



Sprinting Tips by Tara Whitten and Chandra Crawford

This Article was Taken from a Haywood Report prepared by Tara Whitten and Chandra Crawford in December 2003.

It's time to get race-ready. It's time to gather the threads of hard training and things learned from the summer, and weave them into a super strong rope that you can trust like it is supporting your life on a huge cliff face... or use it to lasso Beckie Scott in the next sprint race and hang on for dear life! Let's call the latter option "plan B" and instead focus on the things we need to do well to race as fast as possible come race day. Below is a not-so-brief compilation of some of the things that are important to my teammate Tara and I in training and racing. The emphasis is on sprint racing, but you can see how putting these ideas into action could improve your distance races as well. Take 'em or leave 'em, if you need 'em then weave 'em.

TRAINING

This year a goal of mine was to do more sprint simulations in workouts, and although we got a few done, in the future I think something like an organized "sprint day" every month with my teammates would be great.

Around training there are a few separate things I was working on:

- 1) **FOOT THROW:** This is snow dependent, so when on snow, it's good to work on it a lot. Make a line in the snow, and work on that Alsgard/Dahlie lunge for the finish. Remember: Beckie Scott made history with just half her foot! This skill can make a big difference when you're racing someone of comparable speed. So incorporate this foot throw into your ski loop, or do some 10-second sprints with a friend (they aren't very taxing physically, but give lots of opportunity to practice starts and finishes). The best way to see what you can do better is video technique. It's also very important to watch someone doing it well after your own technique has been analyzed to death. It is helpful to leave a positive image in your mind to strive towards, rather than focusing on what you're trying not to do.



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- 2) **PICK-ME-UPS:** In every zone 1 workout of every type, you can ditch a sluggish/tired feeling, re-focus with a little zap of energy, or even clean up your technique, by doing a short sprint now and then. Nothing crazy, it could even be as little as 3x10seconds. Maybe just whenever you feel like it, or as I like to do in longer workouts: 1-3 every hour of training on the hour. For me these are really a "feel good" thing; I never take them to a point of feeling tired from them. They are helpful for staying fresh. I had always liked speed work, but it was 50km World Champion Martin Koukal from Czech Republic (he also placed 4th in the sprints in Val di Fiemme last year) who made me realize I could do this almost every workout. Even on a mellow afternoon road bike with me, he was doing some 15 second sprints. U-23 Worlds silver medallist Tara Whitten and I like to do these together at times, or surprise each other and just take off all on our own. The important thing here is to keep them short, fast, and fun. Tara's note: When doing sprints in training I like to mix it up between rolling starts, which help you learn to switch gears, and stationary starts, which teach you how to get off the line quickly. You can also mix it up between uphill, downhill, flats, corners, etc.
- 3) **SWITCHING GEARS:** Is really important for sprint racing, but is also good for making a pass in a distance race when you don't want the person you're passing to stick on your butt for the next 5km. Colleen Mortimer taught me this in a race when she passed me at a speed I knew I couldn't possibly hack. She later confessed that she took it up a notch for the pass because she knew how I loved to "stick" on someone faster than me and didn't want to let it happen to her. To practice this in training, you could set four markers up a longer hill and switch gears (go harder) each time you hit one, 'till at the end you're going all-out. And then maybe add one more marker, which brings me to my next point...



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- 4) **THERE'S MORE IN THERE:** Sharon Wood, the first North American woman to summit Everest, inspired me in one of her inspirational speeches (fancy that!) when she explained how she dug deep to continue pushing through a situation where all odds were stacked against her. This became a mantra for many of my better sprint time trials last season. This is in the training section and not the racing section because I believe you will race the same way you train. So the more you can put it all on the line and focus in your interval workouts, the better prepared you will be to squeeze every last drop of speed out of yourself in a race. When you're pushing up a hill never think about your tired, hurting legs; think only: "There's more in there!!" or as Mark Tewksbury, Canadian Olympic gold medallist said to himself during the 53.89 seconds of his 100m backstroke, simply: "Go NOW!!" Take some time to think about what motivates you, and use that as a tool and improve it and take care of it the same way you would other essential pieces of equipment.

RACING

TACTICS: Strategy is fun to work on in that you can learn so much from every sprint race. Discussing, trying out and evaluating ideas and courses is a good way to go. You can go into something with a plan, but nothing can be too rigid because you always need to react to what others are doing and think on your feet. I've had some success with a move we call "The Slingshot," but I've also experienced a race where I was too confident in its effectiveness and screwed it up.

- 1) **WARM-UP** has to be addressed before we even get the fun ideas going. It's important to be really fired up before the qualifier, and well warmed up. Lots of intensity and some plyometric jumping around in the start pen is good. After 15-30 minutes of zone 1, I like to do my prep on the course, and each lap I'll do a different section at the speed I want to race at so that I have a really good feel for it. Tara's warm-up: For a sprint race, I warm up quite a bit more than a distance race. After about 15 minutes of zone 1, I like to do the entire course hard about 30 minutes before my start. After that, I continue to ski easy with 10-30 second sprints mixed in, right up



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until the start. The heats often require much less warm-up, unless there is a long break after qualification. I usually just do short sprints before the first round, and then keep moving at a slow pace between rounds. Sometimes running can work instead of skiing to keep the blood moving between rounds.

- 2) SLINGSHOT relies on a downhill before the straightaway to the finish (a common feature in many of the courses I've seen.) Ski relaxed in 2nd or 3rd place, and make sure you're right on that first place person's skis as you crest the last downhill. Give a push or two extra compared to the person you're tailing, and tuck in really low behind them. When your speed exceeds theirs so much that you'll crash into them if you don't move, pull out beside them, and try to carry your 'extra' speed to the finish.
- 3) SWITCHING GEARS is the way you make a move in your heat. The best places to "make a move" must be scoped out before competition, or noted from other heats (keep an eye on the people you know are at the top, and try to figure out the way they like to race on this course!) This usually work better if you're in one of those heats that starts out a little mellower, compared to a heat that is all out from gun to tape. I like to ski in 2nd or 3rd like in the slingshot and conserve energy for a powerful change of gears up say, the last hill, at which point to goal is to get a gap between you and the rest of your heat. Think of yourself as "launching an attack" like in the Tour de France. Tara: As Chandra pointed out, getting the gap is the most important point in this strategy. Simply taking the lead with everyone else on your tail would open you up to the slingshot strategy explained above (as I have experienced!) So to use this strategy you have to be quite confident that you can get that gap!
- 4) WINNING FROM THE FRONT (TARA): It is possible to win from the front, although it is much more dangerous than skiing in 2nd or 3rd. Witness Marit Bjorgen at the World Champs last year. This strategy is only advisable if you are very confident that you can get a gap on you competitors before any downhills that may be present in the course. You can either make that gap by dropping people off the start or by taking it easy (relatively speaking of course!) and then switching gears suddenly as described above. This strategy can backfire very easily as people can draft off you and then slingshot past at the last moment, so use with caution!! This can be an important strategy on narrow courses where passing is difficult. -FOOT THROW (could potentially change your life.)



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- 5) **A LITTLE WORD ABOUT FREE SKATING FROM TARA:** A lot of people get too comfortable in their tucks. Hanging out in a tuck when you could be freeskating loses valuable time in a sprint. Staying low and putting in some powerful strides while others are tucking can make a huge difference! At U23s last year, there was a small downhill (not big enough for a slingshot) just before the finishing stretch. In all of my heats I gained on people or passed people on this seemingly insignificant bump in the course just because I was free skating while they were tucking. Powerful strides are the key here (use those legs!)
- 6) **KEEP 'EM GUESSING** by never becoming regimented in a certain style of racing or stratagem. Always work on your bag of tricks and expand them with every event you go to or race you watch.
- 7) **DON'T BE INTIMIDATED IN ANY SITUATION (BY TARA):** I have learned that on the start line of every single sprint race, you should be thinking "I can win this race." It doesn't matter if the world champ (or Chandra Crawford J) is on the start line beside you - anything can happen. If you concede the race before you even start, you may let opportunities pass you by. Train yourself to think about YOUR race and not the girls around you. Focus!
- 8) **WRITE IT DOWN** in a race evaluation, or a special book on sprinting or wherever it's meaningful to you. Learn from your mistakes, then laugh about them and don't repeat. Talk about ideas with your coach, and for the most part trust in their sound advice. But don't forget about your gut, which can tell you a lot if you just listen to it.

If you have any ideas to share with us, the door is always open at chandra_nc@hotmail.com or twhitten@hotmail.com.

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