

June 14, 2010

News For

SWIM PARENTS

Published by The American Swimming Coaches Association
5101 NW 21 Ave., Suite 200
Fort Lauderdale FL 33309

Good Starts

It's clear to anyone observing a swimming meet that some swimmers are much faster off of the blocks. Differences in starting ability from one swimmer to the next are easy for parents to observe. Unfortunately, it is one part of the race that is not always mastered equally well by all swimmers. There are two contributing factors to the success of the start: learned skill and natural ability.

The simple fact is that not all swimmers are built the same. Some will always be better starters because they are born with a higher percentage of "fast twitch" fibers making them more explosive and capable of getting off the starting block faster. It is an hereditary factor and cannot be significantly changed through training.

But start ability is not all heredity as proper mechanics also contribute. Coaches teach these mechanics several times a week and can help the swimmer make significant improvements over time. It is important to remember that swimmers learn at different paces. Despite the best efforts of coaches, some swimmers will take longer to learn a good start than others.

Before judging a swimmer's ability to get off the block, either as very good or as needing a lot more coaching, look at where and when the swimmer surfaces after the start. After the starting signal, who gets to the 10 meter mark first? It's not always the first swimmer off of the block. A study done several years ago examined the relative importance of the initial quickness off the block versus the swimmer's ability to enter the water, streamline, kick, and breakout properly. According to the study, how the swimmer hits the water and what they do in the water are of far greater importance than speed off of the block. This ability is a complex skill requiring a lot of practice, mixed with the right body type. Some argue that it is more dependent on body type which is a factor a swimmer cannot control. The fact is, that because of body type and buoyancy, some swimmers streamline better than other swimmers and with proper kicking and breakout mechanics will surface in front of other less able swimmers.

So what can we make of all this? Answer: always look at the larger picture. Is the swimmer improving and is she or he happy? That's the larger, larger picture. Looking at the "smaller larger picture" one needs to consider all aspects of the race including good approaches to the walls, good turns, proper breakouts, good stroke mechanics, proper race management, and a great finish. It all adds up. If the swimmer has not yet developed a great start, entry, and break out, there are many other areas of the event we can look to for success.