

GRAB YOUR KICKBOARD

GREAT KICKER = GREAT SWIMMER

by: [Casey Barrett, Columnist](#)

The key to any great swimmer starts with the kickboard!

06/23/10

There is a truism in all sports that bears repeating on every pool deck. That is: It all starts with the legs. Sounds ridiculously simple, of course. There is no baseball or golf swing, no basketball or hockey shot, that doesn't start with the lower body. And no need to mention the staggering obviousness of that statement when it comes to football and soccer... In the water, it's no different. Your legs are your engines; when they're out of gas you sputter to a stop. The fact is, there are no world-class athletes out there without powerful, coordinated lower body strength. Translation for young swimmers out there: You cannot be a great swimmer until you are a great kicker. So, why is it that on countless teams, kick sets are relegated to a post-warm-up, pre-main-set limbo? A nice respite of garbage yards, as swimmers relax on their boards, splash through a thousand or so half-heartedly, yank on the lane ropes, and chat happily with their lane neighbors. This is not kicking. This is called wasting your and your coach's time. A true kick set should leave you panting, red-faced, unable to speak - and it should have the importance of a killer main set. In recent years, the paramount power of the kick set has gained new traction. I understand that in spots like Tucson and Ann Arbor, kicking has been known to take up over 30% of every workout. How has that worked out for them? Maybe take a look at the 200 freestylers who've come out of the Universities of Arizona and Michigan the last few years... Think those legs might come in handy when they flip for home?

Recently, one such kicking savant from Michigan suggested I write about these kick sets. Former All-American and National Teamer, Chris DeJong, relished these sets and he spoke about the kickboard battles waged among his Wolverine teammates.

"It got intense," he remembers. "Me, [Vanderkaay](#), Vendt when he was with us in '08, we really got into it. The standard was breaking five minutes in a 400 kick - long course. We could do it, and we heard Ian Thorpe was one of the only other guys ever to break that barrier."

I asked about what happened at the walls - any lane rope yanking in and out? "We allowed ourselves one pull, no rope, then a flip turn, that kept it fair," he recalls. Well, maybe not always. Coach Bob Bowman would become famously infuriated as he watched the greatest of them all, [Mr. Phelps](#), consistently "exert his independence" by pulling on that rope at every wall. But if you don't

think he took these kick sets seriously too, maybe you haven't watched his devastating last wall of his 400 IM... That doesn't come from pure discipline alone.

It's interesting, when we learn to swim, we learn to kick first. At three or four years old, young arms are often too weak to clear the surface with a proper pull. Yet those legs are already driving kids up and down the pool. Draped over a barbell or grasping their first kickboard, that's where they first learn mobility. The first lesson is clear - learning to swim is learning to kick.

Then they'll grow a bit, their arms will get strong enough to pull, they'll learn the strokes. If those strokes come together and the competitive instinct kicks in, maybe they'll join the team. Then, the hours will increase, the yardage going way up, and suddenly it's all about the arms. You figure out how to lazily two-beat your way through another 3000 yard main set, figure out that the easiest way to crank out the yards is with a pull-buoy and paddles.

And you ignore the legs at your own peril. Because when you turn for home, in a close one, a big one, with making a cut or a team on the line, don't ask your arms for help. They're cooked. It's time to go to the legs.