

Smart Practice

By J. David Williamson III

Head Coach, Harris YMCA Swim Teams,
Charlotte, NC

In a recent edition of “American Swimming” (2012 Edition Issue 3), an article by Annie Murphy Paul was reprinted from “Psychology”.

The article, “The Myth of ‘Practice Makes Perfect’ ”, discusses the idea of deliberate practice, “a constant sense of self-evaluation, of focusing on one’s weaknesses, rather than simply fooling around and playing to one’s strengths”. In short, the idea of spending hours and hours practicing, be it a sport or an instrument, may allow for improvement. A more focused approach that pays more attention to detail allows for greater success.

This article grabbed my attention in many ways and has led me to re-think my expectations of a practice. For many years, I have lived by a motto of “perfect practice makes perfect” (I even had it printed on a shirt). The idea behind the motto is simple. Anybody can come and practice. They can get wet, they can swim the sets and they can get stronger. But there is more to practice than that. There must be a focus on weaknesses and technique throughout. There are many who believe that a successful practice must have a high amount of yardage at elevated heart rates. I agree that type of practice is a successful practice. However, this type of practicing should be interspersed with more thoughtful practices and sets.



The idea of smart practice is not complicated, but it certainly involves a fair amount of multi-tasking. Smart practicing involves the following:

- A strong focus on technique. Every stroke you take should be the best stroke you can do. The more tired you become in practice (or competition), the more focused you must be on technique. Most bad habits are developed while fatigued or looking for the easy way out.
- Swim in practice as you would in a competition. Use flip turns on the walls in freestyle and backstroke sets. Always push off of the wall on your back when swimming backstroke and use the flags when swimming into the wall. Always touch with two hands on the wall in breaststroke and butterfly. If you are a triathlete, incorporate sighting into some of your freestyle sets. Do not wait for the competition to do the right thing.
- Follow through with a coach’s directive. When a coach makes a correction, that is typically a time to step back and focus on the area that needs correction. If this means slowing down and possibly adding five or ten seconds to an interval, do not fret it. An interval is simply about the “now”, a correction is about the future.
- Avoid training on only the things you like 100% of the time. Concentrate on your weaknesses. If your kick is weak, incorporate some challenging kick sets. If you are exclusively a freestyler, work on some other strokes. If you are a distance swimmer, add some sprint sets to your repertoire.

Smart practice may not always be fun or enjoyable, but the end result is dramatic. Certainly, smart practice makes for a more well-rounded swimmer and allows for a stronger performance in the water. There are many swimmers who follow the mantra of “more is better”. It is important to step back from this and focus on some of the other things beyond speed and distance. The end result will be much more satisfying.

Annie Murphy Paul’s full article can be read at <http://ideas.time.com/2012/01/25/the-myth-of-practice-makes-perfect/>