

Staying Well-Drilled

Swimming drills present a double-edged sword. Done well they can lead to dramatic improvements to your stroke. Done poorly, however, they can do more harm than good. Swim coach Wayne Goldsmith argues the key to knowing the difference and getting the best out of your pool time is to understand the basics.

Words: Wayne Goldsmith | Images: Delly Carr

In the last edition of *TMSM* I wrote an article called 'The Five Swimming Drills You Shouldn't Do' if you want to improve your triathlon swim leg. This article is the follow up – and it outlines the top swimming drills and stroke development techniques guaranteed to improve the swimming performance of every triathlete.

Swimming Drills: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

Every swimming coach has a favourite swimming drill to help them teach or improve a specific aspect of swimming stroke. However, many of these drills are nothing more than fillers – one size fits

all, generic stroke drills given to every swimmer in the program regardless of the swimmer's specific needs.

To be effective, swimming drills need to be introduced at the right time and practiced in the right way. Before contemplating even attempting a stroke drill, it is important that the swimmer is fully versed in the 'Fantastic Five' of swimming, which are:

1. Soft hands and soft feet
2. Relaxed, deep, controlled, rhythmic breathing
3. An early catch
4. Feel i.e. pressure = power
5. A balanced head and hips relationship



Why is the Fantastic Five so important?

It's simple when you think about it. Without the Fantastic Five you can't do the stroke drills correctly. For example, take the most popular swimming stroke drill – “catch-up” freestyle. Every triathlete in the world from Macca to my Mum at some stage has learnt and practised “Catch-up” (for a video showing this drill scan this page with your In-Site app) but...

You can't do 'catch-up' the right way unless you are relaxed in the water with your hands and feet “soft” and breathing deeply and fully.

You can't do “catch up” correctly if your head is too high and your hips are too low in the water.

And after you 'catch-up' without an early catch or an understanding of maintaining pressure on the water, the drill itself is of limited value.

The Freestyle 'Feeling'

Swimming freestyle well is more about 'feeling' than learning a thousand new stroke drills.

Learning to feel softness in your hands and feet is far more likely to improve your freestyle stroke than learning the top ten stroke drills being sold online by triathlon's version of the TV Shopping Network.

Understanding how to maintain pressure on your fingertips throughout your stroke will do more to help your swim leg than a hundred variations of weird and wonderful stroke drills.

Feel your freestyle before you 'drown with drills'.

The BOB Principle

Like all sports, swimming is based on the BOB Principle – Built on Basics.

In football, BOB is about passing, kicking and tackling. In tennis, BOB focuses on the fundamentals of the game: serve, forehand, backhand and volley.

In swimming, the Fantastic Five are the fundamental elements of good freestyle for all swimmers at all levels of the sport.

It is tempting to try and force freestyle – to use gimmicks, gizmos, toys and tools to try and improve your stroke, but in the end it all comes back to BOB – mastering the fundamental aspects of moving effectively and efficiently through water which ultimately determines how well you swim.

The Fantastic Five of swimming

1 Soft hands and soft feet

Developing soft hands and soft-feet is not so much about learning a specific stroke drill as it is learning to remain relaxed and to not tense up as your swimming speed increases.

An excellent 'soft' routine is to start swimming (or kicking) one lap slowly and to concentrate on keeping your hands and feet soft, loose, floppy and relaxed.

Over the lap, steadily and progressively build speed, all the time maintaining the sense and feeling of keeping your hands and feet soft, loose, floppy and relaxed. If you start to feel tightness or tension in your hands, forearms and feet, slow down and remain focused on the soft feelings until the tightness and tension goes.

Have a short rest and repeat the process, i.e. progressively building speed whilst concentrating on softness, looseness and relaxation.

Another simple way to learn “softness” is to grab on to the side of the pool, stretch your arms and legs out and commence kicking slowly – like you did when you first learnt to swim. Focus on keeping your feet “loose” and progressively increase your kicking speed – faster and faster – but all the time keeping your feet loose. Practice this loose feet kicking drill for one minute. Rest. Repeat three or four times.

2 Relaxed, deep, controlled, rhythmic breathing

Breathing incorrectly is at the core of so many of the problems triathletes experience in the water.

The main problem is that triathletes without a strong swimming background are naturally reluctant to fully exhale under water. The fear of having your face in the water without any air in your lungs is terrifying for most people so the usual response is to never fully exhale.

The issue here is that unless you fully exhale, you can't fully inhale and carbon dioxide builds up to the point where it becomes almost impossible to continue swimming.

The three keys of correct breathing in swimming are:

- Never hold your breath when your face is in the water
- Never have your face in the water without air in your lungs
- Breathe fully in and out with every breath – i.e. don't shallow breathe

A great way to learn to breathe correctly is to start swimming slowly and easily and with your face in the water, blow out forcefully through your nose and mouth until you start to feel your air is running out. Then turn your head, leaving the corner of your mouth, one goggle and one ear in the water and just as the last bubble of air leaves your lips, take a deep, full breath and put your face back into the water.

Another great way to learn how to breathe correctly is to count strokes and time your exhale evenly over the stroke cycle. For example, if you are breathing every four strokes, practise breathing out approximately quarter of a full breath each time your hand enters the water so that every four strokes you fully exhale – and therefore can enjoy a full inhale every time you breathe.

3 An early catch

Swimming strokes or 'styles' vary considerably between swimmers but the one thing that remains common to all great swimmers is an early catch.

An early catch is where a swimmer reaches out in front of their body and “feels” the water immediately as their hand enters the water. By keeping their fingertips and hands soft the swimmer can then apply pressure to the water and commence the swimming stroke soon after hand entry.

Less skilled swimmers, unable to feel this fingertip pressure will often allow their hands and arms to “sink” in front of them – relying on muscle to move them through the water rather than relying on good skills and great technique.

A good practice routine for developing an early catch is to swim a few strokes at the beginning of each lap with your head slightly higher than usual – just high enough to allow you to observe your (soft) fingertips entering the water. Notice where your fingertips enter the water – and particularly be aware of how close to the surface they are.

Use your fingertips to “feel” the pressure of the water under

your hand. Once you “feel” this pressure commence your stroke.
Swimming slowly and with this slightly elevated head position, continue swimming – commencing each stroke immediately after your fingertips press down and feel the pressure of the water. Remember it’s pressure before power.

4 Feel i.e. Pressure = Power

The BOB principle of pressure and power should continue throughout your stroke.

A good method to learn the pressure and power principle is to swim slowly with paddles on – and believe it or not – with your eyes closed – (for just a few strokes).

As you push off from the wall (with paddles on) commence swimming slowly and be aware of the pressure of the water on your fingertips and on the surface of the paddle.

Now close your eyes for four-to-eight strokes (be aware of other swimmers around you) and concentrate on that feeling of paddle pressure. Open your eyes but continue to focus on the paddle pressure throughout your stroke and over the full lap. Rest for 30 seconds and repeat this eyes-closed-paddle-pressure routine.

Being able to feel and maintain pressure on the water throughout your stroke is guaranteed to improve your distance per stroke and do wonders for your stroke efficiency.

5 A balanced head and hips relationship

The relationship between your head and your hips is critical in swimming. Keeping your head and hips in the right line is important for great freestyle and developing an awareness of your swimming posture is one of most fundamental BOB principles.

Try this simple head-hips awareness exercise.

As you push off at the beginning of each lap, pause briefly by maintaining a long, stretched out streamline position – fingers stretched to the end of the pool you are swimming towards and toes pointing back to the end of the pool you’ve just left.

For just a few seconds, look straight down at the bottom of the pool, with your head, neck, chest and hips all in the one line – the same straight upright position you maintain while you walk.

Become aware of this ‘one line’ upright body position – head, neck, chest and hips all aligned – then commence swimming.

Repeat this awareness exercise every few laps throughout your

training session to remind you of your correct swimming posture and feel the difference it makes to your freestyle performance.

So, what are the best swimming stroke drills for you to do?

The answer is all of them and none of them. Stroke drills themselves are not what makes the real difference to your swimming stroke. It’s all about getting the Fantastic Five right, then learning and practising the stroke drills that can help you to achieve a specific improvement in your stroke efficiency.

If you want to incorporate some stroke drills into your swimming program, then choose one, yes, one stroke drill.


Learn it. Master it. Have it reviewed and enhanced by a coach if possible. Then, when you’ve mastered that one stroke drill – add another to your swimming kit-bag.

Like everything that works in life it’s not what you do it’s how you do it – and the Fantastic-Five and the BOB principle - are at the heart of swimming fast and efficiently for every triathlete.

Summary

1 Drills alone are NOT the answer to improving your triathlon swim leg. Get the “fantastic-five” right first, then introduce the right swimming drill at the right time and in the right way.

2 If you want improve technique....then improve technique. Technique and skills development drills are not things that you use to “fill-in” time in your workout. Focus and concentrate on improving your swim technique with the same level of commitment you give to your speed, endurance and threshold training.

3 Incorporate technique and skills development work into all of your training. Start your speed sets with a few strokes of the “fingertips-feel” drill. Start your endurance set repeats with a few seconds of “swimming posture awareness”. Reinforce great technique throughout your workout – particularly when you feel fatigued and under pressure towards the end of your training session. 



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

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