

Importance of Recovery & Warm-down

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I remember where I was younger and close to making my first National Senior team I would always hear coaches tell some of the older athletes that 'it gets harder as you get older because your body doesn't recover as fast.' I thought, surely not! Needless to say in time I found this to be very true, just as I found the importance of the word 'recovery.'

Like a lot of athletes, I was forever looking for ways to improve—easy ways, ways that were so simple and took very little time. Early on in my career I always lived by the adage 'concentrate on the little things' and this was very true when it came to recovery. It was usually the little things that separated those that achieved their goals to those that did not.

For me, the easiest way to recover was to warm down. It didn't require any extra money or any fancy gadgets, just time and in the grand scheme of things, that was a short price to pay for a long term return.

Warming down in swimming wasn't purely swimming a few laps and then getting out. Yes, that will help flush the lactic acid - the thing that causes your muscles to burn- out of the system but if you do a **controlled warm down**, then you will see far greater results and honestly feel better the next day.

By controlled, and this relates to activities that include running too, set a distance, a time and do a few multiples of this. For example, in swimming it could be: 10 x 75 on 1:10. It's all about maximizing your recovery time.

Another way to ensure you get a great warm down that requires no additional financial investment or equipment is by taking your heart rate. If you are not familiar with taking your heart rate, get your coach or instructor to assist you and explain the reasoning behind it.

Before you start your warm down, take your heart rate by using two fingers and placing them on your carotid pulse. This is located below the jaw line. Take it for 6-10 seconds; the length is up to you, you just want to gauge how many times your heart beats a minute. Make sure you keep it consistent so that you are able to track your improvement and gain a greater understanding of your body at the same time.

As every individual is different, numbers at this point are irrelevant. What isn't irrelevant is the **drop in your heart rate**. A sign of a good, thorough warm down is a significant decrease in your heart rate from the start of your warm down to the end.

Another easy way to assist in your recovery is stretching. It is a valuable tool prior to exercise but it is just as important, if not more so, to do at the completion of your respective training session. In regards to what specific stretches are of value to you and your specific sports training or pre-existing injuries, it is best to consult a professional.

Correct **nutrition** comes at a small cost but aids in recovery and is of extreme importance. It is important that you 'refuel' and rehydrate after most sessions,

particularly those extremely strenuous ones. Replenishing your energy sources as soon as possible after your workout is a vital element in recovery, and whilst it is not physical activity, it is still very much a part of the warm down process.

Depending upon the resources you have available, **ice baths** or hot/ cold showers are also beneficial. These two recovery techniques are as simple as they imply. The former requires immersion in an ice bath for approximately 10-15 minutes—this assists in removal of lactic acid and other elements of exercise stored in the muscles. A hot shower, following an ice bath or cold shower if you don't have ice or a tub readily available, also has the same effect. Be sure to discuss these recovery techniques with your coach or trainer to determine if they are advisable for you.

Finally, **massage**, **physiotherapy**, and **acupuncture** are additional forms of treatment I used to aid in my recovery after rigorous training sessions. Being an elite distance swimmer, I swam up to 60-65km a week. While that is not a huge amount for some distance swimmers, it was quality based, meaning; we produced lots of lactic acid. The aforementioned treatments all aided in recovery and produced fantastic long term effects.

Warming down and general recovery techniques are an easy habit to get into, they become routine and I believe they were a huge reason why I was able to swim at the levels I did. Winning 4 Olympic medals was beyond anything I ever dreamt of achieving. It was not just about working hard, it was about working smart... something everyone can do.