SWIM SPEED WORKOUTS
FOR SWIMMERS AND TRIATHLETES
THE BREAKOUT PLAN FOR YOUR FASTEST FREESTYLE
SHEILA TAORMINA
4-TIME OLYMPIAN AND TRIATHLON WORLD CHAMPION
CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 3
   How to Use This Kit 4
   Q&A 7

TECHNIQUE 12
   The Pull 12
   Feel 22
   Kicking 23
   Serape Core Drive 27
   Key Swimming Muscles 31
   Timing, Rhythm, and Momentum 36

THE HARD WORK AND THE REST 41

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS 43
INTRODUCTION

Welcome to *Swim Speed Workouts*. I’m excited we’re diving into the beautiful deep-blue third dimension together. With these swim workouts I hope you find a higher level of speed, strength, and power, and that you enjoy working toward your swimming goals.

The workouts in this kit develop the propulsive swim stroke described in *Swim Speed Secrets*. It’s one thing to read about the key elements of the freestyle swim stroke and another thing to develop them. This kit provides you with a plan and a focus during each workout so that you finish the session knowing exactly how you became better, even if it’s only one small step closer to your goals.

As we journey the next months together, there is much to learn about swimming faster and enjoying the journey. The messages in this book are not purely physical. There are mental and emotional components to being an athlete. Don’t show up to the pool each day to simply log the distance and live by numbers. Your full potential as an athlete shines when you engage your willpower and when you have a specific purpose in mind. You should know why you’re doing what you’re doing as you swim up and down the pool, and my goal as your coach-from-afar is to
convey those messages. I hope you will discover even more on your own, far beyond what I can convey.

The first 8 weeks of workouts focus mainly on developing the two vital elements of the freestyle stroke discussed in *Swim Speed Secrets*: the high-elbow catch and a feel for the water. Without these, the full potential of your freestyle swim stroke is significantly less than what it could be. They are also prerequisites to the dynamic elements of the swim stroke, namely the core drive. The core drive is where you discover timing, rhythm, and tempo. When connected with the underwater pull, the core drive accentuates forward movement at every effort level and gear. The second 8 weeks of workouts focus on developing and adding a well-timed core drive to your stroke.

The third dimension has much to offer. Get ready to dive in.

**HOW TO USE THIS KIT**

**The Cards**
This introduction and technique overview provide the starting point before you begin tackling the workouts. Read through everything carefully so you have a base understanding of where we’re headed these next months. In addition to the booklet there are 75 cards, arranged into four tabbed sections to guide you through the specifics: tool kit, drills, tubing, and workouts, each waterproof and color-coded for easy reference.
Tool Kit Cards
These cards bring you up to speed so you understand how to do the training sets in the workouts. You will know what it means to negative split or build and what a send-off interval is. They explain expected effort levels and how to take your stroke count and stroke rate. After a review of these simple cards you’ll not only easily manage the workouts in this kit but also be able to talk the swimming talk with any swimmer or coach in the world.

Drill Cards
Swimming drills are designed to isolate one part of the stroke to focus on a specific area of technique improvement. The workouts in this kit include a variety of drills, and these cards explain how each drill should be done. Photos printed on the card reveal the details, and each drill has an accompanying video, which you can review to see the drill in action, at www.swimspeedsecrets.com/video.

Tubing Cards
There is no more effective practical tool for developing strength and flexibility for the underwater pull than tubing. It was my secret weapon when I trained and raced, so it’s a mainstay in this kit. Every workout includes a tubing set, usually at the end (a few workouts start with tubing). These cards explain the different types of tubing sets and technique.
**Workout Cards**

These 50 cards are the actual workouts that can be placed on the pool deck at the end of your lane. Each workout is designed with a specific purpose to bring you closer to developing a propulsive freestyle stroke. Before heading to the pool, be sure to review the workout card to determine if you need additional cards. You may need to bring tool kit, tubing, or drill cards to the pool with you to remind you of the techniques for a drill or particular set. These workout cards are packed with information that will require you to manage send-off intervals, focus on specific techniques, and learn new drills, so the first few weeks require extra patience and review as you climb the learning curve. Stay with it! Within a short time the details on the cards will be second-nature for you.

**Equipment**

In addition to bringing the obvious equipment to each swim session—a swimsuit, cap, and goggles—you should also pack a pull buoy and kickboard (many pools have these available for use) and tubing (see tubing cards for details).

Optional equipment includes a snorkel, paddles, and fins. While the workouts do not specify these at any point, there are sets when it is acceptable to add them. I discourage beginner and intermediate swimmers from using fins too early in the training process, because a swimmer who relies on propulsion from fins without having learned the art of feeling the water neglects developing this vital element in their stroke. Once a swimmer understands how to feel and hold the water,
fins can be a fantastic tool for power training. The fins hold more water than feet do, so a swim or kick set at full effort with fins will do wonders for your strength and speed.

My opinion on paddles is the same as fins—you must learn to hold the water with your own hands and forearms rather than relying on the surface area and tone of the paddles. Once you understand the sensation of traction on the water with your hands and forearms, put the paddles on during a pull or swim set for extra power and strength work.

I’m a big fan of snorkels. Snorkels afford the swimmer the opportunity to watch the hand/arm as it enters the water, extends, and works into the high-elbow catch phase of the stroke. When a set calls for a focus on the catch, you should occasionally consider putting on a snorkel.

Q&A

Who Should Do These Workouts?
These workouts are designed for triathletes, masters swimmers, and fitness swimmers, from beginner to experienced. The one prerequisite is to have learned the basics of the freestyle stroke, including breathing technique and basic body position. This is not a learn-to-swim book. However, a new swimmer can make significant progress toward the vital elements of a propulsive freestyle while still working to gain general comfort and competence in the water. Each swim workout can be modified to fit your particular experience level.
The foundations of the freestyle swim stroke are fully explained in my book, *Swim Speed Secrets*. Drills and training concepts in the following workouts build upon information in my book, and these will be more meaningful to apply if you’ve already read it.

**How Many Workouts Are There, and How Long Are They?**

The workout plan is 16 weeks long and includes 3 workouts per week. Two of the 3 workouts each week hover in the 2,000 yards/meters range and are specifically designed to develop the technique for a propulsive freestyle stroke. These sessions are on the blue cards and will take approximately 1 hour or less to complete, depending on experience level.

The remaining one-third of workouts (1 per week) are She-Ra workouts. They’re called “She-Ra” because they come from my personal training log and She-Ra is the nickname a college swimming teammate gave me (remember She-Ra, Princess of Power, twin sister of He-Man, Master of the Universe?). These workouts, taken from the years I raced, are on the red cards and are endurance based. The distances fall into what I consider a challenging yet manageable range of 3,500–4,500 yards/meters. The purpose of the She-Ra workouts is to challenge you with a slightly longer workout for the week (these are more training based than technique based) and to share with you how I trained. Beginners may find it difficult to do the entire workout; if that’s the case for you, modify by cutting down the sets to match your level at this point of your training. The key is that you achieve a training effect by churning out more yards/meters than your typical workout distances.
To round out the 50 workout cards, one taper workout card and one recovery workout card are included. The taper card, taken from my own training log, provides an example of how to adjust workout volume and intensity to rest and sharpen in the week before an important race. The recovery workout card offers a session with lower volume and intensity that can replace a regular workout if you feel excessively fatigued on a particular day but still want to get in the water for a light session. The recovery workout can be added into the mix at any point according to your training schedule.

Of course, not every reader’s schedule will allow a 3-workout-per-week commitment, and some readers will make it to the pool more than 3 times in a week. In these cases, keep in mind that the plan is not rigid. Although the workouts are designed in sequential order, feel free to adapt and use this program in a way that suits your individual needs.

What if You Can’t Make It to the Pool for a Workout?
If you’re unable to make it to the pool on a particular day, don’t worry. Pick up the training plan where you left off when you do get back in the water. In the meantime, try to fit in the day’s tubing set. Every workout includes a tubing set. Tubing sets take approximately 10 minutes to complete and can be done at home. You can easily pack your tubing in a suitcase, so if you travel and don’t have access to a pool, be sure to bring tubing. This will keep you on target with your swimming goals and fitness. Consider doubling-up the tubing workout on days when you’re not able to swim. You’ll be finished in 20 minutes or less, and it will do wonders for your muscle tone and swimming strength!
What Size Pool Should You Be In?
There are three officially recognized pool lengths: 25 yards, 25 meters, and 50 meters. The workouts in this kit are designed for sessions in a 25-yard or 25-meter pool but can be easily modified for a 50-meter pool. The only sets within a workout that would require modification for a 50-meter pool are those that include 25s or 75s, or any distance that ends in a “5” instead of a “0.” In a 50-meter pool, these distances take the swimmer to the middle of the pool instead of the wall on half the repeats. It’s common for swim teams that train in 50-meter pools to design sets that take the swimmers to the middle of the pool. Swimmers either push off the bottom to start the next repeat or—even better—rev up their propulsion from a “dead-start” in the water.

Note that the pool lengths on the She-Ra workouts vary because they’re taken directly from my training log, and I trained in different length pools depending on travel and pool access. On each She-Ra workout I note pool length, abbreviated as follows:

- 25-yard pool = SCY (short course yards)
- 25-meter pool = SCM (short course meters)
- 50-meter pool = LCM (long course meters)

Any pool that’s 25 in length, whether meters or yards, is a short pool, thus the words short course (SC) associated with it. Any pool that is 50 in length is a long pool, therefore the words long course (LC) attached to it. The only other distinguishing factor is whether it’s yards or meters (Y or M). If you’re wondering why there’s no LCY, it’s because there are no 50-yard pools officially sanctioned/recognized for competition.
What’s a “Training Effect”?  
Every workout in this kit is designed with the intention of bringing about a training effect, which is a desired outcome of a workout. In training, we often must push beyond perceived limits to appropriately stress our bodies. Sometimes we push with intensity and speed, and other times we focus on strength or endure the discomfort of longer sets to build endurance. There can be a variety of purposes for a workout, and a comprehensive training plan will include them all. Even rest days and technique-focused days are purposed and should be included to achieve a training effect. The key is that your body physiologically changes for the better, even if just slightly, as a result of a training session. Every workout card in this kit states a purpose (training effect) at the top.

Here’s a story that illustrates resting to gain training effect: In 2007 I was in Moscow, Russia, for a World Cup Pentathlon event, and I arrived a few days before the rest of the U.S. team. I went to the pool and sat by the edge, contemplating what type of training session my body needed. I didn’t feel my system needed an endurance workout, and I felt I had trained some really good speed and race-pace sessions recently. I didn’t feel tight in my muscles, so it didn’t seem necessary to do a recovery/loosen-up swim. Finally, I concluded that the best workout I could do was a hot shower. I was so excited. Hot showers are my favorite part of swim workouts! The hard work had been done, and on this particular day the best training effect was to let the hard work sink in so my body could adapt and build strength. A few days later I broke the world record for the pentathlon 200-m freestyle (SCM). Moral of the story: Don’t be afraid to rest when your body needs it.
TECHNIQUE

This section of the booklet details the technique of the freestyle stroke. Please refer to this regularly so you better understand the purpose behind the drills and sets on the workout cards and how they relate to stroke technique.

THE PULL

The vital separating factor of the freestyle stroke is the underwater pull. To describe the pull, I divide it into three phases: high-elbow catch, diagonal, and finish. Though I separate the pull into phases, everything that takes place underwater is part of one fluid, seamless motion.

High-Elbow Catch Phase

The high-elbow catch takes place after extension, during the first third of the underwater pull, while the hand is in front of the head. It's the most important to train because it's the most awkward and demanding phase and therefore the least likely to be naturally present in a swim stroke. If a swimmer hasn't developed a proper catch, then the rest of the pull suffers due to lost momentum and lack of connection with the core drive.
THE THREE PHASES OF THE UNDERWATER PULL:

HIGH-ELBOW CATCH PHASE

DIAGONAL PHASE

FINISH PHASE
When beginning the catch, the hand is at its farthest point in front of the head, as the swimmer has just extended the arm forward in the water; therefore, the extension must be done properly. Extension isn’t achieved by tipping the body on its side. Rather, a swimmer extends from the core muscles and those that attach to the scapula (the shoulder blade). Determining how far to extend depends on the swimmer. Some elite swimmers extend farther in front of the head to get more distance from every stroke. They’re strong enough to handle this and train to build this strength. Others prefer shorter strokes and extension, and get into the catch more quickly. All of them, no matter how lengthy the extension, engage the core and muscles surrounding the scapula.

DURING EXTENSION, LOAD 10 TO 20 POUNDS OF TENSION IN YOUR CORE AND THE MUSCLES THAT ATTACH TO YOUR SCAPULA.
To determine your length of extension, 10 to 20 pounds of muscle tension in the core and upper body is a good gauge. To understand what 10 to 20 pounds of tension entails, imagine the muscle tone/energy required to hold a 10- or 20-pound weight, and feel the muscles go to that level of tone/energy as you extend in the water. If you extend too far and load more than 20 pounds of tension, you’ll be too rigid, hampering your ability to feel the water. You will also feel “stuck” out front, limiting the fluidity of your stroke. Some workouts in this book call for an overloading of tension in the muscles, via overextending the arm and body core, but these sets are designed specifically as a strength workout so that when you go back to your ideal extension length it feels strong and rhythmic.

From extension flows the beginnings of the catch phase of the stroke. The catch involves four dynamics, which happen simultaneously:

To get your catch, arc your upper arm 3 to 4 inches wide of the lateral body line and rotate so your elbow points up.
SHEILA TAORMINA has competed in four Olympics in three sports (swimming, 1996; triathlon, 2000 and 2004; and pentathlon, 2008). Her first two attempts to qualify for the Olympics in swimming (1988 and 1992) came up short. Following those years, she moved forward with her education, finished her master’s degree in business in 1994, and began a professional career in the automotive industry in Detroit.

With her eyes set on 1996, she trained before and after work with her small hometown swim team in Livonia, Michigan. There were no corporate endorsements fueling the effort—just a plan, hard work, and a coach who believed along with her. Sheila learned about technique, efficiency, and the keys to success. Applying those throughout the years, she became an Olympic champion in one sport, world champion in a second sport, and the World Cup standings leader in a third sport.

In the end, Sheila Taormina experienced six different disciplines on the Olympic stage—swimming, cycling, running, pistol shooting, fencing, and equestrian show jumping. Her perspective on the Olympics, human potential, and performance is unparalleled. Learn more at www.sheilat.com.
UNDERSTANDING EFFORT LEVELS

Some coaching styles are based on scientific concepts such as VO₂max and threshold levels, with coded letters and numbers like AN1 and EN1, while other styles veer away from testing and preset numbers. There are benefits to each, and usually an athlete gravitates to the style that suits his/her personality.

I’m not a test-driven coach. I’m not against designing a training plan around the numbers. But going off of perceived efforts, and feeling your own body’s limits and strengths—knowing when to push and when to back off for the appropriate training effect for that day—is also an extremely effective way to train. So, in this book there is no T-pace or T minus 3. Instead, sets are designed around effort levels. Below is a summary of what each effort level should feel like:

**Easy:** Warm-up, warm-down, some drills, recovery swims. Heart rate is low; you could talk easily between repeats and not be out of breath. 60–65%

**Moderate:** Aerobic effort level; you can hold a conversation between repeats, but breathing is somewhat labored and noticeable. You could continue at this pace for an hour or more if you can handle the boredom. It’s a similar effort to going on a long training run to get in the miles. 70–75%

*WHEN WORKING ON TECHNIQUE DURING STROKE DRILLS AT AN EASY TO MODERATE PACE, A SWIMMER ALSO BUILDS MUSCLE TONE BY LENGTHENING THE CORE AND MAINTAINING ATHLETIC TENSION.*
Strong: Endurance, tight send-off intervals; you don’t feel like talking, although you could sputter out a joke or compliment your training partner between repeats. 80–85%

Fast: Very close to an all-out effort, with a slight degree of control involved. You’ll be holding back just a little from full-out speed. You won’t feel like talking, although these sets usually call for ample rest between repeats to allow you to catch your breath. 90–95%

All-Out: Everything you have to give, no holding back. My coach called them “Go, man, go!” sets. Due to the max effort level, these don’t involve high yardage. Quality over quantity is the name of the game on these. 100%

Vortices, indicated by the white commotion surrounding the forearm, are a sign of great traction on the water and are visible when a swimmer travels at top speeds.
HORIZONTAL SCULL DRILL

The horizontal scull drill works the same hand/forearm in-sweep and out-sweep motions as the standing scull drill, but now you lie in the water, face down, upper arms set in the high elbow catch position, as you work down the length of the pool.

To begin horizontal sculling, push off the wall in a streamline position, then surface, keeping both arms in front of your head. Reach your upper arms forward by lengthening the muscles that surround the scapula. Your upper arms should be raised, arced outward 3 to 4 inches wider than your lateral body line, and rotated/twisted slightly so the elbows point up. Hold your upper arms stable in this high-elbow position for the duration of the drill.

To position your forearms/hands for the sculling motion, bend at your elbow and direct the forearms/hands toward the bottom of the pool (just like the standing scull drill, horizontal scull drill builds great strength and coordination at the elbow). You can incorporate a slight forward angle to the downward directed forearm/hand (this works the early part of the high-elbow catch phase), or you can direct the forearm/hand downward fully perpendicular to the bottom of the pool (this works the high-elbow catch in its later phase). Either is acceptable.

Make sure your hands have tone and are flat and open, not cupped. Also ensure your wrists are straight and flush with your forearms so you feel resistive friction on the entire hand/forearm paddle. Working from your elbows, press out, palms facing away from each other at a 45-degree
diagonal pitch, until your hands are 8 to 12 inches wider than shoulder width, and then reverse direction to pitch for the in-sweep. On the in-sweep, palms now face each other at a 45-degree pitch. Press the hands toward each other until they’re approximately in front of the shoulders, and then turn to repitch for the out-sweep. Repeat the in-sweeps and out-sweeps down the length of the pool.

As you work the inward and outward sculling impulses, your upper arms remain stable in the high-elbow catch position. The muscles surrounding the scapula work to give the upper arms the desired extension, and your deltoids will burn as you hold the elbows up. Your core is lengthened and taut as well, so this drill is an all-around challenging workout, even though we move at a snail’s pace. You may kick lightly to provide a bit of extra propulsion.

**OUT-SWEEP**

**IN-SWEEP**

As you scull the length of the pool, keep your upper arms stable, hands flat, not cupped, and feel your forearm/hand press against the water together as one paddle.
TUBING TECHNIQUE

Whether you’re on a bench or standing with tubing only, and whether you’re pulling fly or free, the technique on full pulls is the same.

Setting the high-elbow position: Place your hands between the plastic handle and nylon strap. Cinch the strap around your hands such that you can hold hands flat and open, with straightened fingers; no cupping of the hand. Raise your upper arm to shoulder height and arc 3 to 4 inches wider than lateral side of body line to position slightly wider than shoulder width. Rotate/twist upper arm slightly so elbow points up. Extend forward by reaching with the muscles that attach to the scapula. Keep your wrist straight and flush with forearm, and bend at the elbow to direct forearm and fingers down.

Pulling back: Press back with forearm and hand, fingers pointing toward ground simulating the high-elbow catch phase. As the hand/forearm passes
under your head, the diagonal phase begins. Squeeze your upper arm toward your armpit, as if squeezing a balloon. As upper arm squeezes, pitch your hand/forearm 3 to 5 degrees inward to direct under your body. Your elbow remains pointed out, with your upper arm outside the lateral edge of body. Once your hand passes under your belly button, the finish phase requires that you pitch 3 to 5 degrees outward to direct your hand toward your hip. Straighten elbow/arm at finish but don’t lock out.

**Recovery:** After finishing the pull, return your hand/forearm to the starting position via a low route. Don’t simulate the overwater recovery phase of the freestyle stroke, as tension from the tubing may rebound too forcefully and cause injury to your shoulder.
MASTER YOUR FASTEST FREESTYLE

Swim Speed Workouts will build your fastest freestyle ever.

Drawing from her unrivaled career as a 4-time Olympian, gold medalist, and triathlon world champion, Sheila Taormina’s 16-week swim training plan offers 50 waterproof workouts that develop the critical elements of the world’s fastest freestyle swimming technique:

- high-elbow catch
- feel for the water
- a powerful core drive
- superior swimming fitness

Swim Sheila’s essential workouts—and break out to your fastest freestyle.

SHEILA TAORMINA
is an internationally recognized swimming coach. She spent her racing career refining an exceptional freestyle swimming technique that she teaches in dozens of swimming camps around the world each year.

FIND MORE SECRETS TO SPEED IN SHEILA’S BOOK SWIM SPEED SECRETS