Your new best mate

Confessed bad swimmer Lisa Irlam and her husband wanted a new kind of swimming computer. So they invented one – the Pool-Mate

My husband and I started our company, Swimovate, in 2007. We'd been looking for a device for swimming to keep count of speed and distance and realised there was nothing around. We were both bad swimmers but keen triathletes and we wanted to have something that would give us some focus away from the boredom of swimming up and down a pool, and give us some feedback.

There are loads of speed and distance devices for runners and cyclists but nothing for swimmers. There were basic devices where you had to press a button to tell it you were at the end of each lap.

We started out trying to create something specifically for triathletes that measured front crawl, but I found that the swimming market is the world's biggest. There are 70 million regular swimmers in the US alone. For every one person you see swimming front crawl in the pool, there are probably 10 swimming breaststroke so we thought we should open the device up to any stroke.

We went through different types of technology and developed software that would determine stroke count and the number of laps you'd swum. The Pool-Mate detects the motion of your arms, so it looks for regular motion. So when it records a few of these, it knows that you're swimming and not waving your arms around. And then it looks for a gap between those, so it knows you've turned around at the end of a length.

It counts laps, average stroke count, speed, distance, calories and your efficiency (which is the time it takes you to swim a lap, plus the number of strokes). You press 'start', begin to swim then press 'stop' when you finish. The watch records and stores data for intervals.

We received the first batch of Pool-Mates in September, 2009. My initial plan was to sell 1,000 units in the first year; we sold that in the first month. I put out an internet press release and some gadget sites got hold of it. We've sold more than 7,000 and have distributors in most European countries. It retails for £69.99 and we sell direct off the website and in Sweatshop stores.

I decided it would be good for publicity to go on *Dragon's Den*, so I applied in November,

Lisa Irlam tries out the poolmate

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2008. In February, 2009, they called me. The five dragons really drilled down into everything. They all liked the Pool-Mate but they couldn't see the market potential. They thought it was a very niche product. I was devastated because I'd gone in there thinking it was a no-brainer and that I'd get the investment. I wanted £90,000 investment for 15 per cent of the company. I went in there thinking I was going to get it, but I think you have to be like that to do your product justice. It was disappointing then but we're so glad now that we were rejected. It's great to know we've done it all ourselves.

The Pool-Mate really seems to be what swimmers have been waiting for. We were astonished that no one else had done it. So now it's a question of getting the word out and trying to get into retailers worldwide. We're going to launch a downloadable version of the watch in the summer, and all the watches will be upgradeable.

We're also looking at bluetooth technology so you can upload data from the watch to your mobile and computer. And we're looking to develop training programmes that you can download onto the watch and then follow in the pool. We're working on something for open water but it's been too cold to get into the lake to try it out. The ultimate dream is to create a triathlon watch that does all three disciplines – watch this space.

Sales have been fantastic. I swim with it and forgot it last week and felt lost without it. It's simple to use. The watch stores up to 400 sessions so you can look back to see what you were doing six months ago.

Triathletes love their gadgets and to spend money so this gives them a new outlet to spend money on swimming.