

COOLANGATTA GOLD TRAINING PROGRAM

A GUIDE FOR BEGINNER/INTERMEDIATE ATHLETES
BY GRANT WILKINSON

ABOUT GRANT



Grant Wilkinson has been a part of the surf lifesaving movement since the age of 5, when he joined Elouera SLSC.

Grant was made a life member of Elouera in 2010, and was an excellent competitor having won a collective 87 medals across NSW State, Australian and World Championships across Age, Open and Masters divisions.

After having also competed in 12 seasons of elite IronMan racing between 1989-2001, Wilkinson turned his attention towards training and coaching.

Wilkinson is not only the head coach at Elouera but also the current SLSA Coaching Coordinator.

His love of surf sports is backed by an impressive knowledge base, having studied a Bachelor of Science in Medical Science as well as a Master of Science and many other academic accolades.

Grant has had a multitude of involvement and has been dedicated to surf sports in both coaching and advisory roles for over nearly two decades.

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INTRODUCTION



To state the obvious, competing in the Coolangatta Gold requires very high levels of physical fitness and muscular endurance. It is advised that you have an accredited coach look over your training programs to help minimise the potential for injury via poor technique or overtraining. The following is a guide only, that is designed to assist those preparing for the Gold who may not have access to an iron coach and who are not yet at the elite level of iron racing.

To start with, your training should centre around building your core level of cardiovascular fitness as well as muscular endurance. As a very broad generalisation, in iron racing there are only two disciplines that can really boost your overall fitness levels. These are swimming and running. Board and ski training is a must but for both of these disciplines but it is difficult to keep your heart rate (HR) at a high enough level for long enough for them to be classified as a true fitness activity. As a result, training for ski and board legs will build specific muscular endurance but will only build overall fitness minimally. To get the best out of your training and to ensure you have the best possible preparation a mix of overall fitness as well as muscular endurance is needed.

One of the main concerns for any athlete is illness and injury. Keeping a close track of your HR during training will assist your recovery and make you less prone to both overuse injuries and illnesses. Without going into fine detail, as your HR increases so too does the amount of lactic acid your muscles produce. HR and blood lactate will increase in a linear fashion until what is known as a "HR Deflection Point". After this point, blood lactate will increase faster

than the rise in HR and your body will produce more lactic acid than it can clear. Too much training done at a level where lactic acid is continually accumulating in the body increases the risk of overuse injuries and illness.

There are a few generalised approximations to help you stay under your HR deflection point and to help avoid illness and injury:

- **For long, slow, aerobic types of sessions keep your HR below 160bpm. The majority of people will have a HR deflection point somewhere around 155 – 175bpm so by staying under this your body has the capacity to clear most of the lactic acid it is producing during training.**
- **Any high intensity (high HR > 160bpm) training should be followed by at least one recovery session where your HR is kept relatively low for a minimum of 30mins.**
- **Gradually build up your training in terms of distance and intensity.**
- **The majority of your training should be done between 50 – 85% of your Maximum Heart Rate (MHR). MHR is very loosely defined as: $MHR = 220 - \text{your age}$ (this formulae is not accurate but it will give you a rough approximation that you can start from)**

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SWIMMING



Swimming should be at the core of your training preparation for the Gold regardless of whether you come from a swimming background and are a good swimmer or not. It should form the bulk of your hours spent training each week. Swimming is a true fitness activity meaning that your HR can be elevated for sustained periods of time and so will boost your overall base level fitness.

It is recommended that you train in a swimming squad under a recognised swim coach. In swimming, technique is key and having someone look over you each session will mean that you are efficient in the water and will use the least amount of energy. This is important in the race because the swim leg is the only time during the whole race where you don't readily have access to nutrition (water, food, sports gels, etc.) so you have to use the least amount of energy for the maximum amount of gain.

Specifically for the Gold there are a few key points to remember with respect to swimming:

- **For a beginner to intermediate athlete, the ski leg will take you somewhere around 2hrs to complete – and then you will be asked to swim! Overall physical fitness is essential but muscular endurance in the swim leg and then board legs is vital.**
- **Swimming has a very good cross over effect to board paddling in terms of specific muscular endurance whilst having higher fitness value so again it is critical for the back end of the race.**
- **It is much easier to have an elevated HR throughout 1 – 2hrs of swimming training compared to ski or board paddling so if you can build up to that swimming you can definitely paddle a ski for that long and then go on and do more.**

In terms of swim training, for a beginner to intermediate level athlete it is advised that you slowly build up to a minimum total of 4 – 5km in a session. It is also advisable that at least once prior to the race you do a swim session that lasts somewhere between 90mins – 2hrs in total. This doesn't mean 5km or 2hrs of continuous swimming as you can do short intervals throughout the session but training for that long will help build both fitness and specific muscular endurance.

BELOW ARE THREE EXAMPLE SESSIONS THAT CAN BE USED IN WHOLE OR IN PART TO BEGIN WITH:

SESSION 1

- 400m – 800m easy/medium effort, (broken up into swimming, technique work and drills)
- 6 – 10 x 200m F/S with 20 – 30secs rest, (try to hold a set pace for entire set)
- 4 x 100m F/S kick, medium/firm effort, 30secs – 1min rest
- 1000m F/S – every 4th lap Hypoxic Breathing, (breathe every 3rd, 5th, 7th.... stroke – repeat)
- 200m B/K swim down

Total = 3.2km – 4.4km

SESSION 2

- 20 x 50m – 15secs rest, (4 x F/S, 2 x B/K, 2 x B/R ~ repeat) – warm up
- 2 – 3 x 1500m, (#1 or #1 & #3 = straight, hold 70% pace, #2 = 15 x 100m, 80%+ 10sec rest)

Total = 4km – 5.5km

SESSION 3

- 400m – 1000m x warm up, (own choice / as desired / mix it up)
- 4 x 800m, 2mins rest
- 1. 800m F/S – Record time for this
- 2 x 400m F/S, 1min rest, (combined time must be sub 800m time by 10secs+)
- 4 x 200m F/S, 30secs rest, (combined time must be sub 800m time by 20secs+)
- 8 x 100m F/S, 15secs rest, (combined time must be sub 800m time by 30secs+)

Total = 3.6km – 4.2km

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RUNNING



Like swimming, running is a true fitness activity in that it will easily elevate your HR for sustained periods when training. The good thing about running is that you can more easily check your HR, (if you have a smart watch / HR monitor), put headphones on and can run just about anywhere.

The main run leg of the race is the final run to the finish and for someone relatively new to iron racing you would most likely have been out on the course racing for up to 4 – 4½

hours by the time you start the final run leg. Training for running can include interval and fartlek style of training but the majority of your running should be longer, endurance runs at a HR of around 120 – 160bpm (this is a wide range and will depend on variables such as age, sex, physical fitness and prior training).

One of the main problems faced by anyone commencing running training is injuries. Make sure your shoes are in good condition, provide adequate support and cushioning and that you slowly and progressively build up in your training. There is some evidence to suggest that there is a decrease in the incidence of running related injuries with a cadence of 180-steps-per-minute or higher. To check this, count your steps on one side and you should be around 30-steps on one leg per 20-seconds (30-steps per leg = 60-steps total per 20-secs (x 3) = 180-steps per minute). This shorter stride length will also be more realistic to the tempo and stride you will most likely use in the race.

SOME EXAMPLE SESSIONS FOR RUNNING MIGHT INCLUDE:

1. 30mins x easy to medium, 10mins stretching. 1km HARD Time Trial (T.T). Do over a set course that is reproducible and record time for reference.**
2. 30mins – 1.15hrs x easy – medium pace (HR approx. 120 – 160bpm (DO NOT go over 160bpm for this run)). Progressively build in length and intensity. Again, length and intensity will be dependent on your age, fitness levels and previous running history.
3. 20 – 40mins x Fartlek / Unstructured Intervals (make sure to do minimum 10min warm up and warm down on either side of the intervals). Fartlek / unstructured intervals could be something like:
 - a. Run uphill and flats FIRM / Run downhill EASY
 - b. 1 x distance between telegraph poles FIRM – 1 x distance between EASY – 2 x poles FIRM – 1 x EASY ~ repeat for set / desired time
4. Track Session / Intervals – (This is only recommended for people who have done this style of training before). Do a long warm up (minimum 20mins), followed by ON / OFF intervals. Examples of this could be:
 - a. 8 – 10 x 200m @ 90 – 95% of 1km T.T pace – 200m easy jog recovery (no stops throughout)
 - b. 2 – 4 x (4 x 400m @ 80 – 85% of 1km T.T pace – 100m easy jog recovery between reps – 400m easy jog recovery between sets (no stops throughout)
 - c. 5 – 8 x 1km @ 75% of 1km T.T pace, 2 – 4mins of active rest / recovery between

***As a guide and using Example Session 1, say you record 4mins for 1km Time Trial, (4mins = 240secs for 1km or 48secs per 200m)*

*– 200m @ 90 - 95% = Hold approx. 51 - 54sec pace/200m
– 400m @ 80 - 85% = Hold approx. 1.52 - 2min pace/400m
– 1km @ 75% = Hold approx. 5.20min pace/1km*

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SKI PADDLING

Ski paddling is a skill that takes everyone a very long time to get proficient at. As the opening leg of the Gold the aim is to be as efficient as possible as wasted energy on the ski will come back to bite you later in the race. As mentioned above, for most people the opening ski leg can take anywhere between 2 – 2½ hrs and although swimming will help your fitness levels for the ski, there is no getting around racking up the miles in training on a ski at some stage.

If, like most people, you are limited for time the minimum amount of ski training would be 2 – 3 sessions per week. Ski sessions could incorporate the following with variations to suit your age, fitness, ability and experience:

- 1. Long, endurance paddle** – starting with 10km and eventually building to 25km
- 2. Change of pace/Fartlek paddle** – this could be unstructured (e.g. downwind chop chase or group paddle with wash riding) or could use a work:rest ratio to simulate the surges / change of pace that will occur in the race. An example would be a repetitive cycle of 30secs ON (harder effort):90secs OFF (low to medium intensity paddling). A work:rest ratio of 1:3 (30:90secs, 20:60secs, 15:45secs) is a good place to start as it will allow your body adequate recovery time relative to the work (harder effort) time.
- 3. Resistance paddle** – something as simple as placing an occy strap around the front of the ski will greatly increase the resistance and help build muscular endurance more rapidly. Resistance based sessions should have generous warm up and warm down periods on either side of the resistance paddling. Initially, start with only 20mins of resistance and build up slowly and gradually. It is not recommended to go over 1hr worth of resistance paddling unless you are an elite level paddler (30 – 40mins of resistance is ideal for most athletes).
- 4. Chop Sessions** - a key point to remember is that you will be racing in open ocean so you have to make sure you are used to wind and chop hitting you from various different angles. Flat/ calm water is great for technique and is safe but at some point you to be prepared for whatever conditions may eventuate on race day. Doing a paddle over a figure 8 type of course similar to shown in figure 1 will also help as this will give you a feel of having both a headwind and tailwind at various angles.



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PADDLE BOARDING



Similar to ski paddling, the board leg will require high levels of muscular endurance. Considering that you have just completed a ski and swim leg, the board will be relatively uncomfortable and even the best athletes will spend a good portion of the board leg laying down rather than kneeling. As such, training for the board should reflect this and there should be a good mix of laying as well as kneeling to simulate what will happen in the race.

Trialling drinking systems on the board is essential as you will be 3 – 4hrs into the race and have just completed a leg (swim) where you were unable to consistently take on any nutrition at all. Similar sessions as those listed for the ski will also work on the board with some example sessions including variations of the following:

1. Long endurance paddles (30mins – 1hr+)
2. Change of Pace / Fartlek paddles – similar to ski with unstructured intervals, washleads or specific work : rest ratios
3. ON / OFF intervals alternating between knees and laying.
For example:
 - a. 1min on Knees FIRM – 1min Laying EASY / 2min Knees FIRM – 2mins Laying EASY / 1min Laying FIRM – 1min Knees EASY / 2min Laying FIRM – 2mins Knees EASY *repeat cycle over set distance or for desired time
 - b. Pyramids: e.g. 4mins laying – 1min knees / 3mins laying – 2mins knees / 2mins laying – 3mins knees / 1min laying – 4mins knees // 1min laying – 4mins knees / 2mins laying – 3mins knees / 3mins laying – 2mins knees / 4min laying – 1min knees
4. Courses such as the one listed above in Figure 1 for the ski can be used on the board also.

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NUTRITION, HYDRATION AND RACE PREPAREDNESS



If you are going to all the trouble of training for the Coolangatta Gold then you want to make sure that you leave as little as you can 'up to chance'. That means trialling things like any nutritional supplements you may take in the race during training. This may be as easy as getting the correct concentrations of your favourite electrolyte drink correct so that it is easily digestible. If you use sports gels such as Gu or other brands, it may mean making sure that a particular flavour agrees with your stomach whilst exercising at a high heart rate.

Something as simple as the ability to take a sip of plain water becomes a very real problem when you are trying to run and you have been out on the race course for more than 4hrs. Trialling this in training will help you get a feel for what your body can and can't do. It may be that during the run legs you have to hit a certain tempo / rhythm to be able to drink fluids or you may have to walk to be able to get an adequate amount in. It is best to find these sorts of details out in training and not in the actual race.

In terms of hydration, the ski leg is the make or break! It is pretty much impossible for you to take in adequate amounts of fluids just in the transitional zones between ski and swim and considering you can't really take any fluids on whilst swimming, your race will be over if you haven't properly hydrated on the ski. As a general recommendation, ski paddle with a watch on that has a timer and set it to repeatedly buzz every 15mins. Start it before the race starts and you can miss the first one or two cycles. After that opening 20 – 30mins you should try and take a full mouthful of fluids (approx.

200ml) every 15-minutes throughout the remainder of the ski leg regardless of whether you are feeling thirsty / dehydrated or not. As saying goes "by the time you feel thirsty it is already too late!"

In terms of race preparedness, trial everything you will use on race day. This means costumes, goggles, drink bottles / drinking systems, nutrition and the big one is the PFD you will wear on the ski. Being comfortable in one of these can be tricky so you need to know where any skin irritations / rashes may occur and what you can do to prevent or avoid them (e.g. wearing a rash shirt, Vaseline under the arm / around the neck). Trial it repeatedly in training to make sure you get it right. Also, try and have a back up of nearly everything. Second set of goggles, extra drink bottles, extra sports gels, second set of shoes for final run leg, etc. On race day it is easy for handlers to get delayed in traffic between transition stations or for other unforeseen problems to arise. Having a second set of the simple things can assist you greatly if a problem occurs whilst also putting your mind at ease prior to the race starting.

Again, the above is a general guide that can be used by athletes training for the Coolangatta Gold to give them every chance of a successful and enjoyable race. The main focus of this guide is to make sure that every preparation has been undertaken to ensure your safety during the race. Medical advice should always be sought prior to commencing any form of training program.

Good luck and have fun!