

From the coaches corner: Freestyle drills

By Tammy Yates

Tammy Yates, Coach and Director of Competitive Aquatics at the Goldsboro Family YMCA was one of the two coaches representing our LMSC at Swimfest 2011.

She has kindly agreed to write a series of articles about the various stroke techniques that would be helpful for all of us.



SwimFest 2011 was presented as an interactive learning experience for both Masters coaches and swimmers. Presentations were given by several “mentor coaches” to a combined audience allowing for coaches and swimmers to discuss ideas and share with each other. As a coach participant, I benefited most from being able to work with adult swimmers who are not from my home club and to share ideas with other coaches. There was a large section in which the mentor coaches were running through drills with all the swimmer participants in the water. As a coach participant, we were asked to offer instruction and critique to the swimmers in real time. I was able to hear drill instruction from world-class coaches as well as discuss the finer points with them as a peer.

The most beneficial classroom rotation for me was presented by Cokie Lepinski of the Marin Pirates Master program in the San Francisco Bay area. The result of her preparation for this talk was an eBook called “There is a Drill for That: A collection of drills covering all four swim strokes and sculling.” The book breaks down each stroke presenting drills as a solution to common errors in each stroke, making the book a quick reference guide to any swim coach. I was familiar with the majority of the drills in the book, but the explanations were invaluable as they covered every angle of execution as well as clearly stating their intent and desired outcome. This makes the drills a good reference for coaches, but accessible to swimmers who may not have as much swimming knowledge.

Starting with freestyle, I would like to share some of the more interesting drills and the ones that I have found most useful in the time since my experience at SwimFest. The more I coach, the more I find that head and body position are the most important components to an efficient stroke. I also find they are among the hardest to correct. It is worth it every once in a while to pull everyone back and have them run through some of these drills to learn, or relearn, the proper position. The following drills have worked best for me in this:

HEAD LEAD BALANCE – FACE DOWN

This drill focuses on body position and line in the water with emphasis on a long neck.

- Start face down in the water; arms in the saddle (hands on the front of your thighs), and hold good posture, line, and balance. Kick lightly to keep you stabilized and moving forward. Relax your shoulders and neck and make your neck “grow” by pressing your shoulders down. Focus your eyes on the pool bottom. Simultaneously press your lungs and forehead into the water as one unit and you should feel your hips rise. This drill is about establishing body position, not about going somewhere quickly, so be patient as you kick lightly.

HEAD LEAD BALANCE WITH ROTATION

This drill combines the above two drills into one as they begin to rotate hip to hip and learn how to avoid lifting their head to breath. Strengthens their kick.

- Start in the Head Lead Balance position. Now we add rotation, and ask you to rotate from hip to hip about every 6-10 kicks. The rotation comes from the bottom of your hips and it is a quick rotation requiring a steady, compact kick. Let’s add breathing to the mix. The key is to turn your head as little as possible. Instead, rotate your body for the breath. Don’t lift your head to breathe. When you do breath go right back to your position and find your balance. Breathe every third rotation.

ARM LEAD BALANCE OR 6-COUNT

*Working off the concepts explored in all of the **Head Lead Balance** drills, the swimmer now has one arm extended out front. This continues the lesson on position, line and balance, and begins the lesson on anchoring*

and rotating.

- Start on your right side with your right arm extended under you. Your left arm crosses your body and rests on the top of your right hip. Tuck this left elbow in tight to your body. Kick lightly and breathe as before, rotating your body just enough to breath, and not using your head to lift for the breath. Try to keep your angle at about 45 degrees, with eyes focused on the pool bottom.
- Now switch arms and try this with your left arm extended, right arm crossing your body with your elbow tucked in tight and right hand resting on your left hip. Kick lightly for 10-20 kicks, and then rotate over to the right arm. When you are kicking, and when you are about to rotate, making sure that lead hand is anchored just under the water line. Do not allow that lead hand to wave or move in the water to balance you. Your balance comes from your core.
- Once you can smoothly rotate side-to-side, then you can reduce the time you spend on each side to 6 kicks (or count to 6). Keep your hip angle at about 45 degrees and make sure your hips engage immediately as you begin to pull through the catch. The pull and hips rotate together.

The next couple of drills where ones that I found very inventive:

TRACE THE LINE

This drill helps correct swimmers who “cross over” the center with their hand entry at the beginning of their stroke; who drop their elbow on their recovery, or who swing way out to the side. An added benefit is that it forces you to keep your head down because you are watching the black line! It works best if the black line on the pool bottom is thick. If it is not, tell them to trace a few inches outside the line.

- The emphasis here is good elbow and hand position. Swim down the center of your pool lane where you can see the black line. “Trace” your hand to the outside edges of the black line. Left hand traces the left side of the black line; right hand traces the right side of the black line. If the line is thin, trace a few inches out either side.
- Be aware of where you enter the water with your hands. Many swimmers cross over the center line of their body. This leads to rotation problems and a weakened pull through. On this drill, allow yourself to cheat your head position by lifting your eyes to see your entry and compare it to that black line. The entry is just as important as the pull through.

SUSPENDED HAND

This drill teaches the importance of position, line and balance in the water. It emphasizes the role of core and a good kick.

- Fins are recommended when first learning this drill. Swim freestyle but suspend your hand poised above the water for 10 kicks before entering it into the water. Your hand is poised right above the water, ready for the fingers to enter and the other hand is out front, still, and just under the surface of the water. Good core strength is critical here, as is a steady kick with the feet close together. If you splay your legs or stop your kick, it makes this drill harder. Concentrate on your position, balance and line in the water. You’ve got to keep those hips near the surface or you feel like you’re going to drown! As you get stronger, do this drill without fins.

TRIPLE TOUCH

This drill opens up the recovery and is good for those who drop their elbow or enter with their wrist. Thank you Dr. Jim Miller (USMS) for this drill!

- Start in a face down Superman position with both arm balanced out in front of you. Leave your left arm stationary while your right arm strokes through the water, recovers to the front taps the water, then reaches back behind you over top of the water, taps the water, then immediately swings right back over the top and stays there. Now do the same cycle with the left arm: touch front, touch back, touch front, and then move to the right.