

***The Three R's of Efficient Distance Freestyle
by Scott Bay, Head Coach Team Blu Frog Masters, September 21, 2012***

We've all heard about the three R's for academics: reading, (w)riting, and (a)rithmetic, and we have long been told they are the fundamentals of a good education. Similarly, we have three R's in freestyle swimming that are the fundamentals of good swimming.

Some coaches have defined the three R's as Range, Rhythm and Relaxation. We take a slightly different approach but are essentially talking about the same things. Some things are a matter of style and some things are specific to the distance you want to swim. The analogy is one we can borrow from track and field. The way a sprinter runs the 100-meter dash is way different than the stride and technique used by someone running the Boston Marathon. Same sport but different technique. If you are a triathlete or fitness swimmer and looking to go the distance, here are some general tips to help you get the most out of each stroke.

Reach

Simply put, you are just trying to make sure you get the most out of each stroke. This means making sure you are as long as you can be from fingertip to toe tip before you initiate the pull. Make sure the hand enters in front of the shoulder and you make that the anchor point. The hand at full extension is what holds the water and you simply pull yourself over it. Once you start the pull it is important to not push straight down with your palm but rather get your fingers towards the bottom of the pool and the point of your elbow pointed up. Most refer to this as Early Vertical Forearm or EVF . It helps with rotating your shoulder to a nice place where you can swim with your core and not your shoulders.

Rotation

Letting your body drive your stroke takes a lot of strain off the shoulders. Let the hip and shoulder turn over as one piece. This also allows the hand to slip a little further forward before initiating the catch. Remember to get the face back in the water before initiating the pull so you can rotate the elbow and shoulder into that great EVF position. Be patient with this. The mental imagery we use is thinking of setting your hand in wet cement and then rolling your body onto that line rather than moving the hand through the water.

Relaxation

It is so critically important in distance swimming to make sure you do not recruit muscles to help you swim that don't really help you swim. What does that mean? A bunch of things:

First is breathing. Don't hold your breath! Even for a second. It flexes all the muscles in the core and that actually takes oxygen out of the system.

Instead, exhale slowly and breathe rhythmically like in yoga. Relax the hands. The great debate over "spoons" or "paddles" is kind of moot. Try this: Make one hand rigid and use the other to feel the muscles in that arm. They are all flexed right? Relax the hand and try to hold the water. Same thing is true with pointing the toes. It makes the entire leg really rigid. The mental cue we use is to think of your knee and ankle joints being connected with a single rubber band. Leaving them looser allows for the stronger muscles to do the work and let the leg finish the kick. The kick comes from the hip.

So there you have it. Reach, Rotation, Relaxation ... the three R's of easy and efficient freestyle. Much of this takes methodical practice but once you master the movements, the swimming gets easier and faster! As always, an experienced coach will be able to help you pull it all together.

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