

CHALLENGING TIMES: HOW CAN WE NOT ONLY SURVIVE, BUT THRIVE?

Message from Stephen Norris, Performance Technical Director

Swim Alberta understands the very real challenges that clubs face across a varied landscape of business models and processes. The following points are made to provide coaches with an understanding of various mechanisms and possible solutions around the circumstances faced at the swimmer, coach, parent, and club level.

Swim Alberta technical staff are available to work with coaches to support athletes in areas concerning physical, technical, mental (psychological), health & well-being aspects, together with commentary and suggestions around swimmer, coach, and club technical knowledge.

It should be realized that for all swimmers, no matter how many sessions or hours they would typically train in a week, the sudden removal of this training and competition load is, and will have, profound effects and consequences.

1. Swimmers will lose their SPECIFIC physical conditioning relatively quickly. Strength, strength-endurance, and endurance of the upper body (arms, shoulders, etc.) will decay with a dramatic decline in sustainable and peak power. The concept of the Anaerobic Threshold (AnT) and the Aerobic Threshold (AeT) will be dramatically and negatively affected. This will also be true for the lower body (the legs). One might consider these aspects to be the 'PERIPHERAL' elements.
2. A slower decay in GENERAL physical conditioning will gradually occur. This aspect may be thought of as the 'CENTRAL' elements and involves the cardiovascular and cardiopulmonary components (such as the heart and lungs).
3. Although virtually all age groups will be continuing to grow and develop due to their biological ages and the underlying drivers of growth and development, the sudden decrease in training and competition workload has implications for diet and caloric intake. It will be important for swimmers to understand that their overall food intake will need to be adjusted to reflect this reduced load, yet still continue to eat healthily and adequately.
4. Unless a routine of continued activity is implemented, the daily and weekly routine of the swimmers (and the coaches) will also be disrupted, which is likely to cause further disruption to the athlete's established life rhythms. This may affect factors such as sleep, diet, and mental state.
5. Aside from the disruptions already mentioned, the current situation may well affect the specific and overall mindset of the swimmers. Obviously, a lack of exercise and perhaps an increase in the occurrence of boredom, swimmers, coaches, and parents must be aware of possible negative and de-motivational psychological conditions caused by anxiety & uncertainty over the virus itself, as well as the sudden disappearance of the goals, targets, and objectives that swimmers had of themselves.
6. For most of the swimmers, their academic schooling will also have been disrupted, further adding to an unusual timetable, further uncertainty and anxiety.
7. In many instances, swimmers may well be very aware of the disruptions and hardship the pandemic is causing for their parents and family situation. This will almost certainly add to their anxiety, fear, and tension.

Possible Solutions & Suggestions

1. Establish activity programs that keep to a similar timetable as the swimmers previously had. Now this does not necessarily mean having to get up early as they would have done for swimming before school, but it does mean that perhaps holding to a similar frequency through the week. In fact, coaches should look at this as an opportunity to be able to establish some fundamental behaviours and capacities that tend to be neglected when there is pool-time available.
2. Programs could focus on flexibility, core stability & strength, overall strength, and basic movement control.
3. Also, please note, that although 'swimming specific conditioning and adaptation' will be lost (think, the specificity of swimming and, therefore, nothing truly replaces it), there are activities the swimmers can do to offset this.
 - a. Large muscle group, cardiovascular exercise at;
 - i. Low intensities for extended periods of time (think, long walks or hikes, easy running, or any large muscle group continual exercise); HRs typically below 140/150 for our swimmers.
 - ii. High intensity repeats (same exercises as above)(think, 8-12 x 1-3 minutes at HRmax or close too, with a 1:1 or 1:3 work/rest ratio ... longer for the shorter, more intense repeats ... and always use an easy active recovery).
 - iii. Circuits using body weight and minimal equipment (bars, mats, bands, surgical tubing, hand weights or dumbbells etc.). Aim for two types of circuits within your repertoire. Strength-Endurance focused ones (high reps/short rest; 8-12 exercise stations, multiple times through the circuit) and Strength-Power ones (lower number of reps/higher resistance/maximal recruitment/longer rest; 6-8 exercise stations, 1-3 times through). You will find many examples of such activities online.
 - iv. See point 4 below for 'Swimming Simulation'. Instead of using 'distance' use 'time of the repeat' to shape your sets.
4. Swimming simulation capabilities could be introduced using surgical tubing, Vasa trainers, pulley systems, and/or other specific devices such as the excellent swimming *Exer-genies*®. Coaches could devise training sets similar to those they would employ in the pool across a range of intensities.
5. By encouraging regular communication between swimmers, as well as hosting coach-led updates, using online resources and social media, coaches could introduce various challenges and goals for the swimmers at set points.
6. Devising these activities and introducing a coherent plan will support the notion that the swimming club has not simply folded and that there is a beneficial program that will impact positively the swimmers during this otherwise uncertain period.
7. For the coach and club, there are several activities that I would suggest could be undertaken and are, as often as not, relegated in importance. These would be projects such as:
 - a. Swimmer reviews and profiles (perhaps using the Swim Alberta-suggested 'Swimmer Review' template (aka 'Scouting Report')).
 - b. An examination of the club in question; a technical SWOT analysis involving a deep-dive review of activities and overall club performance (perhaps using some sensible ranking or points system).
 - c. Future planning of the club program, including alignment with Swimming Canada's suggested LTSD (LTAD) framework and yearly/multi-year plans.
 - d. Continued uplift of coaching knowledge and the swimming intellect of the club.

Swim Alberta are continuing with the three Working Groups launched in January: Performance Swimming - Alberta; Performance Development Working Group; and the Competition Calendar Working Group. These working groups will provide an opportunity to plan for the future and the overall uplift/knowledge improvement of the swimming community in Alberta. Staff have reached out to members of these working groups and dates for meetings have been set.

With support of the coaching community, Swim Alberta will look to facilitate informal networking groups via video conference as an avenue for coaches to continue to connect and share ideas during this period.

Swim Alberta is looking for the entire swimming community to help in setting up a 'Resources' for coaches and would welcome you sending us anything of relevance you come across that the larger coaching community would benefit from. We have already initiated this aspect with this document, and have begun to populate resources on the Swim Alberta website: [COVID-19 INFO](#).

We encourage you to look at ALL of the links ... and then 'invest' in the ones you feel are most applicable for your situation or that you can adapt the easiest and most effectively. A reminder that these are ideas for coaches to implement into their programs based on the age, stage, needs and experience of the swimmer, ensuring alignment also to the information provided in the insurance update.

In closing, despite the highly challenging environment that we are in and will face for a while, there is both the realization of a light at the end of the tunnel and very real opportunities to strengthen swimming in Alberta. At the very least, this period affords us time to review our programs (no matter how large or small and from 'learn to swim' through to 'performance swimming'), determine what aspects we should keep, discard, and/or introduce, and systematically plan the framework for the coming season. Finally, by keeping engaged with our swimmer and parent base, each coach and club can demonstrate the value of competitive swimming and being a member of club in Alberta.

"Per ardua ad astra".

Stephen Norris
Performance Technical Director
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For a listing of resources for coaches: <https://swimalberta.ca/covid-19/>