

All about Postal Championships - part 2

By Andrea Packard



So you're planning to do a long distance postal swim this year. Great! Whether this is your first, and your goal is to just finish, or your tenth, and you're looking to improve your time, I have some training guidelines that can help put you on the path to success.

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That depends upon your current state of fitness and your end goal for the event. If you're just getting back in the water after some time off, it would be wise to give yourself at least a month to regain a reasonable level of fitness. Likewise, if you wish to increase your training volume in preparation for the event, a month or so of gradual build-up is much preferred over a sudden jump in yardage. On the other hand, if you've been training consistently, you're fairly satisfied with your level of fitness, and your goal is to simply finish, then you're ready anytime! Of course, taking a few weeks or months to implement some of the strategies I'm about to offer would help, but that's not absolutely necessary.

How much yardage should I be doing on a weekly basis?

Less than you might think! I know plenty of long distance postal participants who train 3 times per week, about 3,000 yards per workout. Believe it or not, a couple years ago I completed a 10K while logging just 10,000 yards per week. Granted, I was in the midst of triathlon training, so I was biking and running on the days I wasn't in the water. But my point is, you don't have to swim 6 days per week, 5000 yards a day to tackle one of these events. Just use some common sense and adjust your goals and expectations to match your training volume.

Avoid over-training!

Now that I've touched on "minimum" training volume, I must offer caution regarding the opposite end of the spectrum: over-training. Swimmers will frequently worry that they haven't trained enough for a long-distance event, but too often they fail to recognize the dangers of training too much. I have personally fallen victim to over-training, both in my swimming and triathlon careers, and unfortunately in those instances I didn't realize it was happening to me (or I was in denial) until it was too late. My athletic performance and health suffered as a result. So what advice can I offer from my experiences to help you avoid getting caught in this trap?

Build up gradually: If you're increasing your training volume, be smart and do it gradually, even if you feel great and have lots of energy. Write down how much yardage you're logging, and try not to add more than 20% each week.

Recover: Recovery must be part of any training plan, regardless of the event distance. It's actually during recovery times that we make fitness gains: our bodies have a chance to realize the benefits of all the hard work we've put in on the tough training days. Make recovery a part of your schedule. I

personally recommend at least one day off per week. That doesn't mean go for a walk or a bike ride instead of a swim: that means do NOT exercise at all for one day. Furthermore, if you're like me and you train six days per week, you should plan for recovery *weeks* in addition to your recovery days. A good pattern to follow is three hard weeks followed by an easy week. I define an easy week as 60-75% of your normal training volume, with all swimming done at an easy to moderate pace. If you're training with a team, it's helpful to announce to your fellow swimmers and coach whenever you're in recovery mode so they won't think you're slacking; otherwise, it's easy to get sucked into a hard workout when you're supposed to be taking it easy (trust me, this has happened to me far too many times!).

Resting heart rate: I have found this to be a very good indicator of the state of my body. Your resting heart rate can often signal that something is amiss in your body long before you feel any other symptoms. Just take your pulse for a full minute first thing in the morning, every day, and write it down. It won't be the exact same each time, but after a couple weeks you'll get a sense of your "normal and healthy" range. If it starts to creep up and stays abnormally high for a couple days, then take a day or two off, or back down the intensity of your workouts until your resting HR drops out of the "danger zone".

Listen to your body: Above all, be in tune to your body and don't ignore any of the common signals of over-training, which include but are not limited to: excessive fatigue, excessive muscle soreness, frequent illness and irritability. If you feel like you've over-done it, adjust your training until you feel your energy return. Remember this experience is supposed to be fun and healthy, and you can't do your postal event if you're too exhausted to make it to the starting block!

Types of workouts:

Training for long-distance postal events does not require long, continuous swimming. In fact, I caution against it for two reasons. First, it can reinforce poor stroke technique. The longer you swim without stopping to rest, the more fatigued your body gets, and whether you realize it or not, your stroke technique is gradually breaking down. Just giving yourself 5-10 seconds rest between repeats will allow you to maintain good technique throughout your workout. Second, long swims require you to maintain a slower pace, so you're not pushing your aerobic system or your muscles to a new level, and you're missing an opportunity to improve your fitness.

So what type of workout is best? Variety is key! To achieve a maximum level of fitness, you need to train your body at a range of speeds and intensities. That means mix it up: some days your main set should require short, fast efforts such as 25s, 50s and 100s with more rest between repeats. Other days, swim distances from 100 to 300 at a more moderate pace with less rest. And there is a place for easy swimming too, which is an excellent opportunity to focus on technique.

Negative splitting: Overall fitness and endurance is clearly the primary training goal in preparing for a long-distance postal event. But there is one specific skill that is beneficial to learn: negative splitting. If you're not familiar with that term, it means the second-half of your swim is slightly faster than the first. Many assume that the best strategy is to "even split" a long distance event (in other words, have all splits be the same). That is a very good and successful method, but in my opinion slightly inferior to negative splitting. Let me explain by using a financial analogy¹.

Positive splitting (the opposite of negative splitting) is like borrowing money – not only will you have to pay back what you borrowed later, you'll have to pay interest charges. For instance, if the first several splits of your swim are each 2 seconds faster than your target pace, not only will you start to fatigue and fall to 2 seconds slower than your target pace, eventually you struggle to hold even 3 or more seconds off your target pace. Why? Your body is paying 'interest and penalties' on the energy you 'borrowed' by going out too fast. The opposite holds true for negative splitting. By starting out just 2 seconds slower than your target pace, you conserve enough energy that you'll be able to finish the race 3 or more seconds faster than your target pace (i.e., like reaping the benefits of compounding interest in a savings account). To finish the analogy, even splitting is like neither borrowing nor saving money – not a bad way to go, but you fail to take advantage of the compound interest that you can earn by saving in the beginning.

So how do you learn how to negative split? It doesn't come naturally and takes practice. Descending sets are an excellent way to train your body (and your mind) to negative split. But you need to do what I call a "tight descend". In other words, 10 x 100 starting out at 2:00 and working down to 1:30 on the last one doesn't cut it. The preferred (and much more difficult) method is to start with the first 2 at 1:38, the next 2 at 1:36, and so on until the last 2 are 1:30. Do any distance from 50s up to 200s, and keep your sets a little different from one workout to the next, but stick with the tight descending theme. While

you're just learning the concept, give yourself plenty of rest (i.e. 30 sec) between repeats. As you improve, decrease your rest interval down to 10 seconds.

Another type of set is long, broken swims. Remember how I cautioned against long, continuous swimming? It's OK to do sets of 500s or 1000s, just make yourself break for 5-10 seconds at each 100. The break will accomplish 3 things: it will give your body just enough rest that your stroke won't break down; it will allow you to train your body at a slightly faster pace than with a continuous swim; it will allow you to look at the clock to make sure you're even or negative splitting.

How about cross training?

Complementing your swimming workouts with other types of exercise is not necessary, but if you like to do so, keep it up! Just be mindful of injury risk if you suddenly start something new, and don't forget my bit on over-training. If there was one single type of non-water workout I would recommend, it would be core strengthening. In about 10-15 minutes, you can do a pretty challenging core workout, and you can do it right in your home anywhere from 3-6 days per week. Core workouts don't stress your aerobic system too much, so they don't present much over-training risk. If you don't know any good core exercises, there are plenty of places to find ideas: go online, look in swimming books and magazines, or ask a coach or fellow swimmer, or even a medical professional. My only word of caution: find exercises that strengthen, but don't strain, your back. If something makes your back hurt in any way, don't do it.

What if I'm swimming with a team and the coach writes all the workouts?

No problem! If you think about the types of workouts your coach currently gives you, many of them probably fit the profile of my suggestions above. And if they don't, talk to your coach about your long-distance goals, and chances are, he or she will help you 'tweak' the workouts to follow the strategies I outlined. Any masters coach I have ever met has been a flexible individual who is there to help his/her swimmers, and is willing to modify workouts to accommodate a range of abilities and goals.

In summary

The suggestions I've offered are by no means the only tools to a successful long-distance postal swim. They simply represent the methods I've learned and adopted for myself over the years. I hope that some of these strategies that have made me successful will help you in your long-distance journey as well. Stay tuned for the final article in this series, where I'll offer my tips for the day of the big event.

¹This concept is borrowed from an article I read a couple years ago on a triathlon site - if I could find article, I would give the author due credit