

TIP OF THE MONTH.....

Winning Freestyle Finishes

By Coach Tony Ackerson

After 27 years of being in swimming as both an athlete and coach, it still amazes me that people will endure long, hard practices year round, swimming hundreds of thousands of yards, and then literally give away races at the end with poor finishing technique.



In this month's tip segment, I want to focus on proper finishing technique, as well as to underscore its importance in one key area that you might not be thinking about. But first, here's how a great finish happens:

1. As you approach the wall on your last lap, you should have a good idea of how many strokes you have left, once you reach the backstroke flags (5 yards to go). More importantly, you should **know which hand you'll be finishing with**. This is an important point: **Don't adjust your stroke in order to finish on your "favorite" hand!**
2. **Double-time your flutter kick!** Powerkick all the way in until you feel the wall on your hand. Too many swimmers "drop" their kick on the last stroke in. Remember, any time you're not pulling or kicking, your body position is lowered, causing more drag.
3. **Try** not to breathe from the flags in, but you should **absolutely never breathe on the last 2-3 strokes** of a freestyle race. No matter how desperately you think you need the air, the oxygen that you take in can't be processed in order to help you swim any faster. Turning your head, however, will cost you valuable time.
4. On your final stroke as you lunge to touch the wall, **roll your body to the side** in order to get full extension. This simple action can result in several inches added to your reach, resulting in hundredths of seconds saved. Remember, **the final stroke should be the fastest hand movement of the entire race**, with a high elbow recovery, and the hand moving in a straight line to the wall. **Stick the finish!**
5. Touch the wall **fingertips first, 6 to 8 inches below the surface** of the water. You can flatten your hand and allow the elbow to bend upon contact to prevent jammed fingers or elbows. Never finish by reaching up and grabbing the touch pad or gutter, which adds valuable time.
6. **Never, ever take an extra stroke!** On a perfect finish, you'll feel the wall at the exact moment that your arm is fully extended. Most of the time however, you'll come up a little short and have to continue to reach and kick the last few inches. Resist the temptation to take a final quick stroke and "jam" your finish. **The time it takes the hand to travel all the way over the water and to the wall is far greater than the time it takes to simply reach and extend.** How do you know if you took the extra stroke? If your arm is bent at the elbow in any way when you touch the wall, you shouldn't have taken that final stroke.

The obvious reason for working finishes is that it makes no sense in a 50-yard race to swim perfectly for 49 yards and then add time with a poor finish. The same holds true in the longer distances as well. Collin O'Malley won a Junior Olympic championship in the 200 free by executing a near-perfect finish and winning by less than 1/10th of a second. He also won a high school season showdown last year with rival Matt Norton in the 500 free, this time **by just 1/100th of a second**. Good finishes matter.

The less obvious, but no less important reason for good finishes, concerns relays. We always say that **the majority of false starts on relays are caused by the swimmer in the water either taking an extra stroke, or finishing by grabbing the top of touch pad instead of "sticking" it, fingertips first**. Remember, on relays, the swimmer on the block is making a judgment on when to go just as the swimmer in the water is beginning to take the final stroke.

So whether your event is the 50 or the 1650, finishes are critical, and not just for the superstars. Swimmers trying to reach their first Junior Olympic time or swimmers simply trying to earn a heat winner ribbon all can benefit from shaving time off at the end of a race. Spend a few minutes next time at practice working the finish, and resolve to become the person that wins the tight races.