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SHOULDER PROBLEMS: FIX YOUR TECHNIQUE

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Shoulder pain is unfortunately a very common occurrence in swimming. Many people accept it as a part of the sport – a result of thousands upon thousands of repeated strokes – and some people are lucky to never experience pain and some people aren't. It doesn't have to be like that! Certainly, some people's shoulder pain is unavoidable, but for many others, a simple change in technique could be the fix.

It's not necessarily repeated strokes that cause shoulder pain. It's repeated strokes with flawed technique. The one thing you need to be aware of:

Don't let your arm go behind your back.

The hard thing is that most swimmers don't even realize this is happening. They just feel pain as they start pulling the water with their arm. In freestyle, backstroke and butterfly, it's all too easy to start the pull while your arm is in a high-risk position.

If you're feeling pain at the beginning of your stroke or as you're pulling through, you need to be aware of where your arm is when you're feeling the pain. If your upper-arm (from your shoulder to your elbow) is behind your back (from shoulder to shoulder), that is bad for most people. Your upper-arm and back have to line up if you want to protect your shoulder.

In freestyle, you might feel pain when the stroke starts because your shoulder is rotated down when the arm starts pulling. If you're feeling pain, either decrease the rotation to that side or pull more in front of you (not as wide). This can be a common problem on a swimmer's non-breathing side because many swimmers lean on that side when they breathe.

A second problem spot in freestyle is the start of the recovery. If you feel pain there, you might be exaggerating the finish motion too much, and the hand and arm are too high when the recovery starts. Keep the arm lower to the water to start the recovery.

In backstroke, many swimmers press down with their hand and arm to start the stroke. This can definitely make the arm go behind the back. If you're feeling pain, either rotate more to that side or pull shallower. (*I'd recommend a shallower pull.*)

In butterfly, the potentially painful position can happen if the swimmer presses deep with their chest and the hands stay high at the surface. If you feel pain, press forward with the chest and have a flatter stroke. This video and picture shows exactly where the high-risk position typically occurs in freestyle and the type of position to avoid in all strokes:



For further reading:

In 2010, I collaborated with three brilliant practitioners (Dr. Scott Rodeo, Marilyn Pink and George Edelman) on a book chapter written for clinicians and dedicated to injuries in swimming with a particular emphasis on the shoulder. The chapter is filled with much more detail, illustrations and guidance for prevention and treatment. The book publisher has graciously granted free access to the book chapter:

- Go to: www.educata.com
- Register in the upper right-hand corner. Fill in all of the required info and make up an expiration date.
- Once registered, click on "Library" and scroll down to the 3rd article "Applied biomechanics of swimming"

For more tips from the National Team High Performance staff, visit the [National Team High Performance Tips archive](#).

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