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The Nature of Stroke Work

Sometimes the Perception is That Not Enough Stroke Work Is Being Done
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A sometimes concern among Moms and Dads is whether enough stroke work is being done. "All they do is swim. I don't see any instruction at all," is a typical refrain. The purpose of this short article is to explain what to expect from stroke work and to describe the different ways we coaches do stroke work and when we do it.

What to expect from stroke work: Do you remember teaching your children to tie their shoes? Some get it sooner, some get it later, some get it when you are not even watching. Each gets it in their own time regardless of your efforts. Same deal on stroke work. We hope to see immediate improvement but it is not always there. Patience is the key. Thorndike's "laws" of learning come into play here: Is the child ready to learn? Does the child repeat the skill at the conscious level in order to move the skill from the conscious level to the automatic level? (Are they even operating at the conscious level during repeats?) With some children we notice a "delayed reaction" to teaching where they apparently make very little progress at the time and then some time later, sometimes even weeks later, magically get it. There is trial and error learning going on at the subconscious, level and it may take many repeats for things to suddenly click. So why do coaches allow swimmers to swim lap after lap with incorrect technique? Because, the hope is that a seed planted by the coach suddenly blossoms through trial and error learning after many repeats.

Where do those seeds come from? There are three basic types of stroke work. The most obvious is formal teaching where the lane or the workout group is stopped from aerobic or race pace swimming conditioning for 10 to 20 minutes and the coach explains a technique, uses a demonstrator, and then will have the athletes attempt the skill, usually one at a time with immediate feedback from the coach. This type of instruction is commonly used nearly every day with less advanced swimmers (novice), and less frequently with more advanced swimmers. Early in the season the coach may have the more advanced swimmers involved with formal teaching nearly every day as well.

A second form of stroke work is the stroke drill. Stroke drills are intended to isolate a part of the stroke so that the swimmer can focus on that particular skill. Stroke drills are often done as repeats on a low to moderate rest interval so that there is a conditioning effect as well.

The third form of stroke work is the most common - to some coaches it is the most important - and it is the most misunderstood and underappreciated by some observers (parents). This form of stroke work is the constant reminders coaches give to swimmers either verbally during the short rest periods between swims or visual cues demonstrated by the coach during the swims. The purpose is to move swimmers from an automatically wrong movement to the consciously correct movement; and if done enough, and given enough time, will effect a change. Some coaches are “always” doing stroke work of this type, even though it is not always easy to observe from the bleachers.

I meet with parent’s groups regularly and I like to do this little exercise with them: “Imagine a successful swimmer at whatever level you chose – state level, regional, national, international. Now, let’s list the factors that contribute to this swimmers success. Ready go.” When I do this exercise I get responses such as, “work ethic,” “discipline,” and “commitment” -- these are factors relating to the psychology of the athlete. We usually get 8, 10, or maybe even 12 factors on the list before we get to...”technique.” I am not saying that technique is not important – it is – but every Olympic gold medalist has defects in their stroke. The pursuit of the impossibly perfect stroke is futile. Yes, stroke work IS important, but I am not sure it is the most important thing for advanced swimmers. When we observe a coach who doesn’t *appear* to be doing enough stroke work, step back and look at the larger picture. Is the child happy and improving? If so, then life is good.

(If not, then please see the March 14th issue on “How to Talk to Your Coach.”)

