



*** INDEPENDENT REVIEW ***

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SURF TIP

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Surfers hate thinking of themselves as athletes. Rebels maybe. Rugged sportsmen, certainly. They'll even concede their role as cultural icons before admitting to themselves that what they do is incredibly athletic. Because of this, they also hate being given fitness tips.

Fitness is for weight-watching secretaries and treadmill-trodding yuppies who dream of reducing their Dockers size. Most surfers believe that their occasional sessions are enough to keep them fit and ready to rip, that specific training goes against the free-spirited nature of the sport. Even though that's a bunch of bullshit, I realize that no amount of browbeating is going to send waves of surfers into the gym to hit the squat and lat pull-down machines. However, during a recent convalescence (two and a half months in a cast after tearing my Achilles' tendon), I worked at an extremely surfer-friendly training regimen that helped maintain truly functional surfing fitness. If you surf less often than you'd like, compete in contests or merely want to be a better, stronger surfer, you might want to check it out.

I am of the belief that very few surfers exhaust themselves while actually riding a wave; there aren't enough point breaks for that. Paddling is what fatigues us. It's very rare that you hear a recently converted longboarder say, "I just can't ride those damn little boards anymore." No, they almost always say, "I can't catch waves on the damn little boards anymore." That's why, during my down time, I chose to concentrate on the muscle groups involved in paddling: back, shoulders and upper arms.

"When paddling, surfers use a lot of the same muscles as swimmers," says longtime surfer, chiropractor and trainer of surf stars Tim Brown of Newport Spine and Sport. "Reach out and pull against your opposite hand to get the effect; as you pull your arm through the water you're activating the shoulders (the internal rotator muscles, the sup-scapularis), the fore-arms, biceps, even the pectorals. Let alone the latissimus dorsi (the large back muscles next to your spine), which is doing most of the work."

Swimmers, of course, are big on strength training. Most surfers couldn't be bothered. This, says Brown, is a mistake. "Surfers should take advantage of downtime between swell or seasons to work on their muscular imbalances. They should strengthen the muscles they use, but also work on the opposing muscle groups--stretching, aligning the joints, working through a full range of motion."

For this I discovered a wonderful machine. It's called the Vasa Swim Trainer, a strength-building device designed for competitive swimmers. Basically, it's an inclined beam supported by two stanchions. You lie on a sliding pad mounted on the beam and use straps and hand paddles to pull and lower yourself up and down the beam. The angle can be changed for greater resistance. It's harder than it sounds (and looks), but then so is hefting barbells.

The great thing about the Swim Trainer is that the motion is just like paddling a surfboard; you feel like a surfer using it. A variety of workouts are possible (an instruction book comes with it, of course), but I focused on the basic swim stroke and the alternating freestyle stroke. By varying the incline level, you get the benefits of resistance training by gradually increasing the load on the muscle. That kind of workout just isn't possible when simply using a paddleboard or surfboard, no matter how hard you try (unless you tow a drogue). Entry, sweep and recovery are almost always identical to paddling through the water--it not only helps build muscle, but develops good form as well.

The [Vasa] Swim Trainer is light, easy to assemble and quiet. For the total effect, I'd set mine up in front of the TV and watch surf videos while I paddled away, dreaming of getting caught inside at Todos or scratching for set waves in Java.

I won't go into the physiological specifics involved in the Vasa workout, like how it effectively targets the latissimus dorsi, deltoids and all those other muscles Brown described. Surfers don't want to hear that kind of stuff anyway--it'd sound dangerously like a fitness tip. All I know is that when I finally got out of my cast and back on a board--after more than two months out of the water--not only did I not feel like I'd missed a day, I actually felt that I was paddling stronger than before.

I don't know. Maybe being a stronger surfer isn't that important to you. Maybe catching more waves and staying out longer--surfing harder--isn't something you strive for. Hey, you're doing fine, right?

Keep telling yourself that. But the [Vasa] Swim Trainer is definitely a permanent addition to my quiver." - *Sam George, SURFER Magazine*