

The background of the entire page is a vibrant underwater photograph of a swimmer in blue water, wearing goggles and reaching forward. Overlaid on the bottom half of the image is a semi-transparent, glowing video game controller, held by two hands. The controller is black with blue and pinkish-purple light effects emanating from it, creating a strong visual link between swimming and gaming.

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Staying Engaged in the Sport of
Swimming in the Age of Gaming and Social Media:
Creating the Game of
SWIMMING

by Thomas Meek

on page 8

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Snorkel Train Your Breaststroke

Try training breaststroke with a snorkel

by Coach Cokie Lepinski, Sun City Grand Geckos

You'll find a lot of articles and videos about breaststroke timing and that's because breaststroke's efficiency is intricately tied to properly timing all the individual elements. When your breaststroke goes off kilter, it can be helpful to break the stroke down and rebuild it. A fun way to do that is to wear a snorkel and try drills you know and maybe some you don't. Wearing a snorkel with breaststroke can help focus your brain on the mechanics of the stroke while allowing your breathing to occur without much thought.



Three primary objectives

For this snorkel-driven drill series, we have 3 primary objectives. We want to work the line, work the timing, and work the individual elements. The line is at the end of your stroke cycle where you should end in a streamline-like position just under the surface of the water. ("Streamline-like" as you should have a very small gap between your hands as you extend your arms out front.) Returning to the line after every stroke cycle is critical for your speed, efficiency, and endurance.

Timing is the second most important element. When do you breathe? When do you pull? When do you kick? Drilling with a snorkel can help you sync your timing.

The individual elements – body line, arm pull, hips, kick, and breathing can all be addressed while wearing a snorkel – yes, even breathing! In fact, many swimmers find they can breathe more deeply and push their exhale a little more firmly while wearing a snorkel.

Snorkel-based drills for breaststroke

Let's get started on tuning up or even rebuilding your breaststroke with a series of drills or focus-point swims. Wear your snorkel for this sequence and as you do, pay attention to your breathing. You want to inhale and exhale exactly where you would when swimming without the snorkel. Exhale during the exertion phase. An example is on the arm pull where you steadily exhale through the pull, inhale during the insweep and go right back to an exhale as you push forward and continue into the next pull. Work toward a steady exhale and inhale through the snorkel.

1. Establish the proper pull. The snorkel is a terrific tool for this. You can do this drill wearing a pull buoy or you can use a light flutter kick. On your breaststroke pull, think circular motion while also striving to keep your elbows high. Those elbows should not drop back behind your shoulders. If they do, your hands can get trapped making it harder to recover them forward fast enough. While circular in motion, a good pull has the fingertips pointing down and palms facing back early in the stroke. The hands recover shallow and near your mouth. That's where the snorkel comes in. Aim your hands to recover near the mouthpiece. Shoot them forward at or near the surface and re-establish your line before the next pull.

2. 3-Size Pull with Flutter Kick. Push off with a good streamline and add a light flutter kick. Continuously cycle through doing a mini pull, medium pull, and full-size pull. After each pull, return to that perfect horizontal line, just under the surface of the water and really stretch it forward. Fully extend, but don't glide. The mini pull involves just your wrists and is kept way up front (arms straight). Keep the palms flat and feel that initial grab on the water. The medium pull recovers near your forehead or your eyes. Work to get those fingertips down early for that initial catch and keep the palms flat. On the "normal" pull, keep the elbows high and in front of your shoulders. Recover your hands shallowly and near your mouth before shooting them forward into streamline.

3. Thumb Lock Kick. Using a snorkel while kicking helps you maintain the proper body line. Extend your arms straight out in front of you with just your thumbs interlocked. This puts you in a great horizontal line and the thumb lock is more real-

istic to the finish of the pull than either a true streamlining of your arms or holding a superman pose where the arms are too far apart. Now do breaststroke kick. Take your time and remind yourself of the fundamentals when kicking such as: keep your knees narrow (hip width apart), hinge at the knees, not the hips, feet turn out on the draw, kick "around and back", and finish your feet together. After each kick, extend forward and re-establish your line.

4. Squeeze your head! An important element in re-establishing your line at the end of every stroke cycle is to squeeze your biceps to your ears or just behind your ears as you extend forward. Make sure your eyes are looking straight down. Do a series of 25s of comfortable-pace breaststroke swims wearing the snorkel. End each stroke cycle in a thumb lock and check your head position (eyes down), gently squeezing biceps to ears, and reaching those shoulders forward pushing for another inch or so.

5. Activate your hips and time your breath. The one minor deficiency to snorkel training breaststroke is a tendency to not engage your hips. Your hips are a very powerful element of breaststroke and you need to tap into them here. Keep the snorkel on. You'll be swimming moderate to fast breaststroke. Remind yourself that you breathe on the insweep, not the out-sweep. As your hands sweep out at the beginning of the pull, think about pulling your hips to your hands. This little change in how you think about your hips can have great results. Slide your hips forward as you continue the out-sweep to the corner. Now, as you insweep and shoot through to recovery, work to pop those hips up to air so that you can race to the line for that beautiful position at the end of each stroke. On that insweep, shrug your shoulders up to help your hands "turn the corner" and fire forward. You should feel your face and snorkel lifting above the water if you are engaging your hips properly.

6. Combine breaststroke and fly. A great drill to activate your hips is to combine one arm fly with breaststroke. Wearing a snorkel makes it easy to control your breathing. Try continuously cycling through one 1-arm stroke of fly to the left, one 1-arm stroke of fly to the right and then one full breaststroke. Work to find a smooth rhythm to this sequence. To do this, your breaststroke stroke will need to be more up tempo and you may need to fully extend and hold that extension for a moment before starting the next 1-arm fly action. Can you get your hips to undulate to the same tempo on breast that you have on fly? You can also do this as 1-arm fly left, 1-arm fly right, and one breaststroke pull with a dolphin kick. Both options allow you to focus on activating those hips.

Breaststroke with a snorkel can be quite fun and gives you the opportunity to drill down on the various elements that make up the stroke. Give it a try and see if your breaststroke begins to feel better. ■

Cokie Lepinski is a USMS Level 4 coach and the recipient of the 2014 USMS Coach of The Year award. She lives in Arizona and coaches the Sun City Grand Geckos and is active in coaching clinics and swim camps including the 2021 Masters Swimming High Performance Camp. She is the author of the e-book, "There's a Drill for That". Breaststroke just happens to be her favorite stroke.

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Staying Engaged in the Sport of Swimming in the Age of Gaming and Social Media: Creating the Game of **SWIMMING**

by Thomas Meek

Abstract: Why do people join the sport of swimming? Why do so many leave as they age up? How do we increase swimmer retention while building higher levels of team participation and engagement?

Many competitive swimmers begin their journey at a swim school. Once basic water safety skills are developed, a swim school's curriculum often progresses to fundamentals of competitive stroke technique. These swim schools often feed newly minted swimmers into established teams, either club or recreational. In either case, the initial team experience is fun-filled and rewarding.

Early competitive swimming is a blast! Times drop significantly, often at every meet. The events are short and fast. Thus, the effort/reward feedback loop is constant and quick paced. Fast forward a few years and the landscape and psychology changes dramatically. Improvement is now measured in tenths of a second and may take weeks or even a season to better. Expectations, and measures of success become less clear. Other interests emerge.

This is the point swimmers begin to segment by personal interest; to the few that stay highly engaged, vs. those less enamored with our sport. What begins as a fresh and fun game becomes a grueling and monotonous activity. A typical season is filled with grinding two-a-day practices. Swimmers, parents and coaches hold out to the promise that at the end of the season, when the championship meet arrives, everything will fall into place and all will be rewarded. Pressure to perform can quickly become intense. Where did the fun of swimming go? Why do I stick with it? These thoughts become existential questions for many young swimmers.

At this crossroads many swimmers with significant talent shift away from our sport, often just at a point where a performance breakthrough may occur. The promise that hard work generates a worthy reward becomes harder to envision. A fair number of

our swimmers are forever lost to a new interest that provides a quicker return on gratification. Countless theories have been published related to the psychology of incentive and reward. We must learn from this research or risk losing the battle of swimmer attrition.

Attrition on club and recreational teams is serious. Imagine what your team could be if you simply retained 10% more of your swimmers year-over-year. The depth of your team's talent and prominence as a community resource would flourish. How many more young minds could you help in developing important life skills, such as being part of a larger community and taking pride in personal growth?

I am not criticizing the benefit of hard work necessary to achieve results. Reward and recognition psychology only go so far. Club swimming can be intense, and rightfully so. The event format is challenging and requires rigorous training to be competitive. However, not everyone will be the next state champion or Olympic gold medalist, nor would I argue that this goal is top of mind for most club or recreational swimmers. Finding a way to connect with athletes on both sides of the spectrum is key. Staying relevant in the lives of all our swimmers is as important as recognizing and nurturing that one in a thousand talent.

Furthermore, as coaches we have our own existential crisis; how do we keep our swimmers engaged and parents informed? How do we measure progress and provide rewards at a personal level? How do we manage our talent pool of swimmers, to support and help each athlete grow to their potential and not only nurture the best of the best. And perhaps most importantly, how can we make

our lives as coaches more rewarding, improving our own quality of life?

Applying my own life experiences has informed and influenced my approach to these challenges. I started my swim journey at a very young age. I dominated in the younger age groups in my club (9-10 Top 16 in the Nation), only to suddenly find that my peer group began to mature physically faster than I. I fell out of the rankings, and without the support of my club coach, I would have fallen out of the swimming community altogether. My coach helped me focus on my personal goals, and over time, as I began to mature and grow physically, my swimming competitiveness came back. My swim career culminated my senior year with an NCAA Division III championship ring while swimming for the University of Chicago.

As a Club and Masters head coach, I searched to find an innovative way to keep my swimmers of all ages engaged. My goal became to develop a modern-day analog that could effectively communicate and celebrate progress in a way that is exciting to today's swimmer. This quest ultimately led me to settle upon, of all things video gaming, specifically the application of gamification and engagement strategies to swimming.

Video games, akin to swimming, have high learning curves, mainly due to the unique environments and mechanics inherent to these activities. Video game developers are presented with the same challenge as our sport. How do you garner new players knowing that it will take time for them to become good enough to enjoy the experience and then retain those players knowing there are many other activities competing for their attention? The solution employed by game developers is to apply design elements that provide quick and rapid rewards to encourage continuing engagement of the game. The application of similar design in non-game contexts is called gamification.

Simply put, Gamification is the strategic attempt to enhance systems, services, organizations and activities in order to create similar experiences to those experienced when playing games in order to motivate and engage users.

The techniques used in gamification are intended to leverage people's natural desires for socializing, learning, mastery, competition, achievement, status, self-expression, altruism, closure or simply their response to the framing of a situation as game or play. Early gamification strategies used rewards for players who accomplish desired tasks or competition to engage players. Types of rewards include points, achievement badges or levels, the

filling of a progress bar, or providing the user with virtual currency. Making the rewards for accomplishing tasks visible to other players or providing leaderboards are ways of encouraging players to compete.

These concepts merge at lightspeed in video gaming-and we must find a way to compete with this type of medium when attempting to enhance engagement of our swimmers. Like it or not, we ARE competing with the virtual world, with its immediate feedback and gratification tactics.

My efforts to improve swimmer engagement and retention drove the development of SwimWarrior, a mobile application for coaches

and swimmers to gamify the experience of competitive swimming. Within the app, coaches time their athletes in a set of 16 events (25, 50, 75 and 100 of each stroke) at practice. Times are stored in the swimmer's profile and are converted into scores with ranks and virtual reward badges to communicate current skill level and progress over time. Results are displayed on multiple leaderboards so swimmers can compete, promoting competition at practice.

For coaches, it is a performance management, organizational and engagement tool. For swimmers, it provides an opportunity to compete in events aligned with what most swimmers are looking for (shorter and faster events) while providing context into where they

are on the broad spectrum of skill level in the sport. SwimWarrior provides a common "language" i.e. an interface for swimmers, coaches and parents to follow the athlete's progression.

As coaches, it is incumbent upon us to find new ways to engage swimmers in a changing world, gamification is simply one method of engagement that I have found to be very successful. Rapid feedback, quick rewards and engagement strategies focused on the quick paced lives of our athletes are key to keeping our sport relevant. SwimWarrior is simply one manner in which to help keep our swimmers engaged and coming back each season. ■

Thomas Meek is head coach of the JSC, a swim team in Scottsdale, AZ. He is the founder and CEO of SwimWarrior, The Game of Swimming. He studied at the University of Chicago, is an NCAA DIII National champion and member of the University of Chicago order of the C. To learn more about SwimWarrior visit www.swimwarrior.com, or contact Thomas directly at tom@swimwarrior.com



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The “Impossible”

By: Ulysses Perez
USA Swimming / ASCA

The nature of competitive swimming is such that the confines of “what is possible” frequently expands to greater and greater lengths. Comparable to other record-keeping sports and athletics, it is true that sports scientists are frequently on the cusp of discovery. From Roger Bannister accomplishing the remarkable feat of running 1 mile under four minutes in May of 1954, to swimmer Jim Montgomery breaking the 50-second barrier in the 100 M Freestyle, seemingly impossible feats never cease to amaze humankind in their awe-inspiring fashion. Not only this, but the methodologies used by said performances further the landscape of training that follow.

This allows for future successes to “spring-board” from the amazing accomplishments that are achieved. I have opted to call this phenomenon: Hormetic Adaptations in Confidence or HAC’s (pronounced hacks). In swim practices, season plans, meets, and conventional life as a swim coach, there are many ways that HAC’s are implemented. In this discussion I intend to elucidate the ways in which coaches can use HAC’s to further improve their scope of competitive swimming and life.

As coaches, we are frequently digging into varied techniques and sciences to further improve our athletes. Methods like *fartlek* training (developed by Gosta Holmer for distance running) have since been adapted to the sport of swimming in their use of interval training, to name one example. In an effort to define a new format of training, the HAC’s method employs a notion where an athlete must undergo a seemingly impossible task to garner the confidence to eventually become measurably greater in their training.

To further this concept, I will define the first initial “H”, or hormetic, as the environment created by measurably increased levels of stress. Hormesis, in biology is the function of nature to adapt to potentially lethal doses of an agent when placed in stressful environments, like heat-shock proteins after intense heat exposure. To a swim coach, one of the ways in which hormetic stresses can be used on an athlete is to expose him/her to a challenge set, where the physiological structure is taxed to the utmost, and the psychological

framework can be changed. Hormetic stress is *instrumental* in its potential to create stronger athletes. In coaching speak it implies that when an athlete is placed under stress, the result is adaptation. Segway into the second initial “**A**” being the adaptation achieved after the external stimulus has been exposed to the athlete. Adaptation is the measurable variable that carries over into long-term successes of an athlete like time improvements, technique development, and conditioning. The final letter is “**C**”, or confidence, that becomes instilled within an athlete after being placed under stress. This is observed in ways that are verbalized or expressed by the athlete themselves in phrases like: “I can’t believe I just did that,” or “I never thought I was capable of going under 1-minute in the 100 Free.”

As a coach, I have found that putting my athletes under stresses that respectively force a given adaptation, there is always a positive percentage yield in their capabilities as an athlete, physiologically and psychologically. There is inherent good in exposing athletes to new and exciting challenges that meet the physical capacity of said athlete. To clarify: there is NO need to put an underdeveloped athlete under a HAC like: 12 x 400 IM’s on 4:00. However, the coach’s job is given greater demand to identify the necessary HAC required for optimal adaptation.

Here are the three ways to use HAC’s

1. Introduce challenging workouts/sets

a. Athletes cannot improve unless they are taxed to a degree in which they are forced to perform a familiar task in a progressively harder format. This can be in the form of an interval changing to provide a shorter rest (thus allowing more work to be done within a strict framework) like a set of “10 x 50s on 1:00” during the early leg of the training period, where it will concede to a short :40 by the time a particular taper period comes around. Another example of this would be the way in which a specific stroke is performed, like a swimmer using a clenched fist or 2 fingers ONLY instead of the full hand during a considerably routine set. This proprioception is a HAC in its ability to challenge the swimmer to adapt to a new stress in his/her environment.

2. Use the reverse-pyramid technique

a. Often, coaches gradually increase the volume in a set with the intention of eventually reaching a peak training volume. In this pyramidal format there is a way to achieve maximal gains, but in the reverse direction, we find a much simpler adaptation. Here is an example: a kick/swim distance set that begins with repeats from 200s down to 50. (200 K/200 S, 150 K/ 150S...). Notice, the set starts with a high volume and finishes low. With this framework, the value of 200 is lessened, and the Confidence

is thus bolstered by the end of a set. A common error with this technique, however, is the burnout phenomenon where an athlete can be over-trained to a limit beyond physiological preparation, so there is a warning to this method: ensure that this technique is ONLY used after a period of steady-state, anaerobic, lactate, and especially technically-sound training.

3. Use the successes of others as a step toward the “impossible”

a. It is at the point where an impossible task suddenly becomes possible that coaches, athletes, and spectators alike experience this HAC most prevalently. You see, if we know the human body can be taken to a limit unlike anything previously experienced (ex. Caeleb Dressel going sub 40s in 100Y FR) then we can further expand the realm of what is humanly possible. This is the format in which we can use HAC’s to benefit the psychological process the greatest. When swimmers on our teams perform extremely well at meets, this enthusiasm propagates across the entire number of participating constituents of our teams (parents, swimmers, and staff). When we observe an act so monumental and jawdropping, we begin to look deep within ourselves and ask: “What perceived limits am I imposing upon myself? Others?” This inspirational aspect of achieving the assumed “impossible” is absolutely necessary and a HAC to develop our swimmers in and out of the pool.

There are few universal truths in the world of swimming, like: coach is always right. Although often we discover that changes in these truths can occur in such a way that positively affects our sport. One example being the change in wearing goggles. Or simply changes in meets like stopwatches and hand-written times sheets where a meet “runner” could be seen zooming across pool decks at meets to collect times. To the mobile, wireless, fully-electronic swim meet platforms that we are seeing today. Changes like this, or Adaptations, are what continually develop our sport. In this way, we are called to continue to push the perceived limits of the “impossible” and experiment with new ways to constructively stress our athletes, systems, and mentalities via Hormetic Adaptations in Confidence. More importantly, the things we do today, tomorrow, and every day after could very well influence the trajectory of swimming. Reverence in the direction of what is unknown could very well be the change we need. Finally, we will never know just how possible our “impossible” is until we choose to try. ■

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