

The Coaches' Corner

by Tammy Yates

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

Continuing our series of drills from SwimFest 2011, I will be discussing breaststroke this month. I find breaststroke to be one of the most interesting strokes to coach as there are so many variations of the stroke.

For some it can be very challenging to learn as it seems rather technical and "timing-sensitive". If this is you, find some comfort in this: even veteran top-notch breaststrokers have episodes where they know something is "off" in their timing or their stroke. In breaststroke your legs play a more critical role than any other stroke. They are your body's largest muscles and therefore demand more oxygen, leaving you quickly out of breath unless you learn to master the glide portion of the stroke. The three most common errors I see in breaststroke are: a pull that comes too far back; a kick that is either too wide or allows the knees to come forward of the body line; or failure to "ride the glide" a critical key to success in the stroke.



BREASTSTROKE KICK DRILLS

WALL KICKS

This drill teaches you to use the muscles in the back of your legs and in your hips to recover your heels rather than using your knees.

In the water, position yourself at the edge of a pool – deep enough that your feet do not touch the bottom. If the pool has a gutter, position your arms in the gutter. If there is no gutter, position your arms on the pool deck. The object is to "hug" the pool as closely as possible with your face, chest, hips and knees initially touching the wall. Point your toes.

Recover your heels toward your hips without letting your hips come off the wall. The more you narrow the gap between your hips and the wall, the more successful you will be at breaststroke kick. Note which muscle groups need to fire up to make this successful. Low back muscles and your abdominal muscles play a big role in the short axis strokes of breast and butterfly.

SUPERMAN KICK ON STOMACH

This drill works well in accentuating the undulation in the breaststroke kick.

A snorkel works well for this drill. Lay face down in the water with your arms stretched out in front of you but not in a streamline – leave the hands straight out from your shoulders. Kick breaststroke and be sure and finish each kick firmly by snapping those feet together and slightly down. Finishing your kick downward will help pop your hips up and you should feel a slight undulation, as if you are gently rolling over an imaginary log. Time your breath to occur when your feet draw up, and get your head back down before your feet finish together at the end of the kick.

BARROWMAN KICK

This advanced-level drill helps you develop fast feet and it comes from Olympian Mike Barrowman.

Do one kick with the left leg, one kick with the right leg, followed by one kick with both legs together; repeat. Keep the non-kicking leg as straight as possible. Do the drill slowly to start, but as you get the hang of it, gradually increase the tempo. Be sure to finish each kick with the feet together. Foot speed is

critical skill for breaststrokers. Don't get caught stopping your foot at the top of the recovery, or you will be putting the brakes on by increasing drag and resistance.

BREASTSTROKE ARM DRILLS

BREASTSTROKE ARM SWEEPS

This drill teaches you to develop a compact breaststroke pull.

In shallow water, bend at the waist and put your face in the water. Do some breaststroke pulls. Be sure and keep your hands well in front of you with quick in-sweeps out in front of you. Your head and neck should be aligned with your body, and your spine straight. Practice sneaking your breath with minimal head movement and with your chin in the water. If done correctly, you should feel strong forward momentum on your in-sweep. Remember this key point. The head in breaststroke does not move! Think of your upper half of your body, from hips to top of your head, as one unit. Rotate from the hips, don't bob your head.

BREAST PULL WITH FLUTTER KICK

Good breaststroke is similar to a good start off the blocks. Both look for you to slip your body through a hole. This drill helps to promote that feeling of being compact, powerful and slipping your body through a hole.

Begin a length with breast pull with a really light flutter kick, just enough to keep you afloat (breathe on the in-sweeps). Try not to use your fins. Keep the pull short and compact on the out-sweep and in-sweep – and try to get that feeling of slipping and sliding just under the water line when you streamline. Don't speed through this drill, take it slow and enjoy the feeling. Glide with head down between arms at the end of each stroke.

FIST PULLING

This drill is designed to help you learn to use your arms more effectively during the pull. This is also a good drill for improving your weaker or non-dominant arm if you pull or swim repeats with the hand of the dominant arm in a fist and the hand of the non-dominant arm open.

You can pull or swim repeats of any distance with the hands shaped in fists. You may learn to use your non-dominant arm more effectively when your dominant arm is limited in its ability to produce propulsive force.

BREASTSTROKE TIMING DRILLS

PULL STOP KICK STOP

This is a drill that can help in establishing timing between the pull and the kick. It also promotes "riding the glide" in breaststroke, driving the head down between outstretched arms, and finishing the feet before starting the pull.

This is a breaststroke separation drill where we separate the pull from the kick. Do a single pull of breaststroke with no kick at all (legs just hang out). At the end of the pull, dive your head down between your biceps into a tight streamline and stop or freeze in this position for just a moment. Without lifting your head or taking a breath now execute a single breaststroke kick with arms remaining in the streamline position. Finish your feet firmly and glide in this streamline position for a moment. Repeat the cycle through the lap.

It is important to make a distinct stop after each pull and each kick. After you practice this for awhile, it should feel quite rhythmical. Once you have this drill down, begin to narrow the gap between the stops and eventually work it into a regular breaststroke. An accomplished breaststroker actually has a slight separation between the pull and when the kick starts. You'll see that they initiate the arm pull first and about the time they are completing the out-sweep they begin to draw their heels up to start the kick. This requires a compact and speedy kick.

FROZEN HEAD

This drill helps correct those who move their head in breaststroke, or have improper head and eye position. In fly and breast, the head should not move, at all! Your shoulders and hips raise on the in-sweep which provides the pocket of air you need to breathe without lifting your head.

You need a tennis ball, or better yet a soft rubber air-filled ball just slightly bigger than a tennis ball. You tuck this under your chin and swim breaststroke, working to hold the ball in place. This will help you keep your eyes down and head in line with your spine.