

FREESTYLE DRILLS

Before I talk about drills, I will mention two concepts that you are trying to master. First, the best thing that you can do to improve your swimming is to improve your body position in the water. Second, the power in your stroke mainly comes from rolling your body, not from pulling your hands through the water.

BODY POSITION:

1. Swim horizontally. By horizontally, I mean that your hips and shoulders should be on the same level. The waterline should be at the middle or the back of your head. Personally, I can remember that easily by thinking about it hitting me at my hairline. Focus on pushing down on your chest. This will help keep your hips high.
2. Swim on your side. You will have less drag if you are on your side. Much more drag is created when you swim flat on your stomach as opposed to being on your side. As I will mention later, you also need to be on your side to develop the power for your stroke.
3. Swim tall. Obviously, tall is a relative term. Stretch yourself as tall as possible. Longer vessels glide through the water better than shorter vessels. You can lengthen your body by always keeping one arm in front of your shoulders. This will look like you are almost swimming a catch-up drill.
4. Swim straight. Don't wiggle down the pool. It is really amusing to watch, but not very effective. Keep your body straight. Imagine a metal rod extending from your back through your head. Rotate your head-torso-hips as one unit on that metal rod. You can minimize your wiggle by not lifting or turning your head to breathe and by controlling your hand when it enters the water so it does not cross the middle of your body.

POWER:

Your power in the water comes from your torso, not your arms. Think about how you start a lawnmower. Or think about baseball players or shotputters. To gain power, they use their entire body. You are not pulling with your arms. Some people describe it as your body is the engine and your arms are the wheels. On every stroke, rotate your top hip down in order to drive your arm back.

DRILLS:

Here are some descriptions about the freestyle drills that you do. (There isn't enough space to discuss other strokes. And besides who really cares about breaststroke anyway?) Remember to take your time and do your drills slowly and purposefully.

Kicking:

How: Body on the surface of the water. Face looking down to the body of the pool. Hands by your sides. Lightly kick. Roll your body to breathe. Pressing your chest down will help your hips stay at the surface of the water.

Why: This drill helps your balance. You must press down on your chest. Pressing your chest down helps your hips float better. Don't forget to roll your head-torso-hips as one unit to breathe. Personally, I hate to kick. However, kicking in this way helps you gain the balance necessary to improve your stroke. I am told that eventually this drill becomes comfortable. A more challenging drill involves kicking on your side with one arm extended. Keep your head down with your eyes looking at the bottom of the pool. When you need a breath, rotate your head-torso-hips until you can breathe.

Skate and Wait:

How: Kick on your side with the bottom arm extended forward and the top arm resting on your hip. Try to keep your top arm "dry." Once you are balanced, drag your top hand up along your body. Stay on your side until your hand passes your head. Then hold yourself flat in a catch-up position (hands together), until you regain your balance (i.e. until your hips rise). You will need to press your chest down to force your hips to rise. Once you have regained your balance, roll back to your side.

Why: This drill forces you to concentrate on your balance. Another important benefit is that you are swimming tall since your arms are always in front of your shoulders.

Skate-Roll-Skate:

How: This is a slightly easier version of Skate and Wait. Instead of waiting in the catch-up position, roll directly to your other side. Remember to roll your head-torso-hips as one unit and to keep your head down as you roll.

Why: This drill keeps your arms in front of your shoulders (swimming tall). It also focuses you on the importance of balancing.

Fist drill:

How: Yes, you actually have to close your hand tightly to do this drill properly. Despite the popular opinion of the Richmond swimmers, you do not close your fist on the recovery, and then open your hand underwater when you think the coach cannot see. Also, bending your knuckles ever so slightly does not count as a fist.

Why: This drill does two basic things. First, it helps with your balance. When your hand is closed in a fist, you cannot use your hand to balance your body. Instead, you must balance with your body. Second, it forces you to use your entire forearm. Pull the water with your entire forearm, not just your hand. In order to go anywhere, you need to have high elbows so that you are pulling the water with your forearm. Think about keeping your elbow higher than your fingers. If you drop your elbow, you will sink.

Finger-tip drag:

How: Drag your fingertips on the surface of the water. Actually, I was not really, really tired at the end of the Chris Greene Lake swim. I was just doing a little finger-tip drag drill work. Of course, if someone had been kind enough to let me draft off them, I wouldn't need that lame excuse. This is an excellent drill even when you are not tired.

Why: This drill helps your entry in the water. You are not swinging your hand across the side and crossing up front. Your hand is close to your head so you can place your hand in the water and reach straight in front of you, without crossing the front of your body. This drill is good for the butt-wigglers.

Zipper drill:

How: This drill combines the finger-tip drag with some balancing. Imagine wearing a body suit with a zipper up the side. As your arm recovers, you pull your fingers up your side like you are pulling a zipper up your side. Stay on your side while you pull the zipper up.

Why: Balance. Balance. Balance.

Catch up drill:

How: Touch hands together up front. Press down on your chest so your hips stay at the water's surface. Keep head down, with your eyes looking directly below you.

Why: This drill helps with balance because you have to press down on your chest to make your hips rise. It also keeps your body long since your arms remain in front of your body.

Almost Catch-up drill:

How: On your side with one arm extended forward. You cannot start your pull with that arm until your other hand enters the water. You might think of this as swapping your hands. One hand takes the place of the other.

Why: One step closer to “regular” swimming. This drill helps you focus on keeping your body long.

Head touch drill:

How: Kick on your side with one arm extended forward. When you touch your head, you may start to pull with your other hand. You are not being tested on where you touch your head. Touch anywhere you want as long as it is your head and not anyone else’s head. Unless they ask....

Why: This is very close to almost catch-up. This requires you to balance on your side while you try to find your head.

Breathe every stroke:

How: Do I really have to tell you??? Surprisingly enough, swimmers have difficulty understanding this concept. They want one to mean two. Do not breathe every other stroke. Breathe every stroke. This means every time your hand enters the water, your mouth should be in air.

Roll head-torso-hips as a unit and keep your head down as you roll. Do not turn your head. Roll your body so your mouth comes to the air. (Tip: do not feel compelled to actually inhale every time your mouth comes to the air.)

Why: Requires you to roll your hips. Remember your body is rolling on the axis down your body.

Your eyes should be looking down. Forget two rules that you were taught years ago: Don’t try to breath in the pocket under your armpit. Instead, keep your head still, use your hip roll to bring your mouth to the air. Don’t swim with the water hitting you at your eyelevel. Your head should be flat, with your eyes looking to the bottom of the pool.

I will add several things that do not quite qualify as drills:

Stroke Count: Why do we count strokes? It is not only because your coach wants to torture and embarrass you by your inability to count.

Watch the fastest swimmers in your pool. Invariably, they take fewer strokes than you do. The more strokes you take, the less streamlined you are. You can gauge your efficiency by trying to go faster while maintaining the same stroke count.

Swimming Golf: Not quite a drill, but the idea is to count your strokes and add them to your time. Try to decrease the total score. After all, our goal is to swim faster, not just to push off and glide as far as we can.

Visualization: This has been my favorite non-drill for years. It works very well during the winter. Turn the alarm off. Pull the covers tight around you and visualize a perfect stroke. I learned the hard way that this non-drill can only be done sporadically or your torso and hips will become less streamlined.

This article is a very basic primer on swimming drills. I have tried not to write anything that is original to me. For more detailed information on swimming technique, I recommend Terry Laughlin's book Total Immersion. (See also www.totalimmersion.net).