Swimming should be easy—almost effortless...

Learn how with

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

Words: Wayne Goldsmith | Image: Thinkstock

There 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.

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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.

2. 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.

3. 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.

4. 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 forces you to swim with a low hip...
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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.

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

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.