



DRILL AND PRACTICE

The key to improving your stroke is practising relevant and effective drills. By **Emma Levy and Tracey Baumann**

In all my years of coaching, I have had the opportunity to witness swimmers with many different learning styles and the effects of these on their progress. Whatever your preferred learning style, some principles of learning apply to all swimmers.

CHOOSING DRILLS

When practising a new skill, whether it is swimming, learning to play the piano or memorising the routes to become a black cab taxi driver, we have to learn in bitesized chunks. Have you noticed how in other sports people are happy to break the activities down? Take football as an example: nobody learns how to play football by only playing repeated full games of football. They spend endless hours learning how

to dribble the ball, to pass it to their teammates, and to shoot towards the goal. It is usually only at the end of a training session that they will come together and practise these skills in a full game. If you think for a moment about other sports that you know, this is generally the case.

Just as when learning other skills, breaking swimming movements and positions down using drills is certainly an effective way of improving your stroke. But it is common to hear of people going to the swimming pool or the lake only with the aim of swimming certain distances each time, and the goal becomes how much distance they swam per session or per week, rather than how they actually practise the skills of swimming.

Whilst many people do use drills in



swimming, the drills will only transfer skills effectively to your whole stroke if the drill itself is relevant and effective. For example, there is little point in spending hours practising kicking drills completely on your side i.e. at a 90° angle, and then require your body to swim whole stroke with a 45° rotation; or in using pool toys that break the connections that you need to maintain while you swim whole stroke. It is imperative that the drill you are practising reflects the exact position or movement that you want in the whole stroke.

PERFECT PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT SWIMMING

Choosing an effective drill is only the first part of being able to actually imprint a new movement pattern. It is

very easy to do a training session where the mind is perhaps not as focussed as it could be, and we are just ticking boxes rather than being super focussed on the skill at hand. Many clients ask 'how often should I practice?' I answer this question by saying it is not about how often you practice, it is about how you practice. I could have two clients going to the pool three times a week for an hour, with one being super focussed on each and every stroke they take, and the other thinking about work, kids or what they are going to have for dinner. They have both spent the same amount of time in the pool, but the first client will certainly make much more progress than the second.

When coaching, I repeatedly ask my clients to tell me the sensation that they are feeling while we are making

changes to their stroke. This gives them a feedback loop that they can then tune into when they are practising in their own pool. The key to changing your stroke is to ensure that you stay focussed, and you use the feedback loop as a measure of this.

STRENGTHEN NEW NEUROLOGICAL PATHWAYS

To change any movement pattern in your body, in this case a swimming movement pattern, you have to build a new neurological pathway for the new movement. Once you have built the new neurological pathway, you then practise in focussed repetitions to strengthen it. This practice builds and strengthens the myelin sheath around the nerves involved. Think of a neurological pathway as a cable, and the myelin sheath is the insulation around the cable. The thicker the insulation the more secure the cable will be. The end goal is to make this new neurological pathway thicker and stronger than the original one, because as soon as we are not focussed our brain will always default to the thickest pathway.

THE BEST WAY TO PRACTISE

I always suggest that my clients take three cues to the water with them. For example: send your head as far away from your feet as possible; rotate your whole body as one unit; have a relaxed neck. If we have used any specific drills in the session I will ask them to perform the drill a few times (maybe 2-3 short repeats) thinking about each one of the cues in isolation. After they have worked on 1 cue within the drill, they then practise the same cue by doing six whole strokes without taking a breath. Removing the breathing in these beginning stages helps the mind to stay focussed on the cue at hand, and not switch to survival mode. Then I ask them to do a number of 25m repeats: push off thinking of one of the 3 cues, do 6 strokes without breathing and then continue the rest of the 25 m length with breathing but maintaining focus on the same cue. They then continue in this manner, circling through each of the three cues and incrementally increasing the distance as they can maintain their focus.

Next time you are in the water, what cues or drills will you use, and what can you do to ensure the quality of your attention as you swim? 🧠

EXPERT ADVICE

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