Swimming Offers Ideal Training Alternative, Especially in Summer

By Gary White
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LAKELAND | Imagine an exercise machine that could reduce the impact on your body by 90 percent, increase energy expended fourfold and develop muscles throughout your body in a single workout.

Sound futuristic or far-fetched? No, it's as primitive as water.

Swimming provides exemplary cardiovascular health benefits without the same gravity-based stress as other forms of exercise. And a swim session can be much more appealing than a run or bike ride when the temperature is in the 90s.

Bill Bracken of Lakeland began swimming competitively in childhood. Now 40, he competes in triathlons, and he tries to get in three or four swim sessions a week, either at the Lakeland Family YMCA or the city's Gandy Pool.

"There aren't many exercises you can do your entire life without any real wear and tear on your body, and swimming is certainly one of them," Bracken said. "The other thing I love about it, being in Florida, you're not out in the hot air sweating to death. It's a lot more refreshing exercise to do, especially in the middle of the day."

Swimming offers numerous advantages, said Kasey Mueller, director of sports medicine and fitness technology at Keiser University's Lakeland campus.

"When you're in the water you weigh a tenth of your weight out of water, so even people that are larger or who have maybe some kind of injury, it's not putting as much (stress) onto their body as walking on a treadmill or that sort thing," Mueller said. "You can still get your heart rate up and get the exercise you need without all the pounding."

Mueller, a former competitive swimmer, said it takes four times as much energy to swim a distance as to run the same distance. She said swimming can work all the major muscles in the body, especially if you alternate among the four basic strokes — forward crawl, butterfly, breaststroke and backstroke.

Even a swimmer who sticks with just the forward crawl, or freestyle, engages the major muscles of the arms and legs and works the "core" muscles of the abdomen, Mueller said.

She cited a recent study that found patients were able to lower their blood-pressure levels through regular swimming.

Bracken said he usually does interval workouts in the pool, swimming 100 or 200 yards at a fast pace with rest periods of 10 or 20 seconds. He said that pattern allows him to swim some 2,000 yards at a consistently hard rate and lessens the chance that his technique will degrade over the course of a long, steady swim.

He said intervals push his heart rate higher than it would be during a continuous swim at a slower pace.

Swimming is a solitary activity, and the prospect of spending 30 minutes or so
staring at the bottom of a pool might be unappealing to some. But Bracken said
group workouts offer some sociability, as the rest periods give swimmers the chance
to banter as they hang on the pool walls. And he said swimming with others can
provide a sense of competition.

Bracken sometimes takes part in group swims held early on weekday mornings at the
Lakeland Family YMCA.

Mueller said a pool workout need not mean the traditional routine of swimming one
lap after another. She said the resistance of water increases the benefits of walking or
running in a pool — a flotation vest can be used to make running in place easier — or
doing such isometric exercises as lunges.

Mueller pointed to the benefits of water aerobics classes, which are popular with
seniors who might be limited in their exercise options.

Mueller said the forgiving environment of the pool not only reduces impact on the
joints but also lessens the risk of injury from a fall.

Mueller said she recently took a group of Keiser students to join some seniors in
water aerobics class, and it proved to be a learning experience for them.

"My students, these young 18- and 19-year-olds, were dying," she said, "and these
seniors were doing great."