

Vary intensity of workouts for maximum benefits

By Terry Tomalin, Times Fitness/Outdoors Editor
In Print: Saturday, December 19, 2009

Patty Nardozzi, right, a masters swim coach, talks with a swimmer at North Shore Pool in St. Petersburg.



[DIRK SHADD | Times]

ST. PETERSBURG

Masters swim coach Patty Nardozzi has seen plenty of swimmers who join her team claiming to be in good shape.

- "They swim on their own, usually long, slow distances," she said. "But then they come in and do an organized workout and can't believe how tired they are."
- The reason is intensity.
- If you run, swim or bike on your own, it is easy to fall into a routine. You may exercise for weeks, months or even years, and never notice an improvement.
- But the key to improving athletic performance is to challenge your body.
- The idea isn't longer workouts, it's smarter workouts.
- "In our workouts, we push hard, rest, push hard, rest . . .," Nardozzi said. "Your heart rate goes up, then it drops, then it goes up again. Interval training works you both aerobically and anaerobically."

Turn it up

Elite athletes have used interval training for decades, but in recent years, weekend warriors have begun to enjoy the benefits of this exercise system as well.

The concept may sound complicated but it is not.

For the casual jogger it may be as simple as running two blocks easy, the next one hard, followed by two blocks easy, the next one hard on, and so on.

Back in the early 1970s, at the dawn of the American running craze, the training method of Swedish running coach Gosta Holmer gained widespread popularity. Fartlek training, or "speed play," involved short bursts of intense effort interspersed with longer periods of relatively easy, or "restful" effort.

"That combination of hard, easy, hard, easy, is the best way to improve," said Nardozzi, who has seen interval training transform a recreational swimmer into a competitive swimmer in a matter of months. "You will see results."

getting started

Before you start any exercise program or significantly increase the intensity of an existing one, consult your physician.

Plan to start slow. Be sure to warm up for at least five minutes before each exercise session.

If you are a walker, you can begin by just alternating walking with slow jogging.

An easy way to do it is to walk for three telephone poles or street signs, then run one.

If landmarks are not available, use a runner's watch. Walk for three minutes followed by one of slow jogging, then repeat as many times as possible.

Timex's new runner's watch, the Ironman Sleek 150-Lap with TapScreen Technology, allows the user to mark sets or intervals by simply tapping on the watch face, a major improvement over previous running watches.

keep it going

As your fitness level improves, you will find that your recovery, or rest intervals, will get shorter.

You can keep up the intensity by lengthening your periods of exertion (let's say from two minutes to three minutes) or by increasing the number of sets.

As you become more proficient, you may need additional tools to fine-tune your workouts. That is where a heart rate monitor will help.

Instead of using time or distance to mark your intervals, a monitor will actually track how hard your heart is working. The actual numbers may change as fitness levels increase, but that is a story for another day.

Terry Tomalin can be reached at tomalin@sptimes.com

[Last modified: Dec 18, 2009 03:30 AM]