

Different Strokes

By Terry Laughlin

I've spent countless hours training with triathletes in Masters workouts and have observed that about half dutifully do whatever the coach assigns, including the odd set of 100 IMs (individual medley) or 25s Fly. The rest are reluctant to do anything but freestyle, convinced that nothing else will help them reach their swimming goals.

As an open-water racer, my swimming needs are similar to those of triathletes. And yet I swim other strokes at least 30% of the time in my training, and work tirelessly on improving my technique and efficiency in all of them. Why? Because I've learned that multi-dimensional training makes me a better freestyler.

I have also coached elite-level freestylers with the same mix of strokes and seen their freestyle performances improve more with varied training, because multi-dimensional training helps one avoid staleness. I swim stronger, smoother, and faster freestyle when I alternate freestyle reps with different-strokes reps. The mix keeps my "freestyle muscles" fresher, by giving them a form of active rest, helping me maintain a higher level of concentration and sharpness on each freestyle rep.

Second, training with multiple strokes produces more training adaptations. One triathlete—a recent convert to four-stroke training—emailed me: "I finally realized that when I just swim freestyle, it's kind of like running the same loop every day; you know every dip and hill, and have cracked their codes so well that your body runs on autopilot. When I swim a different stroke my body learns to deal with unexpected demands, just as it must when I race on an unfamiliar course or under unpredictable conditions. The physical and mental benefits have been powerful."

Third, freestyle-only workouts use the same muscle groups repeatedly. Training with a medley of strokes recruits more muscle groups, providing greater training benefits and limiting injury potential by spreading the workload over more joints and movement patterns. Finally, my motivation and engagement are greater when I vary my training. With a variety of strokes and drills, I can set

many more personal goals, and devise an endless number of challenging practice tasks. And since my potential in the other strokes remains relatively less-tapped than in free, personal training achievements happen with greater frequency, keeping me fresher both mentally and physically.

For all these reasons, I never "go through the motions" on the other strokes. I try to swim them with the same degree of concentration and rigor as my freestyle. The better the quality of my interaction with the water in any form, the more I learn about aquatic fluency and economy in general. Simply by increasing the variety of my interactions with the water, my body becomes a better instrument for solving the many movement problems water presents. And when that happens, my freestyle improves. I may have stretched my horizon for continued freestyle improvement by ten years or more, simply by training this way.

THE WELL-ROUNDED SWIMMER: TECHNIQUE TIPS

Here's a medley of focal points for the other three strokes.

Backstroke

This is the stroke that most directly complements freestyle, because the balance, alignment and rotation patterns are so similar. The similarity of movement also makes backstroke a good "recovery stroke" for muscle restoration after an intensive freestyle set.

Balance. Lie back, with water wrapping

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closely around your face, and lean on your shoulder blades, until your hips and legs feel effortlessly supported by the water. With this feeling more of your energy will go into propulsion, and less to correcting your body position.

Calm Waters. When world-record holder and Olympic gold medalist Natalie Coughlin wins her 100-yard races by stunning margins, the water in her lane is always calmer than in other lanes. When drilling or swimming backstroke, try to keep the water quiet around your head and swim with a minimum of splash and noise.

Rhythmic rotation. Rolling rhythmically around your spinal axis is the best way to reduce drag and increase power. The simplest way to ensure you're rolling enough is to focus on having each shoulder clear the water on each stroke cycle. You should not feel the water resisting your shoulder on the arm that's recovering.

Breaststroke

Pierce the Water. Breaststroke's essential movement is a long, completely streamlined bodyline between strokes. Stroke-breathe-kick, then stretch/squeeze yourself into a torpedo-like position for one to two counts in each stroke. Aim for 10 or fewer strokes per 25 yards.

Neutral Head. Excessive head movement is the most common stroke error, causing choppy strokes. Imagine you're wearing a neck brace as you swim breaststroke; look down at the water as you stroke and breathe then smoothly lower your head between your arms for the glide.

Short Strokes/Fast Hands. Keep your hands where you can see them during each stroke. Start by sweeping them outside your shoulders, then spin them—quickly—back to the starting point at full extension.

Butterfly

Dolphins Don't Kick. The most common energy-waster in butterfly is excessive kicking. Minimize the effort and movement from your legs; let them follow your body instead.

Your knees should barely bend and your feet should never leave the water.

Hug the Surface. Don't fight gravity by climbing out and diving in. Hug the water as you stroke and breathe. Land your hands forward—and outside your shoulders. Let your chest fall into the water as you do. This—not your kick—will create butterfly's characteristic

undulation. Keep your chin in the water and look down while breathing.

No ButterStruggle. Don't fight your way through it. Teach yourself the stroke by swimming only a few, say three to five, smooth, relaxed, controlled strokes, rather than grinding through 25- or 50-yard repeats. Focus on a light, steady chest-hip-rocking rhythm and let arms and legs follow that. ▲

Terry Laughlin is the Head Coach of Total Immersion Swimming. This column is adapted from his book, Triathlon Swimming Made Easy. Read excerpts at www.totalimmersion.net.