulting in a poor body position. This is evident in Figure 3, even though you cannot see my head. Notice the direction of my body from my feet to my hand. If you draw a line through those points it is obvious that my body is pointed up, instead of parallel to the bottom of the pool. This head position, which causes my whole body to be out of position, was so ingrained in me that every time I thought about any other aspect of my stroke, I immediately forgot about head position and my eyes went forward instead of down. Every time my instructors observed my drills, they asked "Where are you looking?" That was the key for me to think about my head position. On the positive side, I am "tall" in the water, well-streamlined with a relaxed kick. I just have to get that head down and body in the right line.



Figure 4. Shannon on the second day of instruction

Drill Time

Saturday is all about drills, one after the other, progressing from simple but critical “skate” drills to the more advanced “switch” drills. All of these build on one another to reinforce the feel of a proper stroke. They teach good balance and position in the water, and a smooth and easy gliding motion through the water. The idea is to introduce as many drills and concepts as possible on Saturday, so that a maximum of improvements will be seen on Sunday.

Eureka Time

One of the consistent experiences that students have at a Total Immersion clinic is a “eureka” moment, where something clicks and significant improvements are made. Suddenly, the light bulb comes on and everything makes sense. For me, this came from a particular drill that allowed me to understand how it feels to have the correct body position, while switching from side to side in the swim stroke. Suddenly, my stroke was transformed from a series of disjointed movements to a smooth glide from side to side. This drill allowed me to put many

different concepts together; I was able to achieve the feel of a smooth stroke swimming on my sides, smoothly transitioning from side to side, patiently waiting to pull, piercing the water smoothly, all with good body position. It felt great to put it all together!

After tons of drills, lots of eureka moments, and several video sessions, David took a final video of each student. Most of us felt nervous around the camera, imagining how bad we would look underwater and wanting to get it right, and therefore our final videos did not show our best moments. Still, it was obvious that every student had made significant progress in a very short time.

Take a look at Shannon’s final video in Figure 4. One of the cool things about this photo is that you can see how patient she has become with her pull. Notice how her right arm is still out in front while her body has rotated and her left arm is penetrating the water in a downward direction. Also notice that her head position is improved. She is still looking a bit forward, but she’s much closer to an ideal position. Her whole body is closer to the surface. Her kick has also improved; it’s much more within the cylinder of her body.

After at least 100 “where are you looking?” questions from my instructors, I finally started to get my head in a better position. Notice the almost vertical direction of my goggle strap. As a result of my improved head position, my body is more horizontal, and my hips are closer to the surface. Also, notice that my hand is no longer pointing to the ceiling; it’s forward and pointed



Figure 5. Dan on the second day of instruction

a bit downward. I’m swimming on my side here, just about to pull my recovering hand forward. Hopefully that lead arm is going to remain patient during the recovery.

Summing it up

All this position and drill stuff may sound technical, but the drills are easy to understand and are quickly adopted, with consistent and mindful practice. I came into the clinic feeling like most of my swim stroke existed only to keep me from drowning, and that little of it went to forward propulsion. I left enjoying my swim stroke and practice, and felt smooth and relaxed in the water. I am sure this new relaxed stroke will result in a more enjoyable racing experience, and lots of PRs.

The Tri-DC publishers gratefully acknowledge the talents of TI swim instructors Ann Svenson and Dave Cameron, who helped us make significant improvements in a very short time. Dan would also like to thank his personal TI instructor Marsha Marinich, who teaches at the Skyline Sport and Health. To learn more about Total Immersion, visit www.totalimmersion.net.

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