Backstroke drills by Tammy Yates

Tammy Yates is sharing more of the drills she worked on while at Swimfest 2011. Thank you Tammy!

In the last newsletter, I shared freestyle drills learned from SwimFest 2011. This month, I will be sharing drills and ideas for Backstroke. Many key stroke deficiencies in backstroke are a result of poor or lack of hip rotation. Hip rotation sets up the entire stroke in terms of power, balance, and timing. The first couple of drills will emphasize that rotation.

ARM LEAD BALANCE

Emphasizes balance, streamline and importance of core.
    • On your side, right arm extended out, left arm in the saddle (hand lying on your left thigh). You are looking directly over your left shoulder at a little bit of an angle. Remember to pull your ribs in. Your lead palm should be facing the bottom of the pool and be on a direct line to the side of the pool. Don't let your hand waver, hold it steady. If it does waver, you have a flaw in your posture – bring your ribs in and flatten out your back.
    • Once you feel comfortable balancing on the one side, you can progress to an alternating arm lead. You go from one side to the other with one rotation every 10 kicks. That rotation comes from the base of your hips. Set your anchor on the lead arm by rotating that elbow up just a little bit. It connects your back to your hips. Now when you rotate your body, it is tied to your arm and you are much stronger that way. Always try to get down on the opposite side before your arm hits the water. Remember to enter the water with your pinky finger.

HEAD LEAD BALANCE WITH 1/4 ARM LIFTS

Emphasizes timing of the arm recovery with the body rotation.
    • Kick on your back with your arms down at your side. Get yourself rotating side to side about every 6 kicks. As you rotate to your right hip, lift your left hand and arm about 30 degrees (a 1/4 lift of a full recovery). Now as you rotate to the left hip, lift your right hand and arm up in the same fashion. This helps you feel the timing of the beginning of your arm recovery.

L DRILL

Emphasizes anchoring and rotating the body as one unit.
    • In this drill, you kick and rotate with one arm in the air and one arm in the water. Let's say you start with your right arm pointed straight up to the sky and your left arm under the water and out behind you with the palm facing the pool bottom. Kick along for about 15-20 kicks and then simultaneously pull with your left arm, swing your right arm and rotate to your right side (as one unit) so that your right arm ends up in the water behind you. Now it is your left arm that is pointing to the sky. Each time you rotate, try to find your balance point as quickly as you can.
    • You must not let your arm that is behind you get trapped by your side when it is time to rotate to the opposite hip. We put your arm up in this L position so that when you set your anchor to rotate your body, the weight of the arm in the "L" position is up and on the top side of your body, making your anchor that much stronger.
    • If you were viewed from underwater what you want to see is that you are on your side before your lead arm enters the water. Your palms face the bottom. Start that early hip rotation down onto the balance line as your arm sweeps back. Finish with your palm facing the bottom.

This next section of drills will help a wide variety of backstroke errors. I find that all swimmers of any level will benefit from these drills, even if they are accomplished backstrokers already. It is always worthwhile

to focus on individual components of the stroke on a regular basis to prevent swimmers from slipping back to poor strokes or creating new bad habits.

GOGGLE BALANCE

To determine whether swimmers are keeping their head still and properly aligned.

• Take your goggles off and swim backstroke with your goggles resting on your forehead. This helps you to keep your head perfectly still. It takes awhile to master but is an excellent drill for maintaining proper head position. If your goggles fall off, you've got head movement.

Note from Coach Tammy: This is a personal favorite of mine. Based on the skill level of the swimmer, I start off with a coin on their forehead. The coin will mostly stick to their head because of the cohesion of the water, but they don't know that yet. Once they feel comfortable with that, I move to the goggles. Then I move on to a cup of water. I find that small Styrofoam coffee cups work best. This is also a great way to bring levity into an otherwise serious practice or a fun activity that skill gets some work done.

SKY POINT

Improves endurance and power of flutter kick as the kick must support the arm overhead, especially in the rotation. This is an advanced level drill.

• Here, one arm is out of the water at 90 degrees above your shoulder (pointed up to the sky) and the other arm is underwater at your side. Roll toward your arm at your side for 6-10 kicks, and then rotate to the other side. For beginners, try **L Drill**, an easier variation of this one.

FIST SWIMMING

Emphasizes the power of the hand in the pull through and proper arm pull through.

• Pretty simple to describe. Swim backstroke with your hands in a closed fist. Notice how much harder it is? This demonstrates the important role your hands have in feeling and sculling the water when pulling through. However, you are getting somewhere right? This drill also emphasizes that your forearms contribute to the pull through. In fact, your hands and forearms work as one unit. When your hands are clenched, try to press on the water with the palm side of your forearm. In all the strokes, the lower arm, from elbow to wrist, is an extension of your hand, or one unit.

• When doing fist swimming, take the time to work on the angle of your pull through, making sure to find the sweet spot where you draw the elbow in close to your body, and "throw something at your feet".

• Now, when you go back to swimming with open hands, see if you notice a difference in the pressure on your hand. Hold the water with your hand as you move through the pull.