

Run Tall and Swim Long

By Steven Shaw and Malcolm Balk

'What distinguishes the top competitors from the rest is the ability to maintain good poise and balance throughout the three events.'

Paul Triathlon Coach at McGill University Montreal

The Challenges of Triathlon

The Triathlon is a unique sporting event requiring a supreme level of versatility, power and endurance. To be successful the triathletes must be able to balance the demands of training and competing in three diametrically different disciplines, with often incompatible demands and skills. Swimming in straight line in rough water is completely different from running up a steep hill.

The challenge for the triathlete is to meet each of these requirements effectively and still maintain their psychophysical equilibrium. The inability to maintain this delicate balance will not only prevent triathletes from achieving their optimum performance but can lead to injury and burn out.

The Alexander Technique

The Alexander Technique is a dynamic system of mind and body integration, which enlivens the experience of living, a system, which can radically enhance the performance of all athletes. It can help Triathletes cultivate their sense of body awareness, which is the single most powerful factor in improving their performance. Through improved kinaesthetic awareness they discover how to avoid extraneous activity and how to redirect energy so that it is applied exactly where and when it is needed.

Alexander Technique lessons stress the importance of the head neck back relationship, which enables pupils to improve their overall poise and balance.

Dr David Garlick of the University of New South Wales in Australia found that the neck muscles provide vital feedback to the entire nervous system.

"When your neck muscles are tense and contracted then every other set of muscles will have to work harder. A free neck and well balanced head means you are able to release 'locked-in' tension in other parts of the body too, and gain more ease in every movement."

In a recent workshop with the McGill Triathlon team in Montreal none of 24 participating triathletes appreciated that the carriage of the head was a significant factor in affecting their running performance. This lack of awareness was reflected in all their running styles. Some of the runner's necks lacked muscle tone so that the head wobbled around. Others held the muscles of the neck stiffly causing the head to be pulled backwards and still others tended to drop their heads from the base of the neck in order to observe the ground in front of them. Unless this core problem is addressed other more indirect difficulties such as ineffective arm movement or shortening of the stride length cannot successfully be remedied. In the McGill workshop, the athletes were asked to try apply a simple strategy designed to help correct the tendency to look down by dropping the head and neck. The athletes were asked to "aim high" and look 30 to 40 meters in front of them. All reported a lighter impact with the floor and greater sense of ease both when they ran slowly and at faster paces.

In open water swimming with a large numbers of competitors the problem is more involved. While most swimmers are generally aware of the fact that holding the head high increases drag and makes swimming less efficient, in the triathlon it is regarded as necessary. Open water swimmers have to raise their heads in order to sight the land marks to prevent Zig- Zagging. Most triathletes raise the head every 6-8 strokes to see. Water is a thousand times denser than air and therefore changes in body orientation are compounded. If the head is pulled back aggressively the legs sink very fast where as a more gradual elevation using the atlantol-occipital joint can be achieved with little change in the position of the rest of the body. Learning to become more in control of the way the head is lifted will not only help improve efficiency but will reduce the risk of strain and injury. We advise open water swimmers when possible not to breathe by lifting their head up but to look ahead with mouth still in the water and then turn normally to the side to take their breath.

The understanding of the head tilting at the a-o joint has immediate application for the cycling portion on the triathlon. Most triathletes tend to collapse the front of the torso restricting their lung capacity. At the same time the head is retracted from the base of the spine in order to see the road ahead, which shortens the neck and puts great strain on the neck and shoulder girdle. By learning to adopt a more lengthened stature and move the head from the nodding joint the cyclist is able to establish clear vision and improve respiratory functioning. In terms of the transition from cycling to running, it will far easier to run tall if you've been lengthening on the bike.