# Body shaving maximizes your feel for the water — and trims your times too

**By Alex Kostich**
May 15, 2001

Do you shave your entire body??

So goes one of the most frequently asked questions that a swimmer must endure when talking to a non-aquatic inquiring mind. As trivial and prurient a question as it can be (depending on who is asking it, and why), there is a lot to be said for the importance of a pre-race shave.

While most recreational swimmers could not be bothered, world-class swimmers depend on their once- or twice-annual full-body shave to, well, “shave” seconds off their times.

Regardless of your ability in the pool, you may want to consider trying the process, as the full-body shave can add a psychological — and not just a refreshingly physical — boost to your racing.

For swimmers, the importance of shaving also ties into slicker, smoother benefits. However, a popular myth that needs to be dispelled is that swimmers shave to rid their body of excess hairs. This is only partially true; while removal of hairs is definitely helpful in making one’s body more aerodynamic in the water, the real purpose of shaving is to remove the thin layer of dead skin cells that coat the outer layer of the epidermis.

This reveals fresher, more sensitive cells and results in a heightened “feel” for the water. While the body is constantly shedding its top layer of dead skin cells anyway, the use of a razor speeds up the process and removes cells all at once, not a few at a time. As anyone can attest, putting on a pair of jeans or getting under the sheets after a fresh full-body shave is a refreshing sensation that translates into feeling faster in the water.

The first step in a good shave is identifying a brand of disposable razors and shaving cream. Simple Gillette double-blade razors are inexpensive and much more effective than single-blades (as the TV commercials indicate, the second blade picks up any stray hairs that the first blade misses and leaves your skin smooth).

As far as shaving creams go, a menthol-scented cream works best: The menthol has a cooling effect on your skin and intensifies the sensation of a new shave. If you have sensitive skin, Edge Gel for Sensitive Skin will help you avoid razor burn, although it doesn’t leave you feeling as alert and refreshed as the menthol-based cream. While none of this is really rocket science, there are details to note if you plan on taking full advantage of a body shave. Eventually you will find the brands of items that work for you, but I suggest the double-bladed razors and menthol cream.

An efficient way to start your shave is to use clippers (those electric blades that barbers and sheep shearers use) to trim down the hair on your legs, chest, and arms. This saves time and spares razor blades, for to shave a pair of legs with full-grown hair can take up to four razors. Since you are not just shaving hair, but skin cells, the blades should always be new (and there is no faster way to dull a razor blade than by shaving thick unclipped hairs).

Once “clipped,” begin shaving your legs and arms. The most efficient way to shave is to practice a sawing motion, back and forth, against the grain of the hairs and then right back down with the grain. The up-stroke shaves the hairs, while the down-stroke cleans the razor off. The more traditional technique of

rinsing the razor after each up-stroke is time-consuming and actually serves to dull the razor faster if you are rinsing it in warm water.

It is best to shave while sitting in a bathtub of warm water that you can constantly drain and refill; this way you stay warm and relaxed and avoid shivering, which results in tight muscles that can hinder your upcoming performance. Also, keep in mind that shaving is a lot like yoga; it can be strenuous as you contort your body into different positions to get every stray hair on the behind your knees and on the small of your back. Try not to strain yourself in one position too long, for this can also have a negative effect on your race. When possible, have a partner shave those hard-to-reach areas.

As odd as this may sound, don't forget to shave the bottom of your feet and the palms of your hands. World-class swimmers swear by this method of heightening the sensation of these extremities, and you will notice a marked difference in your "feel" for the water. Fear not, there are no documented cases of thicker hairs growing back: All you are doing is removing dulled, less-sensitive cells from your hands and feet.

The final step is to dry off and splash your newly smooth skin with some rubbing alcohol. This serves two purposes: It opens up your pores and refreshes them even more than the menthol cream did, and it sterilizes any cuts or pores that could become host to painful ingrown hairs. If your skin looks scaly when dry, you can spread a light coat of baby oil over yourself for added moisture.

The best time to shave is generally the night before your race. Allow yourself at least 90 minutes to do the job completely, and avoid swimming until your warm-up the next morning. The sensation you feel with a new shave is short-lived as your newly exposed cells begin to dry up and die off, so you should avoid the water and "save" yourself for warm-up and the race itself.

Once the race is over, the sensation of a close shave will wear off within a week, but if you are competing again soon you can re-shave and it will still feel like your first time. A re-shave should also be done using new razors, but instead of going against the grain of your hairs, be sure to shave across the grain this time, left to right. This way you skim off the dead skin cells while not going over fresh hair stubble that, if aggravated by a razor, will cause ingrown hairs.

Because of the unique and short-lived sensation that a full-body shave provides, it's recommended that you only enjoy the process once a season, and no more than three times a year.

Often during a **taper**, swimmers feel unsettled and awkward in the water. By anticipating the super feeling a shave provides you can rely on this pre-race ritual as the last step between feeling lousy and feeling great in the water. As such, the shave is as much a mental boost as a physical one.