

# Kill These Drills

While swimming drills are designed to improve your stroke, some will have the opposite effect, writes swimming coach Wayne Goldsmith.

Words: Wayne Goldsmith | Image: Thinkstock

**T**here are almost as many swimming stroke correction drills as there are triathletes. Triathletes and swimming coaches have their favourite arm drills and feel drills and kick drills – all of them designed to correct an element of swimming stroke and in doing so improve your triathlon swim leg.

However, not all swimming stroke drills improve your stroke and, in fact, some of the most common stroke correction drills used by triathletes and swimmers in swimming pools all over the world may even be harming your stroke.

## Stroke development versus stroke correction

It is important to understand the difference between stroke development and stroke correction.

Stroke development is the process of learning, practising and mastering swimming strokes, skills and techniques. This is a logical, systematic learning process, which educates and guides the learner from basic, simple swimming movements through to the efficient execution of the whole stroke at speed.

Stroke correction is the use of drills, equipment and coaching techniques to change, alter or improve an inefficient (i.e. already learnt) swimming stroke.

## Some of the most common stroke correction drills used by triathletes and swimmers in swimming pools all over the world may even be harming your stroke.

While stroke correction drills have an important place in swimming and triathlon training programs, the key is to take time to learn and master an efficient stroke from the first lap of swim training you do and not to rely on stroke correction drills unless absolutely necessary.

The development and maintenance of an efficient swimming technique is not the result of doing a few laps of stroke correction drills here and there. Technical efficiency comes from continuously and diligently

thinking about and practising great technique from the first few strokes of your warm-up until you touch the wall at the end of your swim down.

And the golden rule of all swimming drills – whether they are stroke development drills or stroke correction drills – is: A swimming drill done 100 per cent correct is 100 per cent correct. A swimming drill done 99 per cent correct is 100 per cent wrong.”Learn to do swimming drills well or don’t do them at all.

The five swimming drills you shouldn’t do if you want to improve your triathlon swim leg are:

**1** Kicking on a kickboard holding on to the kickboard at the end of the board, i.e. the end of the board closest to your face.

- **Why not?** It teaches and reinforces a ‘fingers above wrist’ position on entry – a very difficult stroke fault to correct.

- **Alternatives:** Kicking without a kickboard with your body in a long, stretched, streamlined position. Or, kicking with a kickboard but holding the board by placing your hands palm down near the front of the board, i.e. the end of the kickboard farthest away from your face.

**2** Catch-up freestyle – i.e. the freestyle drill where the swimmer places one hand on top of the other.

- **Why not?** It teaches and reinforces arms crossing the body midline, which results in your body ‘snaking’ and twisting through the water.

- **Alternatives:** ‘Catch-up to hip’ drill, i.e. where the ‘pause’ characteristic of most catch-up-style drills is with one hand near your hip and the other hand stretched out in front of you in streamline or catch-up drill but to a shoulder-wide position.

**3** Chicken-wing drill/‘Finger-drag’ drill, i.e. the drill where the swimmer drags their fingers along the surface of the water in recovery to learn a high-elbow recovery position.

- **Why not?** It teaches and reinforces a ‘hard’, forced elbow-led recovery and a flat swimming stroke.

- **Alternatives:** Lateral freestyle drill with a hip-driven rotation, or slow-motion swimming (wearing fins if necessary) emphasising relaxed fingers, wrist and elbow-led recovery.

**4** Head-up freestyle drill, i.e. swimming for extended periods with your head held high out of the water.

- **Why not?** It forces you to swim with a low hip



position. The relationship between your hips and your head is critical in swimming and this drill teaches and reinforces a very poor body position with low hips.

- **Alternatives:** Swim your usual swimming stroke but lift your head only slightly and keep your chin at water level and looking forward to practise 'sighting' for one or two strokes, or swim the 'head-up' freestyle drill for no more than two or three strokes each lap while maintaining a hips-at-water-level position.

**5** Overspeed drill (spinning drill), i.e. stroking as fast as possible with short, fast strokes in an effort to improve swimming speed.

- **Why not?** This drill should be avoided at all costs. It teaches and reinforces the concept that

speed should be hard and forced and that technique is not important when you want to swim fast. Speed is about swimming easily and relaxed with great technique.

- **Alternatives:** Short, fast explosive sprints with great technique over distances less than 20 metres, or try a running entry (where it is safe to do so). This involves running six-to-10 strides before diving into the pool and swimming as fast as possible with great technique.

Note: Stay tuned for the next edition of *TMSM*, where we'll take a look at the five swimming stroke development routines you should do if you want to improve your triathlon swim leg. [T](#)

## Summary

1. For every stroke fault, there is a stroke correction drill to try and fix the fault. However, inside every stroke correction drill, there is another fault. The aim should be to reduce the need for stroke correction drills by making the effort to develop and maintain a technically good stroke at all times.
2. There is no perfect swimming drill – just as there is no single perfect technique for all swimmers. Find a few stroke drills that help you to feel fast, relaxed and comfortable in the water and stick to them – i.e. find the drills that work for you – learn to do them well and do them often.
3. Link your stroke drills into your training sets. An effective training session isn't segmented into separate parts, i.e. it's not 'drill set with perfect technique' and then '20 x 100 on 1:50 with terrible technique'. Use drill sets to switch on your mind and body to efficient swimming technique. Don't be afraid to throw in a few strokes of drill in every training effort, e.g. drill the first six strokes of every repeat in your main set so that you are reinforcing good technique throughout your training session – particularly important as you fatigue later in the workout.
4. Use common sense. Some swimming drills do not make any sense. For example, kicking on a kickboard while holding the end of the board in a 'fingers up' position might be useful to develop kicking strength but it is a terrible drill in terms of teaching and reinforcing hand entry position and the early stages of your catch. If the drill does not make sense, look for an alternative.
5. One size does not fit all. The temptation is to just throw in a whole bunch of swimming drills into every workout and see what happens. Have a reason to do a drill and find a drill that will help you with your specific stroke needs. Just because the winner of the Hawaiian Ironman does a particular drill every swim session, it does not mean that drill will help you, and in many cases, doing the wrong drill or doing a drill poorly can actually harm your swimming stroke. [T](#)



Wayne Goldsmith is a triathlon coach who has worked for both Triathlon Australia and Swimming Australia

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