

Basic Freestyle Techniques

TRADITIONAL FREESTYLE

Uses a longer, slower stroke with more power coming from the legs and hip rotation. This is the technique used by most successful freestylers.

Key Elements of the Traditional Freestyle:

- A longer glide in the first one-third of the pull before breaking into the catch part of the stroke. In other words, once the hand enters the water, you push the hand forward just before you begin the catch.
- Greater distance gained per stroke.
- A substantial amount of power generated from the kick.
- Body roll and hip rotation providing additional power.

NON-TRADITIONAL FREESTYLE

Is characterized by a rapid turnover, arm-oriented strokes, a primarily 2-beat kick (sometimes a 4-beat kick), and not much hip rotation. This is primarily used in shorter distances but can work for some swimmers in longer-distance events.

Key Elements of the Non-Traditional Freestyle:

- Very high elbow and low hand in the first one-third of the stroke. The fingertips, forearm, and elbow are almost perpendicular to the surface of the water. This arm position takes flexibility in your shoulders that not everyone may possess.
- Very little hip rotation.
- Very little power created by the kick. In this technique, the primary use of the kick is to keep your hips floating.

FINDING YOUR TECHNIQUE

Within these two techniques, there are several variations of swimming freestyle. For instance, I was coached to swim freestyle using a combination of these two techniques; I was instructed to have a shoulder and hip rotation, with a 2- to 4-beat kick for longer-distance events (e.g., 400-meter freestyle).

There is no single right way to swim freestyle. There is no perfect stroke mold that any one person fits into. There are certain aspects of freestyle, such as a relaxed recovery or a high elbow catch, which are desired by all swimmers. However, each swimmer does have a different pull-to-kick power ratio depending on their individual strengths. The idea is to find your strengths, like a powerful kick or an awesome pull, and build your strokes around your strengths. You don't want to throw away any of your strengths in order to correct a weakness. The bottom line is what gets you to the finish line the fastest is the best.

COMMON FREESTYLE ERRORS:

- Not being able to discern how fast one's body is moving through the water (not how fast the hands and feet are moving, but how fast the body glides through the water).
- Not keeping the elbows and shoulders up when the hand enters the water.
- Letting the elbows lead the pull at any point during the first two-thirds of the pull.
- Stopping the kick to breathe.
- Pushing water down in the first one-third of the stroke.
- Pushing water up instead of back in the last one-third of the stroke.

QUESTIONS A SWIMMER NEEDS TO ASK IN ORDER TO BECOME MORE EFFICIENT:

- How far can I extend my arm in front of my body during the stroke without losing the line of my axis?
- How far can I extend my arm behind my body during the stroke without losing the line of axis?
- How deeply can I pull?
- How much of the time during the pull can I sustain my hand and arm angles nearly perpendicular with the water surface?
- How much power can I generate from my kick?
- How fast can you accelerate your pull and still keep hold of the water?

Pulling

THE FIRST ONE-THIRD:

During the first one-third of the pull, the hand enters the water between the head and the shoulder. Your hand position should be flat (firm, but not tense); the fingers should be together. As the hand pulls the water down, it should go out laterally no farther than the width of the hand. This may vary depending on the individual. If the swimmer's hand moves too far away from the body laterally, it cancels out the power the swimmer gets from shoulder rotation.

THE MIDDLE ONE-THIRD:

During the middle one-third of the pull, the hand and forearm should be kept ahead of the elbow as much as possible. The hand should go as deep as the swimmer can handle. The stroke should start just outside the width of the shoulder and pull straight back. It used to be taught to sweep in towards the belly button; we now want the swimmer to just pull straight back to avoid a forced sweep-in. If you are pulling hard and catching water, the water will move your hand for you, creating a natural sweep-in. This is called "feeling the water."

THE LAST ONE-THIRD:

The swimmer should pull well past the hip joint. The angle of the hand should be almost perpendicular to the surface of the water at the end of the stroke with a flick of the hand to exit the water. Keep your stroke recovery in mind. When one hand is entering the water, the other hand should be between one-third and one-half of the way through the stroke.

PULLING DRILLS:

- **Catch-Up.** This drill involves completing a full stroke with one arm before beginning the stroke with the second arm. The swimmer starts streamline on their stomach. They take their first stroke focusing on catching water and feeling the water. The swimmer cannot take their next stroke until the first stroke returns back to streamline. With each stroke, the swimmer should rotate to their side while maintaining a 6-beat kick.
- **¾ Catch-Up.** This is a more advanced variation of the catch-up drill. Instead of waiting until the first hand comes back to streamline, the next stroke is taken when the swimmer is on their side and the first stroke is even with the head. There should be a slight hesitation before the swimmer takes their next stroke. The focus of this drill is to force the swimmer to be on their side at the start of the next stroke.

Kick

Most beginners use little more than half of their available power when kicking. These swimmers have a good downbeat but very little upbeat. Swimmers need to learn how to feel and hold more water on the bottoms of their feet during up kick. They also tend to kick from their knees down. Ideally we want to kick from the hip flexors down to your toes in order to generate a powerful kick. The feet should be slightly pointed inward. Feet should be pointed but relaxed. A tense foot will result in cramping of the arch of the foot as well as the calf muscles. It is okay if your feet kick one another on occasion. The feet should not separate more than 2-3 inches from the toe of the top foot and the heel of the bottom foot. We want a fast, tight kick. A powerful kick helps keep your hips floating and can move you forward during your stroke recovery.

KICKING DRILLS:

- **Side Kick.** The swimmer keeps one arm extended out in front of them. They rest their head on the inside of the shoulder of the extended arm with their face looking down. The swimmer's other arm is placed along the side of their body; the hand should be placed on the thigh just past the hip joint. The swimmer's body is turned completely on the side so that their shoulders, chest, stomach, hips, thighs, knees, shins, and feet are facing the pool wall. When a breath is needed, the swimmer simply turns their head, keeping the ear close to the shoulder of the extended arm. It is important to keep kicking during the breath. Remember: a fast, tight kick is ideal.
- **Dryland Kick.** This drill is done out of the water. The swimmer lays flat on their back, hands placed under their hips. They lift their feet 6 inches off the ground and flutter kick. The swimmer should make sure they are driving their legs from their hip flexors and not their knees. Keep in mind that you should not have a perfectly straight knee; your knee should be relaxed with a slight bend. The knee follows the motion of the thighs.
- **Barrel Rolls.** The swimmer places their arms against the sides of their body and their hands are placed on the inside of their thighs so their shoulders are slightly rolled forward. The swimmer kicks 6-8 kicks on their front and rotates to the side, back, side, and back around to the front.

Body Position and Breathing

For an effective freestyle technique, swimmers need to establish their best body position in the water. They should start by floating on the surface relaxed, arms in the streamline position. The shoulders should squeeze the head with the swimmer's nose pointing to the bottom of the pool. If the head is held too high, then the hips drop, causing the swimmer to sink. The head, neck, spine, and hips should create a straight line.

Breathing is often considered the most difficult part of freestyle to perfect. The breath should begin when the opposite hand enters the water. The breath is a simple turn of the head. The nose goes from pointing to the bottom of the pool to the side of the pool (not the ceiling!). While the swimmer's face is underwater, they should be exhaling through the nose. When they are ready to take the breath, they should inhale through the mouth. The swimmer should try to "sneak the breath." The most difficult part of the breath is keeping the head down in the water and maintaining the straight bodyline from the head, neck spine, and hips. Half of a single goggle and the corner of the mouth should remain in the water when breathing.

BODY POSITION AND BREATHING DRILLS:

- **6 Kicks, 1 Stroke.** The swimmer keeps one arm extended out in front of them. They rest their head on the inside of the shoulder of the extended arm with the face looking down. The swimmer's other arm is placed along the side of their body; the hand should be placed on the thigh just past the hip joint. The swimmer's body is turned completely on the side so their shoulders, chest, stomach, hips, thighs, knees, shins, and feet are facing the pool wall. When a breath is needed, the swimmer simply turns their head, keeping the ear close to the shoulder of the extended arm. It is important to keep kicking during the breath. Remember: a fast, tight kick is ideal. The swimmer kicks 6 times, then takes 1 stroke to the other side. The swimmer should not breathe during the stroke. The head should remain completely still during the stroke.
- **One-Arm Freestyle.** The swimmer places the inactive arm firmly on the side of their body. The active arm is taking normal freestyle strokes. The focus of this drill is to have the swimmer rotate the inactive side (hip and shoulder) out of the water and back into the water. Each rotation should place the swimmer on their side. The breath should be taken on the inactive side. This drill is commonly mistaken as a pulling drill. It is really intended to strengthen the core and the balance of the swimmer. This drill is difficult but very effective and is done by both beginner and elite swimmers.