



Short Course Racing (with world record holder Peter Marshall)

Podcast 5

The Effortless Swimming Podcast



Welcome to the fifth episode of the Effortless Swimming podcast. It is great to have you back. My name is Brenton Ford and today's guest has won 14 medals across major international competitions including 10 gold, 2 silver and 2 bronze medals. That's spanning the World Championships, the Pan American Games and the Pan Pacific Championships.

He is a backstroker and he currently holds the world record for the 50m backstroke short course and he is a former world record holder of the 100m back stroke world record in a short course pool. He retired from swimming last year but he has had a very successful career and to still hold a world record is a fantastic achievement.

The guest today is Peter Marshall who is an American swimmer. We go into a few things including what his gym program was like when he broke that world record. He talks about how he did a lot of miles as a kid and as a teenager and then moved it to a more quality and speed based program. So look out for those things; here is the interview with Peter Marshall.



How did you get started as a swimmer?

Gosh, it's been years. In the US there are all these local neighbourhood pools and swim clubs and essentially I have three other siblings, I am the second in line and my older sister started swimming and she basically dragged me into the sport as a five or six year old. I didn't want to go to work outs but I really liked competing so I did really well at competing even when we didn't even train or anything. Essentially through the summer league neighbourhood pools that sort of got me into the sport and from there I progressed to the local club organisational level out here in the US. Then you just step up the ladder to college and then onto the National team and continue swimming as a professional with Speedo and Tier.

What was your training schedule like when you were competing?

Well it varied a lot throughout my career. When I was an age group swimmer it was probably; we did a lot of yards as age group swimmers, **all through high school. We trained 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9... we did 9** workouts a week. We would probably go on average about 9000 yards a workout, so we were really putting in yardages as high schoolers probably from 15-18.

Then in college kind of the same routine but less yardage. Same amount of workouts but we worked in some weights and some plyometric exercises. I did a little bit more sprint work and at that point started to transition to a little more quality over quantity and then after I graduated I just continued to focus more on quality. I really think that was where I excelled in getting away from some of the longer swimming routines to **focus more on what I was better at like the sprinting. I didn't necessarily** need to put in 8000-10,000 yard workouts anymore I needed to focus on...well gosh I swam for about 50-55 seconds and let's focus on that and get rid of some of that long swimming so that's what we did.

Do you think the long swimming helped you when you were younger just to get a better feel for the water you do you think you would have gone just as well if you had done less miles when you were a teenager?

Yeah I guess that's always a question that I think about. There is definitely something to the feel that you get just from putting in sheer amount of hours. I think that will generally help you do well at anything you just spend massive amounts of time doing something you will progress. I do think however there is a lot of wisdom in making sure whatever you are spending a lot of time doing that its pinpointed to your final goals and I think that I probably would have stayed away from some of the massive amounts of yardage and maybe mixed in a little more quality with some of the longer yarded stuff. **It's impossible to say really, that's kind of the fun about asking the question, yeah I think it helped me** and ideally maybe I would do it a little bit different if I did it again but it honestly worked well for me.

That's right, well it all turned out well in the end didn't it.

Yeah.

When you started to do more sprints and more quality work what type of gym work were you doing with that? Do you think the gym work was important?



I guess the first part, when did I start doing more sprint oriented racing and workouts, was when I got to college. So from the ages of 18 through gosh, the rest of my career really. It first started when I was about 18, before that I would swim the mile, I would swim the 4IM, I would do the 500m free, I would do every single event. Coming out of high school what I was recruited for was probably the 200 [backstroke](#) and the 100m back stroke but I swam 400IM, I was even recruited to swim 400IM as a young teenager. So I started the **sprint focus in college and then that's also** when I started the more intensity in the weight room. I have had a progression of training styles in the weight room as well. We basically trained like American football players and in college in the first couple of years we were getting pretty big I thought for swimmers. Trying to break down those exercises we were doing a bunch of presses and squats and leg press. I mean just kind of bulkier exercises I would say, we would go max 12 reps til you burned out **on every exercise. I'm not sure that is necessarily the best for swimmers** but as I continued to progress as a collegiate swimmer we transitioned some things and focused more on longer duration exercises mixed in with some Olympic lifts. I think that helps a lot for some of the short course swimming we do in the US, but some of Olympic lifts and the longer circuits that were more aerobic really helped for the long course training. After I finished college I transitioned to a new swim program and with my new coach we worked on, it was of a combination, we did a circuit workout in the weight room where every weight exercise it was usually on machines was all high rep all high weight, as high weight as you could handle, and as quick as you could do it safely. I think that was the best weight routine I had. So we would go through three exercises a total of 9 times, so 3 times on every exercise and we would be doing 30 reps on every machine nonstop. It was a really brutal workout but it was more finely tuned for races where you do 30 strokes, but I think that fitted my race style better.



Yeah it was just really specific exercises with a very similar number of reps to what you are doing in a race as well. So like you talked about the specific kind of training is what worked best for you.

Yeah definitely I think that, I mean I even picked some routines that I think really worked well, so we would do like a chest press, then some **pull ups, what was the other one... then some triceps and it was...** You would just think about your 50m or think about your 100m the whole **time you're doing it and you get through** however many reps in about three minutes and your totally gassed. Then you have 4 more circuits to **do before you're done with the workout. But I think that stuff helped me** and I could see the correlation between what I was doing in the weight room and how that was going to pay off in my swims because I could see, **ok if I am going to bust out 20 reps on the weights that's really going to transfer into my 20 cycles in the pool when I am racing.** Or when I am doing my leg extensions or lunges or if I am doing a specific number on the weight machine which is a similar number to the amount of kicks I am going to do off a wall in my 100m back stroke, or whatever it may be. I think seeing the correlation was really helpful for me because a lot of **times I didn't necessarily** understand where some of my coaches were coming from with what I was doing and for me to more fully understand this weight routine and how it was going to transfer helped me push harder in the weight room.

Yeah I think it's good for a coach to be able to explain to their swimmers why they are doing the sets or the gym work and just how it actually relates to their races, because I think sometimes coaches they aren't able to link that up with why they are actually doing it. So if you can it can provide a lot more motivation for the swimmer.

Oh gosh, especially in swimming too. All my siblings and I we have all played sports. My brothers played lacrosse and football and my sister **played basketball and everything, and it's so interesting for me to see.** Like the difference between swimming and a lot of other sports is football, soccer whatever those are playing sports. You go play that, it not a training sport like triathlons or swimming or track and field even. In swimming it can get very monotonous in training and I think it should be part of the responsibility of the coach to keep workouts creative and active and engaging for the swimmers and definitely one of those ways is to make sure that whatever your athletes are doing is an intelligently designed workout. I think swimming sometimes has the tendency to put in workload over intelligent training and I think that the more coaches can focus on the intelligently designed workouts the better they are going to have results.



Yeah that's a great point, I absolutely agree with you. Because swimming is just so easy, so you have an hour and a half workout it's just so easy to fill it with whatever takes up the time. But if the coaches put a bit of thought into it, it makes a big difference.

Yeah totally, definitely.

When you're racing, say your backstroke whether it's the 50 or the 100, what is your focus on?

You know I was dependant on what type of venue the competition was, what point of the season I was at. I mean I guess you can take your training races in the middle of the season building up to the pinnacle race at the end of the season and in those training races you're basically always thinking about how this is going to prepare me for the end of the season. I am going to work on three elements of this race at this meet and this next meet in two weeks I am going to work on these three elements. Then you start, as the season progresses, I am putting it altogether and throughout that process I think you are continually racing the same guys and there is definitely mental strategy to how your season progresses with your competitors. I think me and some of my coaches would be like, 'he is going to swim the race this way, and if you can beat him that's going to put this little seed of doubt in this other guys mind and maybe you will have more of a competitive edge at the end of the season'. Those were kind of the training races and then I think those prepare you for the end of the season when while you are still competing it should be more of a rehearsed routine where you don't have to think about what you are doing as much anymore. Your coach shouldn't have to say to you, ok you're going to take 13 kicks off your 50m wall and then you're going to build to the finish, that stuff, you don't really talk about that you are more focussed on the competing side of things, at least that's how I did it. I kind of at the end of the season wanted to think about less and simplify things so I could just work on gutting it out when I needed to and hopefully the other stuff was second nature by that point.

So you sort of practised the races during the training races and when it comes time for the end of the season ones it all just comes together and it is about letting it happen.

Yeah definitely and I think earlier in my career we would also do multiple races during the training meets so you know you would have 4 or 5 races during a final session in the middle of the season and then at the end of the season you are cutting it down to one maybe two races a session. I



think that is another thing you have to think about too. As a sprinter I wasn't ever looking forward to a large volume of racing at a swim meet I wanted to focus on 2-3 races at the swim meet and really putting everything I had into that, because I knew I only had so much to go around.

When you broke the 50m [backstroke](#) world record, the most recent one, did you see yourself being able to swim that quickly? Or was it a bit of a surprise that you managed to go that quick? What was it you were thinking about on the day?

I guess to put that race in context that was when we had all those suits, so they have since got rid of but I am sure they will come back at some point, but the day in Singapore was I think the final stop of the 2009/2010 world cup series and the world cups are kind of different to most competitions I have ever been to. That day I knew if I could re-



break the world record ahead previously set in that world cup series then I had a really good chance to move up in the world cup standings. I kind of had a routine that I went through every big meet that I wanted to swim particularly fast at and especially on the world cups when you are jet lagged, my routine involved a little bit of coffee,

about a water bottle full of coffee. I mean I always drink about a water bottle full of coffee on these races where I knew I was jetlagged about 30-45 minutes before my race so that I would be sweaty and a little bit shaky because I knew that would help me swim my fastest. I have my mental state that I got in with certain types of songs that I would listen to on the iPod and I would just get myself into a place where I could feel like "alright I am going to explode through this race, I know the two things I need to do better in Singapore than I did in Berlin, or wherever it was," the 50m is a great race though because it is just explode – explode on start, explode through the wall, get your kicks out and then explode through the finish. I love that stuff, I mean that is probably the hardest part about being retired is that it is hard to have that competitive spirit I guess outside the pool. I think I answered your question?

That's great. So you just stuck to the normal routine which you use for your big races and everything just came together.



Yeah it did, it was a fun race. I remember that one in particular even if it was with those suits; it is always fun to break a world record that never gets old.

Nah I bet. What about goal setting was that part of your training strategy did you usually sit down with your coach and talk about what you want to target for the next 6 months or 12 months?

You know sometimes we did sometimes we didn't. I always had goals in mind before every season whether I vocalised that to my coach or not I definitely think that stuff is helpful. Some of the things I did I would just write myself signs and put them in my locker so that every day before a workout when I put my suit on I could see; here is my goal and I made sure to read it out loud to myself and then I would get in the water and workout. Yeah I think those goals and written reminders, the more you can see them the more you can remind yourself the better you are going **to be able to focus throughout the season. It's a grind through some of those workouts in the middle of Christmas training or those training camps you have to be able to remind yourself what you are working for.**

Yeah I think that stuff is great writing down whether it's your goal time or why you're doing it and just putting it somewhere that you see it every day so it just keeps the motivation up and reminds you why you're doing it.

The other thing I remember is kind of the more vivid I could make my signs the more images I could put on there the better that would get **stuck in my mind and help me focus on it. I wouldn't just write it in black ink on a white piece of paper it would be a particular colour; like it would be in gold so that I could focus on winning the gold medal or breaking a world record or whatever.**

Did you visualise your races at all? Did you ever lie down and just picture yourself winning those races? Did you rehearse it in your head before you did them?

Yeah I never deliberately set aside 10- minutes to go sit in dark room or anything but I would have my moments before races that I would go sit in the hot showers and think through my race and get myself psyched up to race. I would never run through an entire race in my head but I would run through elements of it; I would run through how I am going to feel when I am kicking off the third wall in 100m or what my start is going to feel like. I would always picture the ideal, so on the start I would always think



about "This entry I am going to have really clean entry and it will have one of those pebble breaking the surface with very little splash and I would just think about the sound that that would make as I would do my start or just how powerful my legs would feel as I came off the wall on the third turn" I never ran through an entire race, there were coaches that told me "we are going to start the stop watch, close your eyes and I want you to run through the race and tell me when to stop the stop watch and we will see how close you are to your final goal time."

Some of that, I understand what they are getting at but I could never do that in my head because I get to hung up on these details, maybe because I am a perfectionist but I would be like, "I am running through the race but I didn't do that exactly perfect" so I would re-start my race so I just learned to focus on different chunks and visualise it and not worry about how long I was taking to visualise.

Yeah that's good and the last question I have is do you think you learnt some skills or traits you have developed through swimming that you have applied in life? Whether it is getting up early for practice and just working hard towards something, do you think swimming is a good sport for that kind of thing?

Most definitely. Most definitely for the discipline side of things. You definitely know how to set goals, I think you definitely know how to work hard there is absolutely no way to wake up for workouts before you go to school for about 10 years straight, you have to be disciplined and that is probably one of the number one things I will pull out of the swimming role and apply to whatever I do next. I do think that you need to enjoy what you are doing, that's one of the reasons I retired because I didn't have the drive, I didn't enjoy it enough to continue doing it. I think that people should infuse as much creativity into their swimming as they can. Of course there is so much that I can take away from the sport of swimming to the world outside of the swimming pool.

I think swimming is a great sport for the discipline and the friends you make as well. Some of my best friends have come from swimming just because you have the same sort of values and you know what it takes. Not many people are willing to get up early in the morning, five mornings a week and do that for years on end, it takes a certain type of person. So you can find some pretty good friends through that if you are doing the same thing. So it's a great sport.



Definitely great friendships, you spend that many hours with anybody you are going to be friends with them.

Yeah that's right, that's exactly right. Thanks so much for being on the call Peter I have got a lot of good things from what you have talked about. I appreciate it very much and I wish you the best with whatever you chose to do next.

Yeah thanks, my pleasure Brenton.

Talk soon, and thanks again.

Some of the main points that Peter mentioned in the interview was the first one; Peter mentioned that as a young swimmer he did a lot of kilometres and hours in the pool. Then later on he moved to quality and speed based work training program. He is not sure if could have got to the same level he got to had he not done those long hours in the pool as a teenager. That's the argument that is out there, can someone become a good swimmer without doing a lot of hours in the pool but more quality and speed type of work as a younger swimmer. So that is still up in the air but Peter did a lot of kilometres in the pool and then moved to a sprint based workout.

He also talked about having a specific gym program, so making it specific to your race where he would work out for the same time that his race would go for and he would work the same types of muscles and do the same types of movements that he does in a race. He also talked about making sure that your workouts are targeted towards what you are doing in a race, because he said he had the most motivation when his coach was able to explain and show why he was doing all those things in training.

The last thing he mentioned was having a routine for racing. So when he broke that world record he had been through that same routine many times before. Where would have a lot of coffee and listen to his music and he would have that routine that he had done many times before. I think that is a really good thing to do because if you can get into that zone early on then it makes it a lot easier to have a good race. If you can practice it and keep it consistent then you know what you have got to do for your next race.

Thanks again for joining me for the fifth episode of the Effortless Swimming podcast. I am Brenton Ford; go to the website at



EffortlessSwimming.com or swimmingpodcast.com where you can get some videos, articles and other resources that will help you with your swimming. Tune in next episode where we have a very well known Australian who is an Olympic Gold Medallist, a former world record holder and a very known and very well liked swimmer in Australia, so we are looking forward to that next podcast. Thanks again and see you next episode.

