All About Postal Events - Part 3
By Andrea Packard

The final week

Your postal event is one week away. What now? Time to taper! Taper? What? If you thought tapering was only for those shorter swim meet events, you're wrong. Even Ironman triathletes typically taper for 2-3 weeks leading up to their big event. Once you're within one week of the event, there's nothing more you can do to change your overall level of fitness. You can't cram in lots of extra last-minute yards in hopes of improving your endurance. It won't work. In fact, if anything, it will hinder your performance because it will cause excess fatigue. The best thing you can do is to rest up and maximize your energy level for the big day. If you're training 3-4 days per week, I'd recommend reducing your volume to about 80% of your normal yardage. If you're putting in 5-6 swims per week, you could cut down to 60-70% of normal yardage, by shortening your workouts and / or taking one extra day off. Regardless of how many times you swim the week leading up to the event, try to arrange your schedule so that either the day before or 2 days before the event is a day off.
Workouts should consist of plenty of warm-up and cool-down, with mostly easy to moderate swimming for the main set. Plan to do a couple short pace sets. If you have a target split pace in mind, do 5-10 x 100 at that goal pace, with about 20 seconds rest between. Or, do about 10-15 x 50 on a 10 second rest interval. Even if you don't have a precise goal time in mind, you can still do these pace sets; just try to hold a consistent pace on all repeats, and go at a speed and effort you feel you can maintain for the entire postal distance.

The few hours and minutes before

The big day is here. In terms of nutrition, if you have your own tried and true pre-race meal, then stick to it. If you're unsure what and how much to eat, then let me share what has worked for me. I get up early enough to eat a decent-sized breakfast that includes some protein and fat, and let it fully digest. Specifically, that means an egg and a bowl of oatmeal with peanut butter approximately 90 minutes prior to event warm-up time. If there are lots of team members doing the event, and I'm counting for someone prior to swimming, then I might have too much time (i.e. more than 2 hours) between breakfast and my race time. In that case, I will also eat an energy bar about 45 min prior to start time. I admit I do get a bit of a queasy-nervous stomach, and I do have to force myself to eat. But I know if I don't put down some calories, my performance will suffer.

Allow yourself a few minutes to warm-up prior to your event. You might be thinking, "I'll be swimming far enough – I certainly don't need to warm-up!" Don't be fooled: just 200-300 yards can help a great deal. It will allow you to wake up, work out all the kinks in your body, shake loose any mental cobwebs, and get focused for the swim ahead. It gives your body a chance to get your heart rate up gradually so that you don't shock yourself the first few minutes of the event. Just like it's better to let your car warm up for a few minutes on a cold day, so it's better to give your body a chance to warm-up. If you're like me and you want to do a little more than 300, then go for it. I typically do 700-1000. The first 400-500 nice and easy, then 2-3 x 100 descend down to my goal pace, then 2 or 3 x 50s at goal pace. I have to remind my body what the right pace feels like so I don't go out too fast or too slow.

Equipment tips

I thought I should throw in a few gear tips I've learned along the way. If you wear a cap, take an extra one with you to the pool that day. Those caps have a way of breaking at the most inopportune moments! As for goggles, not only do I recommend taking an extra pair to the pool, I highly suggest you put them at the end of your lane. Case in point: the nose strap on my

goggles snapped right in the middle of my 6000 last year. Fortunately, I had those extra goggles lane-side, so my gear failure only cost me about 5 seconds. I hate to think how much time I would have lost had I gotten out of the pool to dig through my bag for extra goggles…or how miserable I would have been had I been forced to swim the second 3000 with no goggles!

What about your suit? Remember that long distance postal events are official USMS events just like swim meets, and therefore the same suit rules apply. And now something you might not have considered: possible skin chafing from your suit straps or the edges of the suit. Even if you've never before experienced this problem, it could happen to you on a long swim. I, for example, don't have any suit troubles during normal practices or the "shorter" postal events. But my suits start to really irritate my skin in certain spots when I swim longer than 6000 or so. A little Vaseline or Body Glide applied to potential problem areas is a good preventative measure.

Nutrition during the swim

How about eating and drinking during the event? If your projected time is going to be 90 minutes or less, you're probably OK without. But if you prefer to take a short break or two for a little fuel, then go right ahead. If you estimate your event will take more than 90 minutes, I highly suggest taking at least 1, if not multiple fuel breaks. I use Accelerade and gels, and also have a bottle of water just to rinse out my mouth after eating / drinking the flavored stuff. If you like to use energy bars or other solid food, that's fine – whatever your stomach is able to tolerate. Regardless of what you use, be sure to try it during a few practices to make sure it sits OK – you'd hate to discover during a postal swim that a certain gel or energy drink makes you sick!

Pacing strategies for the swim

If this is your first one, and you have no goal time in mind, then I have just a few simple tips for you. First, take it out nice and easy and give yourself at least 500 yards to gradually build into a comfortable pace. If you feel like to need to break every so often, then by all means do so. Just plan out your breaks – for example, tell yourself you can take 10 seconds after each 500; that way you can have little milestones to work toward and the swim won't feel un-surmountable. If you have a little experience with these postal swims and you have a general (or very specific) goal time in mind, let me suggest a pacing strategy that has proven very successful for me. Remember all that talk about negative splitting in my last article? That's exactly what you should aim to do. More precisely, my ultimate goal with each postal swim, regardless of the distance and my level of conditioning at the time, is a 20/60/20 breakdown. By that, I mean I aim to go about 1-2 seconds per 100 slower than my goal pace for the first 20% of the swim (i.e. the first 1000 of a 5K); then, I pick it up just a bit to hold my goal pace for the middle 60% (i.e. middle 3000 of a 5K); and for the final 20% (last 1000 of a 5K), I push hard with whatever I have left in the tank and try to go about one half to 1 second per 100 faster than my goal pace. Granted, I'm not able to pull-off this ideal splitting every time. But when I analyze all of my best postal performances, I see that my splits pretty closely followed this pattern.

Use the clock or signals

One of the skills that benefits me greatly at long distance postal swims is my ability to look at the clock regularly throughout the event. Believe it or not, I look at the clock every 100 (I take a "slightly longer" breath a few strokes before or after the flip turn) and I do the math in my head to figure out if I'm on pace. Not only does this help me hold a steady pace, it gives me a metal exercise that keeps me from getting bored out of my mind! And it also allows me to keep count. For those who don't normally watch the clock while they swim, I'd suggest trying to master this skill. That is, if you're not hindered by vision problems or foggy goggles. If you can't find a way to keep an eye on the clock, then at least ask your timer to give you signals with a kick board in

the water at regular intervals (say, every 500 or 1000). Granted, your timer is responsible for recording your splits and ensuring you swim the correct distance, but I'm sure most of you would agree that it's nice to know "where you're at" throughout the swim. One final note on the counting: go through your split sheet thoroughly right after the event, because timers have been known to make mistakes.

Enjoy your experience

I think that covers all the last-minute helpful hints I can offer. As a final note, be sure to enjoy your long-distance postal experience. Yes, it will be tough, both physically and mentally. But I hope you'll discover that it's worth the effort.