Swim Training for Scuba Divers

TEXT BY GARY HALL SR. / PHOTOS BY STEPHEN FRINK

Legendary football coach Vince Lombardi once said, “Fatigue makes cowards of us all.” When we’re scuba diving, fatigue can do more than make cowards of us: It can endanger us. Swimming and fitness training will help ensure you are safe in the water and able to enjoy your diving experience.

People who dive only once or twice a year (or less frequently) may find they are not as physically fit as they hoped. Each year we get older, and the levels of exertion we achieved in prior years may not be as sustainable. While diving is not normally a physically demanding sport, situations can arise that require stamina and keen water skills. Here are some suggestions for pool exercise to help you get in better shape for your next dive trip.

• **Plan ahead.** From the date of your next dive trip, count back three months to start a swimming fitness program. Swim fitness is best achieved with gradual improvement.

• **Join a local Masters swim program.** Misery loves company; you will likely work harder and get fit more quickly in a group than you will on your own. Besides that, you can pick up tips on swimming more efficiently from the coaching staff. The science of the stroke has evolved significantly in the years since I was swimming competitively; it’s about moving more quickly with less water resistance. While scuba safety is not measured in fractions of seconds like competitive swimming, efficiency in the water is important. (Note: “Masters” does not necessarily require competitive proficiency; it’s an age-grouped means for older swimmers to be chronologically equalized in competition. Many Masters swimmers do not compete but enjoy fitness swimming with others of like mind.)

• **Work out your legs.** The legs are key to scuba diving, so take your fins to swim practice, and use them. The kicking is different without fins; while you’ll get plenty of exercise either way, the muscle groups engaged with fins may be different. Leg cramps from muscle fatigue are more common with the water resistance from fins, so getting your legs fit and avoiding these cramps can make for a better, safer dive experience.

• **Kick underwater.** The kicking motion underwater is different from the one used on the surface, and underwater you can learn to achieve thrust with both the upward and downward kicks. Plus, breath-hold sessions conducted while kicking underwater are good anaerobic training. Blackout in the water is not restricted to freedivers, so most coaches prefer underwater swims be conducted with supervision. Each year recreational swimmers die by pushing too hard to get to the end of the pool that is ever so slightly beyond their capabilities.

• **Work your core.** Finning involves more than just the legs. The entire core, including the lower-back, gluteal and abdominal muscles, plays a big role. Dry-land training for core strength as well as fitness swimming with good body rotation will strengthen your core for diving.

• **Monitor your weight before your dive trip.** It is surprising how many divers either don’t realize or choose to ignore that they have added pounds since their last dive. The extra weight not only puts an additional burden on their hearts, it also makes the topside and underwater maneuvering required for scuba diving more difficult to accomplish. Something as simple as climbing the dive ladder with a tank strapped to your back can be arduous with an extra 10 pounds of body weight. Factor in the extra lead required to submerge, and the climb up the ladder is made even more difficult. You will be safer and have more fun if you shed those extra pounds before your next dive.

• **Hit the gym.** At least once a week it helps to get to the gym and do some basic strengthening exercises with barbells, machines, pulleys or whatever is available. Even simple pull-ups and push-ups at home will help. If nothing else, it will make it easier for you to carry all your gear. More important, you will be safer in and around the water when you are stronger.

If you don’t have an organized Masters swim program nearby, here is a suggested workout to help get you ready for your next dive.
Swim Training: Sample Workout

1. Warm up with an easy 200-meter freestyle swim. Concentrate on looking down toward the bottom of the pool to maintain good body position, and pull with a high elbow position underwater to reduce drag.

2. Do eight 50-meter swims with 15 seconds rest between each. This is called interval training, and it is more beneficial than swimming 400 meters uninterrupted. You will work harder and get your heart rate higher. As you become more advanced, you can increase the number of 50s per set.

3. Kick for 45 seconds while wearing your dive fins and holding onto the wall. Rest for 15 seconds, and repeat until you’ve done it five times. If you kick hard, even just 45 seconds will feel like five minutes — and it will get your legs in shape fast.

4. Do an easy 100-meter swim. It is a good idea to add some easy sets between more strenuous ones to give your muscles time to recover.

5. Do eight 25-meter underwater swims with fins, using the legs only. Take 30 seconds or more to rest between laps so you can stay underwater for all 25 meters. This is something you may need to work up to, and you should never risk hypoxia by pushing yourself too hard.

6. Do four 50-meter kicks with fins followed by four 50-meter swims with fins. Try to do these fast, leaving the wall at intervals of one minute to one minute 15 seconds, depending on your speed.

7. Cool down with a mellow 200-meter swim. Always try to wrap up your workout with an easy set to relax the muscles, which will help you avoid pain or cramping later.

Although it may be easy to get out of shape, the good news is that it doesn’t have to be terribly hard or take forever to get back into shape. So start now. Remember, a fit diver is a safer diver. AD

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