

LONG COURSE
Fact and Fiction
And Other Summer Swimming Thoughts
By Coach Barry Marlin
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Every summer for the past 9 years the Potomac Marlins convert from the standard Short Course (SC) practice schedule to our summer Long Course (LC) schedule which runs from the day after Memorial Day through the Friday before Summer All Stars (first weekend in August). Not surprisingly, many of our SC swimmers have never experienced swimming in the LC format and still many more have questions, impressions and concerns, which we hear on a regular yearly basis. For the most part many of the questions are reasonably valid, however, there are often statements made by other inexperienced swimmers/friends, parents and summer coaches that are simply wrong and/or based upon a poor “personal experience” that have translated into biased/uneducated advice which is typically not in the best interest of the swimmer.

In an attempt to cut through some of the FOG on many of these annual comments and concerns that Bill and I receive, I submit the following editorial opinions based upon my personal 30 year experience as a swimmer and coach. My intent is to educate those who have questions about LC training and at the same time to encourage all 11 & older PM swimmers and select 9-10 swimmers who wish to continue to improve in the sport to get involved in some level of the team’s summer LC program.

What is Long Course? Long Course simply refers to the format or size of the pool. A Long Course pool is 50 meters long as opposed to a Short Course pool, which is either 25 yards long or 25 Meters long. Chinquapin Rec. and the JCC pools are 25 meters. (The others are 25 yards. 25-meter pools are about 82 feet long – 25-yard pools are exactly 75 feet long). Long Course is the standard format for all National and International competitions including the Olympics. Some International competitions, including the World Cup, are swum in the 25-meter SC format. The United States is among the few (if not the ONLY) country, which swims 25 yd. SC. 25 yard SC is currently the standard format for USA swimming and NCAA college swimming. There is an ongoing movement within USA swimming to slowly convert all USA competitions to the 50-meter LC format (and/or 25 meter SC format) wherever possible. (You may see some PVS meets being held in the 25 meter SC format very soon). This is being considered due to the fact that it is widely held that US swimmers are at a disadvantage when competing at the international levels due to the lack of experience with the LC meter format within most age group programs throughout the country. The biggest obstacle standing in the way of this conversion is the lack of 50-meter pools within the nation.

The 2004 PVS Short Course Champs and 2004 Sectionals will be held in the LC format. USA swimming does this in all OLYMPIC years.

Long Course swimming is more about the SWIMMING. It is truly the better format in which to establish the FASTEST swimmers in the pool. SC format with current rules pertaining to the 15 meters a swimmer may travel off each wall while still submerged is often more about the swimmers proficiency and execution of the turns. Swimmers with great turns and/or underwater streamline techniques have a considerable advantage in short course even though they may not actually be faster swimmers between the walls. (This was most recently evident in the women's 100yd back at 2002 NCAA Championships where the winner of the 100 back (49.+), Natalie Coughlin, established a new American record and did 2/3 of the whole race underwater of each wall doing butterfly kicks). It was quite an impressive race and a lesson in pressing the limits of the rules to maximize ones chances of success.

Does SIZE matter? The 50m LC pool IS longer than a 25 yard/meter SC pool, but does it really matter that much? Let's start with a riddle. What weighs more, a ton of bricks or a ton of feathers? The answer is obviously ...they weigh the SAME but they look a lot different. So then, what practice set is longer. 10 X 50m Free in the Long Course pool or 10 X 50m Free in the 25 m Short course pool? If you are following you will realize that again they are the same. The main difference is psychological for those swimmers who are unfamiliar with the LC format. I have had young swimmers not hesitate to swim 10 X 50 fly in practice and then look at a LC pool and not think that they can do one single lap. "It just looks long", I tell them, "you swam the equivalent of 10 of these laps yesterday in the SC pool without stopping". It is a matter of perception. And it is a very REAL perception. Take my word for it, an 11-year-old standing on the blocks at the end of the 50-meter pool for his/her first 100 fly is thinking "my God! That's a long way!" But after the race we all realize that a 100 Fly is a 100 Fly. Although, instinctively we would probably choose to carry that ton of feathers over the ton of bricks if given the choice.

The only real advantage (or disadvantage depending upon your perspective) to LC swimming is the lack of TURNS. If your turns are bad, then this is an advantage. If you like to REST on turns then this is a disadvantage. However, resting on turns is NOT A GOOD THING so having to SWIM MORE between the walls rather than REST on the walls is actually an advantage to those swimmers who are actually trying to IMPROVE.

LONG COURSE vs. DISTANCE training: A common mistake is often made when swimmers and parents confuse LC training with Distance training. LC training is no different than SC training other than the length of the pool. The sets are the same (increments of 50 rather than 25 - ex. 50, 100, 150, 200 in a LC pool as opposed to 25, 50, 75, 100 in a SC pool. A short course practice and a LC practice may each have the exact same sets. 10 X 100, 6 X 200, 4 X 400, or 8 X 50). The difference would only be that in the LC format you do half as many laps to cover the same distance. DISTANCE training on the other hand is very specifically targeted for those swimmers on the team who have shown an interest and talent for Distance swimming. A distance swimmer is someone who excels at one or all of the following events (500yd Free, 1000yd Free, 1650yd Free). The LC equivalent of these SC events are (400m Free, 800m Free, and 1500m Free). A distance swimmer is required on occasion to do longer sets during practice than most of the other swimmers in the group. A coach may designate a DISTANCE lane within the practice group for these swimmers to focus on a special workout. These distance swimmers or distance lanes can be formed in SC and LC workouts. Essentially, LC training and Distance training have nothing to do with one another. Many distance swimmers prefer to train in the LC format because there are less turns involved. Rest assured, by signing up for a LC practice group you are not signing away your life to the distance coach.

LONG COURSE vs. SPRINT training: The most amusing comments that we hear each year are the ones that state; “LC training is not good for Sprinters”, “LC training ruined my son’s sprinting ability”. “Why train LC when I am a sprinter?” I wonder what the Olympic 50 and 100 meter sprinters would say to these people. I have a pretty good idea, but my advice is to turn quickly, trying not to chuckle, and RUN! Don’t be part of someone else’s disappointing experience which they have blamed on the POOL.

Not to beat a dead seahorse...but if you are a sprinter in SC then you are a sprinter in LC. Many top sprinters LOVE LC because THERE ARE NO TURNS. “One lap wonders” I call them. Sort of like drag racing with no parachute at the end. I think the 50m Free is one of the most intense 21 seconds of swimming you’ll ever witness. Don’t let people who have failed in the LC format convince you that the blame for their poor performance on the pool and/or on LC swimming in general. This should be a dead give away as to their understanding of the sport right from the start. As with distance swimmers, there is often a lane of Sprinters in most organized workouts (LC or SC). Most Age Group (9-18) Sprinters and Distance swimmers do 95-99% of their workouts together (same sets). Permanent specialized lanes for distance swimmers and sprinters are not usually a necessity or an advantage until college years. LC training does not make a sprinter slower any more than SC practice would. On the contrary, it probably makes them stronger, increases their endurance, improves their confidence, improves their timing, increases their confidence and excitement when jumping back to the SC pool, and possibly improves their stroke rate. The only thing that will make a sprinter slower is lack of training intensity, lack of motivation, lack of focus, lack of nutrition, lack of positive attitude, lack of discipline and the mental capability to hastily place blame on their poor performances on, of all things, “the size of the pool”?

WHO SHOULD DO LC training: All 11 & overs who are serious about improving as a swimmer (both summer league and winter league). Any 9-10 year old who is serious about improving and who is unsatisfied with the level of training or technical instruction at their summer clubs.

WHO SHOULD NOT DO LC training: Any swimmer not serious about improving. Any 10 & unders who are not sure if being a swimmer is their “thing” yet and simply want to have FUN in a low pressure non-competitive environment. 8 & unders should not do LC training.

WHAT is the PURPOSE of LC training?

Physical:

1. Training with your USA team throughout the summer continues to build on your training base established over the previous 9 months.
2. LC training maintains and increases your cardiovascular conditioning level throughout the summer and puts you months ahead of those swimmers who do not train when SC season begins in the fall. Reduces time to get in shape for fall SC from 2-3 months to 2-3 weeks.
3. LC training provides valuable experience for higher levels of competition.
4. LC training provides greater opportunity to work on and concentrate on stroke technique skills such as distance per stroke (DPS).
5. LC training provides less opportunity to rest on walls and therefore potentially increases cardiovascular training levels.
Less turns = more swimming = higher conditioning.
6. Continued association with American Swim Coaches Association (ASCA) trained and certified coaches. Swimmers hear the same advice and corrections they have become accustomed to all SC season. Confidence that correct technique instruction is occurring. VERY IMPORTANT. I have heard many summer coaches instructing kids to do exactly the opposite of what they should be doing. I have also heard parents at summer pools helping out by giving instructions which begin with “do it this way, this is how I used to do it”. Well, by my calculations.... A 50+ year old man/woman instructing kids to do something the way they were taught is basically 30-40+ years behind the learning curve. Especially when swimming technique has drastically changed as recently as 2-3 years ago. Sometimes confusion is caused simply through semantics and sometimes our PM kids know more than the summer coaches but are confused when another COACH tells them to do something differently? Be careful! 9 months of good technique can go down the tubes in a lot less than 11 weeks.

Psychological: LC training offers several significant mental boosts once you make it past the initial shock of the longer pool and no turns.

1. Change in format provides new and exciting mental break. Relieves monotony of year round SC training.
2. Provides atmosphere of serious training when surrounded by the team's most serious and dedicated swimmers.
3. Provides mental boost when converting back to SC in the fall. Pool seems very short. May increase confidence and enthusiasm levels during SC season.
4. Young swimmers who have bad turns may experience greater initial success at meets and practices.

HOW many days should I do LC training? The standard answer has always been “the more you do the better you will get”. However, in this day and age the other way to approach the answer to this is, “What is the minimum number of days I should practice to reach my goals”? I offer the following general advise;

1. National and Senior level swimmers 13 & Over are assumed to be committed to their training and their personal goals of making it to the National level of competition (Junior Nationals and Higher). They should be at all required practices during the summer. There is no other way to make it to the National level. 100% effort required in LC practices. Summer team practices/meets should not be a priority. **College swim team recruiters do not look at who made summer league All Stars. They only look at who made. USA JUNIOR and SENIOR NATIONALS.**
2. All Senior Prep- Level swimmers 11 & older should be swimming a minimum of 5 LC practices per week. Supplement as necessary with required or un-required summer workouts. Beware, don't over do it with summer team practices. Even though they are typically and relatively easy they can put an already tired body over the edge. Assumed priority to USA practices and meets.
3. Swimmers (AG1, AG2, JM1, JM2) who wish to maintain their conditioning level for next fall SC season should swim a minimum of 2-3 times per week with the LC program. LC practices should be supplemented with as many summer team practices as necessary or possible. Beware, don't over do it with summer team practices. Even though they are typically and relatively easy they can put an already tired body over the edge. Swimming LC 2-3 times per week will not necessarily guarantee time improvements in summer league meets, but it will maintain endurance gains which will be of significant value when the SC season starts in the fall.
4. Swimming less than 2 times per week will not have a significant benefit to the conditioning of the body or the retention of endurance. It may, however, provide initial experience with the LC format, which may be beneficial in the future.

How will LC training affect my summer team practice requirements: There is no way to tell for sure until you try. My recommendation is to compliment your LC practices with whatever number of summer team practices you can handle before feeling too tired or over trained. Bill and I used to practice LC 5 mornings a week for 2 hours 25 miles away from our summer pool. After practice, depending upon how tired we were, we would decide whether to go to summer team or go home and watch “Wheel of Fortune” ‘till we fell asleep. I believe we ended up going to double practices about 2 times per week on average. Our summer team practices were quite useless as training, but we attended mainly for team spirit and fun. When we got older 14-15 we found that the most significant way we could help our summer team improve was to go to practice and help the little kids (12 & unders) work on starts and turns rather than practice. (Coaches will love you for this extra in water help!) Once you are at a certain level in swimming, attending your summer (or High School) practices in addition to your USA practices is sort of like climbing Mt. Everest in the morning and then trying to get excited about climbing the tree in your back yard in the afternoon. At some point you just realize that it is silly.

All summer teams are quite different depending upon their size, their coach, and their parent board objectives (All Kids Swim (AKS) vs. Win At All COst (WAACO -as in NUTS) and the ability levels of their swimmers. Some teams may have an experienced coach with a USA coaching background and a group of USA swimmers who come to practice on a regular basis. If you are fortunate enough to have a team like this, perhaps the coach has space to establish a lane for the USA winter swimmers to get in a semi-serious conditioning workout. I believe Coach Bill does this with his summer team (Chantilly Highlands). The truth about summer coaching is that if the coach is serious about improving his team he understands several important things about his team and kids.

1. Winter swimmers typically do not get faster over the summer by coming to summer team practices. Winter swimmers improve over the winter SC season. From a summer team perspective, winter swimmers improve dramatically from season to season but not usually DURING the summer season.
2. Winter swimmers who are training LC on a regular basis do not need summer league practice or much attention from the summer team coach. Most educated coaches who have the best interest of the swimmers in mind over their own Win-Loss records will make arrangements for their USA winter swimmers to attend minimal workouts (if any) provided they are attending their USA LC practices on a regular basis. This allows for more time to devote to those who truly need it and provides more valuable lane space.

3. The most efficient use of coaching skills in the summer is to improve the general level of the majority of the novice summer kids. Technique and STARTS and TURNS practice is by far the most valuable time that can be spent by a summer coaching staff. Unfortunately, this is hard work and most coaches do not have the skills, patience or foresight to do this day after day.
4. The points attained by the novice summer swimmers who get the occasional 2nd and 3rd places are directly responsible for winning most CLOSE summer league dual meets. Therefore, the most efficient and productive use of coaching skills should be applied to the summer swimmers who can gain these “swing” points. Meets that are NOT close are always won by the team with the most winter swimmers on the roster OR the team with most swimmers NOT on vacation or sick in bed. Two things that are totally out of the control of the coach. Therefore, the true test of how good your summer coach is lies not in the final WIN/LOSS record, but rather in how he/she plans to win or prepares to win the CLOSE meets.
5. Across the board, an 11-week summer program does not allow enough time to produce faster swimmers through typical lap swimming. It looks good, and that’s what swimmers do, but the most significant area of improvement for summer and winter swimmers to improve their times during the summer league season is through repeated practice on the three most crucial areas for time improvement (which are; START, TURN & FINISH). The same is true for winter swimmers who are competing in the summer leagues. (If you want to improve your 50m times over the summer, practice 10-20 turns and 10-20 Starts of each stroke at full speed every day in your summer team workout.). A winter SC swimmer may practice all summer trying to drop 1-2 tenths of a second in their 50’s by swimming faster in the middle of the pool, but most swimmers that I have worked with (at all levels) can increase their break out time and distance off their starts and turns by 5-7 tenths of a second each resulting in 1-1.5 seconds drop in their 50 times over the course of the summer season. **Trust me! Just do it!**
6. Realizing this (#5) the most productive use of the Senior winter swimmer within the structure of his/her summer team is as an instructor to help teach the summer swimmer how to perfect their starts, turns and finishes. Senior winter swimmers who are practicing with their USA teams LC programs should be encouraged to come be assistant instructors for the 12 & unders several times per week. Be role models for the up and coming future of your teams. Your biggest and most lasting contribution can be made in this way.

The Summer League TIME TRIALS Syndrome: If you have not yet experienced this “phenomena” you will soon enough. Many winter SC swimmers/parents who do not swim LC often wonder why their times at TIME TRIALS are faster than or equal to their times at the end of the season/All Stars. The reason is quite simple in most cases. Winter swimmers who are involved in a more serious practice environment, which is endurance and skills based are, in most cases, in fairly good shape at the end of May. Summer league Time Trials are usually 3-4 weeks later. This happens to coincide with an approximate TAPER/REST period for most kids. Consequently, they are in peak condition and fully rested for the first meet of the season, which is usually Time Trials. As the summer season progresses the conditioning level of the winter swimmer falls off dramatically because summer league practices are not endurance based and do not focus on long-term conditioning. As a result of repeatedly practicing poor technique without adequate instruction (and more importantly, proper and specific **correction**) and lack of cardiovascular conditioning sets, their endurance decreases making finishing the races more difficult. If you find yourself caught in this predicament and are unable to practice with the LC team, then your best chance of success is to re-focus on your starts, turns and finishes in order to compensate for the loss of endurance and conditioning. There is usually plenty of room for improvement in these areas regardless of your practice habits or schedules. Secondly, relax at practice and re-focus on technique. Don’t worry about who is first in your lane. Sloppy practice habits will not make you faster no matter how hard you are trying.

Remember: Practicing 5 times a week with your summer team for one hour doing things which are not mentally or physically challenging or correct is NOT better than (or even equivalent to) practicing 2 –3 times per week with your winter team which provides physically and mentally challenging workouts. **No pain!- No gain!** Undeniably TRUE!

LC MEETS: Most of the PVS LC meets are on Sundays. They are set up that way so they do not conflict with the summer league dual meets. The exception is LC Age Group Champs, Junior Champs and Senior Champs in mid July. These are 3-day meets (Fri. Sat. Sun.) The Age Group meet is set up on Saturday to begin after the summer meets are over. The Junior Champs and Senior Champ swimmers are expected to make a choice between their summer league dual meets or the LC Championships. The Potomac Marlins encourage our LC swimmers to choose the LC meet over the summer meets, but leave the final decision to the swimmers without hassle.

All registered PM swimmers may register for summer LC meets, as their PVS membership is good through the summer. Register as usual over the web site. Swimmers may do this even if they are not practicing with the summer LC team; however, it is not recommended because experience with the LC format is very helpful prior to the first meet. See web site calendar for meet entry due dates.

SUMMER RECOMMENDATIONS: For those who absolutely CAN NOT make it to a PM LC training program this summer and who wish to continue swimming with the Potomac Marlins team in the fall 2003-2004: (hope this includes all of you!)

1. Go to ALL of your summer team practices throughout the entire summer. Even after the last meet or Divisionals and even if you do not make-All Stars. Work very hard. Intensity is crucial and more important than the amount of time you spend in the water. Ask to be moved up with kids who are older and faster than you if possible. Show initiative and ye shall be rewarded.
2. Try to develop a cardiovascular dryland training plan for yourself that you do every day/week in addition to your summer swim practice. (Push ups, Sit ups, Running, Long Jogging, Jump rope, Biking, hill climbing, stretch cords, long swims during the day in the lap lane of your summer pool, vertical kicking in the diving well of you summer pool, water jogging, treading water, etc...) Keep your level of conditioning high throughout the summer. Do this on a regimented basis. This requires SELF-DISCIPLINE, an essential ingredient for success at all levels.
3. Sign up for a few LC meets on Sundays in June and July to try it out.
4. Practice and perfect TURNS and STARTS & FINISHES (especially for backstrokers). Perfect the underwater butterfly kicks for backstroke starts and turns. Practice different foot placement for deck starts on different kinds of summer pool decks. (Bull-nose copings are very hard to start from – always use track start on Bull-nose deck copings for stability.) **Become and expert at the details of the sport.**
5. Video tape yourself swimming and doing Starts and Turns for analysis. Compare to any videotapes you have of Olympians. Count the number of strokes you take per lap at the beginning of the summer and see how far you can decrease that number by the end of the summer.
6. Establish a better diet plan through experimenting with different foods that make you feel more energetic and foods that help you recover from workouts faster. Record results for use in winter. You need to drink A LOT more in the summer.
7. Establish a 15-minute complete stretching routine. Do it every day before practice and meets. Make it a team thing to do with your friends. Maybe even become the teams stretching LEADER???

We see our job as Potomac Marlins USA Swimming coaches to give our swimmers the best advise possible with their best interest and personal goals in mind. In so doing we rely heavily upon our own experiences as both swimmers and coaches. We do not believe in forcing or requiring swimmers to do things which they do not want to do, however, we would be doing a great disservice to our swimmers if we did not attempt to help guide them down a path that will provide them with the greatest opportunity to achieve their goals. I hope that my thoughts on the subject, personal advise and responses to many of the questions about LC summer training are helpful when trying to figure out what to do this summer. We hope to see many of our SC swimmers on the LC deck this summer at either Westwood CC or GMU. **PM summer LC workouts are open for PM swimmers to bring FRIENDS on a drop in basis throughout the summer.**

Thank You

Barry Marlin
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Potomac Marlins

P.S. Below, please see coach Bill's brief comments on the subject.

1. Training LC in the summer will help you start out in the fall ahead of where you left off in the spring.
2. LC training continues to improve your aerobic capacity thru the summer as opposed to summer league workouts that are strictly sprint based. This aerobic training is especially important to develop in girls ages 11-13 and boys ages 12-14. This is because at these ages, their bodies are most receptive to aerobic gains. If you miss that window of opportunity to improve your cardiovascular system, you will get left behind going into the 13-14 age group. So much so that you may never catch up to your peers in USA Swimming who do train LC in the summer.
3. LC workouts will NOT hurt your ability to sprint.
4. Long Course training and Long Distance training are not the same thing.
5. If your son or daughter is a gymnast, and he or she is training 9 months of the year with Bella Karoli, would you pull him or her out of the program for 3 months in the summer to train with a High School gymnast in a tumbling class? (Note: Coach Bill has coached 17 PM swimmers to the Junior National Level, 2 PM swimmers to the Senior National Level, and 1 swimmer to the Olympic Trials. Coach Steve and Coach Peter have also accomplished similar results).

Coach Bill Marlin